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**Respecting and Challenging the Candidate:  
Some Developments in Program Design**

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## **Respecting and Challenging the Candidate: Some Developments in Program Design**

The professional doctorate is often sold as the doctorate that departs from elite understandings of academic apprenticeship, reaching out to ‘external’ communities of knowledge, with their emphasis on the local and the pragmatic. Universities, however, continue to grapple with the problem of actually delivering on such rhetoric. Anxiety about declining standards has university managers on red alert to ensure and assure high quality, and this is all too often a strong imperative to hold to traditional models of doctoral education. Such models are far more likely to ‘start from scratch’ in terms of research design than to welcome the messiness of practice and professional thinking about practice to inform research in doctoral education. This paper explores ways of delivering on the promise of both respecting *and* challenging the knowledge that professional doctorate candidates bring to undertaking research. It does so in three ways. First, it considers the problem of ‘practice-meets-research’ as a long-term issue for the academy. Second, it outlines one programmatic attempt to provide client/candidates with a genuine experience of *respect-and-challenge*. Finally, it considers implications of the pedagogical work in this program for professional doctorates in general.

### **The ‘doing-or-thinking’ binary**

In lay terms, when we think *practice*, we think *doing*. In education, this means planning, instructing, revising, mentoring, assessing, reporting – and increasingly it means marketing, risk management, policy formulation, team building, conflict resolution and so on. Despite the amount of time professionals are now spending on this latter set of activities, media images of professional educators are unlikely to show this sort of ‘doing’ in their depictions of the daily lives of professional educators. It is less amenable to ‘eye-witnessing’ than the teacher standing in front of the classroom. So too research is most commonly represented by the scientist holding the test tube, and thus the folklore remains that research is ‘scientific’ and that this is fixed and universal in terms of its methods. This is so despite all the evidence that the work of being a researcher may well be radically different now (McWilliam, 2004; Taylor, 1999). Put another way, when we think research ‘from the outside’, words like *experiment*, *data*, *survey*, *questionnaire*, *tests* and *findings*, are more likely to be meaningful and relevant than terms like *communities of practice* or *self-study*.

It is little wonder, then, that professional doctorates have a legitimacy problem. Given our propensity for separating the World into two halves or binaries pairs (theory/practice; researching/doing; mind/body; material/spiritual; reality/unreality; outside/inside) (Lather, 1986), it is difficult to accommodate the fullness of the idea of being a researcher *and/as* a professional practitioner. In general, we still see ‘inside the university’ as the legitimate location of research, and the professional practitioner as ‘out there doing’.

### **Whose knowledge counts?**

This having been said, it is too easy simply to insist that the professional practitioner is closer to the ‘home’ problem, and therefore professional knowledge is all that is

really needed in practice. While this might work as a compelling moral story about authenticity and self-help, it is not supportable as a general proposition about knowledge building. It could well be argued, for instance, that 'close to home' thinking is bad for decision-making credibility, as bad as it would be for a courtroom judge to be deciding the fate of a family member. Indeed, only recently has there been much concession to the idea that it might be possible to research an issue about which one holds passionate opinions, and there are many who would still view this idea with great suspicion. As Paul Filmer (1997) reminds us, it is 'disinterest' as disengagement from desired outcomes that has been the cornerstone of trustworthy research, and this remains a firm tenet for validating research.

A further problem for overcoming the practice/research binary in professional doctorates pertains to the individuality of the award. One of the most recognisable characteristics of research training in postgraduate university programs is its insistence that research be developed and conducted by individuals and that the rewards acknowledge individuals, not teams. This is so despite the fact that most research cultures depend on collaboration within and across communities of researchers. Unfortunately, many professionals' first experiences of being researchers are often through postgraduate programs, and this means that highly individualised research is understood to be the rule rather than the exception.

This prioritising of a highly individual way of working is not only sub-optimal as research practice, but it is also antithetical to the motivations of many candidates in a Doctor of Education program. Those who seek out education as a career may well be seeking to focus on others, often at the expense of themselves. So it could be that altruism is at the heart of much of the desire to do local inquiry *with and for* local individuals and groups of individuals, rather than to research 'down' on them. While educational research can be shown to underpin a great deal in the way of educational progress, the history of scientific research also has a shameful legacy of taking from local people, in the same way that indigenous peoples have had their sacred images stolen from their communities for display on tea-towels. Put bluntly, the claim that researchers have been the most likely beneficiaries of their own research (Tripp, 1990) is hard to refute. The desire to make research work in a more democratic and less parasitic way is an important precursor to much of the work done in the name of the professional doctorate.

Another possible reason for the growing popularity of 'home brand' research might well be the frustration educators feel when trying to use research products and ideas that don't really bite at the local level. For example, the research done by academics into classrooms may well be able to tell educators that teachers are more likely to give attention to boys than girls, but the actual work of trying to address this problem is not a simple matter of knowing the research that says the problem exists. Likewise, the fact that research tells us that educators claim to be more stressed by their work than ever before does not provide any solution to the problem of particular individuals feeling overwhelmed by particular demands in a particular environment. These particularities of *in situ* behaviours and personalities are rarely accounted for in 'off-shore' inquiry. The great seductiveness of professional doctorate research is the promise that it can deliver local solutions to local problems by building into the inquiry itself strategic moves that work in the interests of stakeholders, rather than

documenting at a distance. Far from being seen as a limitation, the ‘interestedness’ of the inquiry is understood to work as a plus.

Clearly there is no one task, or even one set of processes, that makes for ‘the right response’ to the ‘respect-*and*-challenge’ promise. However, a number of principles emerge from this discussion that can underpin the pedagogical work in a professional doctorate program. They are:

- The design needs to be mobilised by a desire to know something about practice that is not already known. (Curious)
- The knowledge produced needs to be of benefit to a larger body of practitioners and/or clients. (Value-adding)
- The pedagogy needs to support systematic inquiry that is rigorously documented and argued at all stages. (Defensible)
- The program needs to be conducted *with* and *for*, rather than *on*, its participants, who should have a stake in the outcomes. (Ethical)

What this set of principles shares with all research is its insistence on systematic curiosity and validity that can be defended to an external audience. How this set of principles differs from other modes of research is its insistence on the *social* nature of the research process and its consequences.

To insist on the centrality of the social is to acknowledge that the bulk of knowledge underpinning professional work is not informed by, nor generated out of, traditional disciplines by people in universities. As Taylor (2002) argues, professional knowledge is more likely to be a fusion of formal, codified or explicit knowledge *and* informal or tacit knowledge. This tacit knowledge derives from conventions and routines that are personal, social and context-specific. So professional knowledge has a profound social dimension, because it is not limited to the ‘personal’ or the ‘codified’. The conventions and routines that inform it are outcomes of social interactions in a particular context—they represent knowledge that has been authorised by peers, and known collectively rather than individually.

### **From intention to design: One programmatic attempt**

If a professional doctorate program is to deliver on its promise of validating the social, then it needs to make a commitment to the social world that comes with a candidate or cohort of candidates, and this commitment should actually look like something distinctive in the program itself. The following documents an attempt in one university to deliver this distinctiveness by reshaping the nature and timing of program ‘deliverables’.

The Doctor of Education (EdD) course at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is a research doctorate similar to many of the professional doctorate programs existing in Australia. The framework for the course, until this year, had followed the traditional ‘first generation’ model of course work leading to confirmation, and then a dissertation (Maxwell & Shanahan, 1997). Beginning this year, a new program design for the pre-confirmation phase was implemented. Designed for candidates to complete in part-time mode, the reshaped program covers the period of candidature from initial enrolment in the program to confirmation. The confirmation is a significant milestone

within all research degree courses at QUT, as it is at this juncture that the candidate has the green light to proceed from a 'proposed' project to a 'confirmed' one.

The reshaping of the program was underway by late 2001. Evaluations from the candidates, academic staff teaching in the EdD teaching team, and supervisors of the EdD candidates of the doctoral program indicated that the existing program framework was problematic in terms of candidates managing their EdD studies while working full-time and, as part of this concern, the inflexible nature of the assessment tasks and assessment deadlines. The consideration of these matters became a catalyst for investigating more broadly the existing pedagogic and curriculum practices within the pre-confirmation phase. A strategic conceptual and structural model was needed to incorporate the already emerging pedagogic work being afforded by new technology. In this section, we make some observations about these pedagogic structures and interactive relationships.

The reshaped framework was developed within a context that encompassed local and national agendas surrounding professional doctorates. To the fore was recognition of the unique contributions of the professional doctorate candidate, specifically, the recognition that the professional doctorate is one where the student makes a "significant contribution to knowledge and practice in their professional context" (Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (CDDoGS), 1998). National government agendas were calling for doctoral programs to produce highly skilled knowledge professionals with industry links, and with broad expertise in research skills for the workplace and beyond. For the reasons elaborated above, this required valuing new forms of knowledge and innovative epistemologies of practice (Maxwell, 2002; McWilliam & Taylor, 2001).

Professional doctorate candidates are no different from their undergraduate counterparts in rushing to peruse the assessment tasks in their course outlines. The adage that "what gets measured gets done" seems to be particularly apposite to time-poor students at all levels. It was for this reason that assessment was prioritised, but within a framework that considered quality assurance and pedagogy (Love, 2002). The existing program had consisted of three major pieces of assessment, each 10,000 words, and investigating topics such as the literature review, the research methodology, and the research problem and ethics. These large chunks of assessment were replaced instead with 10 research and practitioner interrelated researcher activities undertaken across the existing coursework units, and presented in a portfolio prior to confirmation and within a designated block period. (For detailed description, please refer to Appendix A.)

At all times, the program leaders were mindful of the need to continue to develop and augment "conversation-rich, information-rich and structure-rich" learning environments (McWilliam & Taylor, 2001). The program was designed with on- and off-campus multi-modal learning environments within an integrated network of learning, knowledge and pedagogy. The pedagogic initiatives include a blend of interactive face-to-face and online communication, online communities of practice brought together by shared understandings and purposes, online interactive workshops focusing on clearly defined topics, and ongoing research diaries.

The design challenge was to afford candidates refinement of research problems within the conditions of professional inquiry. This challenge was driven by the guiding design principle of valuing the process of learning together as a community of learners, engaging in the social process of knowledge production. The design plan was to build a connected and active community of learners that was inclusive of academic and professional agendas, networks, and knowledges relevant for the candidates. The image of the lonely doctoral student, highly expert in the professional field, entering into an academic and novice relationship with supervisors was a scenario we actively sought to avoid duplicating. The emphasis was on connectness and sustainability, rather than isolation and vulnerability.

Drawing on understandings of connected learners as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139), *community* is used to connote a broad range of communities to which the candidates are connected. At least three communities of practice are embedded with the program. First, the candidate belongs to the *cohort community*, the community of doctoral candidates who begin in a particular year and who attend study schools together, engage in academic development activities together, review each other’s written work, and respond to each other through the online research journals.

The second understanding of community is the *professional and academic network community* that together engage the candidate throughout the research program. Many candidates bring their professional community with them, and then augment this group with members from the academic community. Each semester prior to confirmation, candidates are asked to write 500 words to identify their existing communities of practice and communication processes, and to assess their value, recognising that their particular community evolves over the life of the doctoral study.

The third community of practice is *issues/topics* focused (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The candidates are invited to contribute online entries that are public to the particular cohort to which those candidates are members. Examples of issues/topics include the candidates’ conceptual framework, research questions, problems they foreshadow for their research design, and so on. The candidates and the teaching members then have the opportunity to read the entries and to reply online to their work as well. This is part of the interactive and scaffolded work of the study schools. The advantage is that there can be a face-to-face stimulus session, candidates write their online entries either individually or in pairs, and then these entries are displayed on a large screen for the class to read, and to engage in further face-to-face and written responses. This becomes a record of ongoing reflections and changes in thinking that are valuable for the individual student and also for the cohort as a whole.

A key strategy in maintaining the “structure-richness” of the program has been the online research diary. Candidates in the first year of the program contribute an entry every fortnight into an online research diary to which teaching members and cohort peers respond electronically. The candidates address what they have accomplished the previous two weeks, their current thinking and their plans for the coming weeks. This strategy has been found extremely effective as a tracking device to identify “stalled students” (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004). As Ahern and Manathunga (2004) found, it picks up two early warning signs: candidates who continually change their topic or

focus, and candidates who avoid any communication (no entries). The research diaries also provide insights into how the candidates use this technological and social form of communication to voice frustrations, raise problems and find solutions, and act as forums for seeking information and troubles-telling. To this extent, it affords a “conversation-rich” forum in the program.

These pedagogical strategies have involved combinations of face-to-face and online activities to provide flexible learning opportunities with communities of learners. The redesigned program has been possible by drawing on recent technological affordances (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003). There is a delicate balance for a candidate to meet the expectations and needs of their profession while also juggling the expectations and needs of academia. Face-to-face and online classroom discourse contributes to this so the teaching interactions are designed to involve and value the discourses of the knowledge community of professional practice alongside the discourses of the knowledge community of academia. These pedagogic activities are initially challenging for candidates, as their work becomes the public and community text itself for learning. Such mediated learning means that candidates share new knowledge and engage in the social process of knowledge production while on and off-campus.

The reshaped program is not a “radical reappraisal” (Taylor, 2002), in that its historical antecedents were squarely within the university community. Many existing program features remain, so that the overwhelming majority of the candidates’ research activities continue to be workplace-based, with most students coming from the professions and returning to the professions. The program itself continues to have ‘surface’ level links with associated professional bodies and industry (McWilliam et al., 2002; Taylor, 2002), although there has been some consolidation of industry involvement. Industry and professional associations are not partners in the delivery of the program.

Whether the reshaped ‘front-end’ of this professional doctorate will improve the quality of learning and research for its current cohort is still to be seen. However, there are already some hopeful signs. One formal evaluation has been undertaken to date, which is the Student Evaluation of the first semester unit. Appendix B shows the evaluations over a three year period (2002-2004) and these figures show that assessment ratings (in italics) have improved this year, along with the overall rating for the unit. This suggests that the candidates see the introduction of the more flexible assessment activities, along with the program redesign, positively.

Three further anecdotal observations about the program can be made. First, the attrition rate in 2004 has remained extremely low in comparison to previous years. From a cohort of 28 candidates, only two candidates have withdrawn due to personal reasons. One candidate plans to re-enrol for 2005. Second, feedback from two doctoral students who took leave for personal reasons in 2003 and re-entered the program this year support the more flexible, yet still scaffolded, approach. Third, two candidates this year reached confirmation within 7 months of enrolling in the program. Typically, confirmation happens almost two years into the program, with the earliest confirmation previously being 14 months.

## Design implications for professional doctorates

The current government demands to increase both the effectiveness and efficiency of doctoral education and, in particular, to measure its contribution to national, social and industry development (see, for example, Kemp, 1999) gives impetus to what has been to date a vulnerable area of doctoral education. The reshaped program outlined in this paper could be described as a 'second generation' professional doctorate, in that it pushes on from traditional models that now may be argued to exist before the confirmation phase of the course. In attempting to provide candidates/clients with a genuine experience of respect-and-challenge, the new program can make stronger claims to recognising and forging a more authentic relationship between academia and the profession. In summary, the reshaped program now works as a site for

- Engaging clients who are "mid-career, time-poor, part-time professional educators, a group that ... provides the University with its greatest pedagogical challenges" (DDoGS, 1998)
- Valuing client professional knowledge
- Promoting connections between communities of learners
- Demonstrating pedagogical innovation involving user-friendly structures and frameworks that support problem refinement, professional inquiry and analysis
- Using technology and multi-modal learning environments for on-campus and off-campus delivery
- Developing and implementing quality assurance systems for managing student assessment to increase the likelihood of successful and timely completions, thus responding to the University's need for economic sustainability.
- Providing rich support and collaboration structures for candidates.

As with other programs, there is no point at which it could be argued that the work is done. However, the fact that a particular professional doctorate may have originated in much the same way as a PhD (that is, born in the university with few structural links to industry at its inception) is no reason to give up on program development. Indeed, it is 'surface' programs (McWilliam et al., 2002) that are most in need of reshaping in the interests of their candidates/clients. While program coordinators cannot be expected to reinvent history, they can and should take advantage of a climate in which change is both expected and can be supported by technology. It is not a question of change for change's sake, but rather an ongoing imperative to live up to the goal of both respecting and challenging client professional knowledge.

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### Appendix A: Activities in the pre-Confirmation Phase

Task	Description	Type (Online, Seminar, Formal paper)	Status (e.g. formal assessment, work in progress, ongoing)
1. Communities of practice	Students draft their own description of their communities of practice. Describe who they are. Why? This learning network would consist of two or more critical friends who may be stakeholders, professional colleagues, peer students, academics, and across interest and discipline groups.	Submit an online entry (500 words) by mid-semester. Name the contact, include a brief CV and a rationale. Update every mid-semester for rest of course work	Ongoing – once a semester
2. Communication networks	*Email communication  *research journal entry every two weeks outlining: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. what you've done</li> <li>2. your current conceptualising</li> <li>3. where you need help</li> <li>4. where to next</li> </ol> *Works-in-progress seminars (2 seminars)	Informal  Submit as online entry. Peers, teaching team members and protem supervisors respond.  Seminar to cohort	As required  Ongoing – every two weeks  In Seminar Week in Semester 1 and in Study School in Semester 3.
3. Timeline	By mid-semester of each coursework unit, provide a timeline outlining when tasks are to be accomplished. Update each semester outlining what has been accomplished and revised plans. It is expected that the plans include writing tasks to the equivalent of 10,000 words per semester.	Submit timeline to protem supervisory team and teaching team member for discussion and approval.	Ongoing – once a semester

4. Review of literature –	<p>The literature review is an ongoing process but there are some endpoints along the way.</p> <p><i>Background to problem</i>  What have the other educators thought about this?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Definitional literature</li> <li>2. Key conceptual work</li> <li>3. Professional doctorate literature</li> <li>4. Educational research</li> <li>5. Research design</li> </ol> <p>Reviews of literature are required also for Tasks 7 and 8.</p>	<p>Annotated bibliography (maximum of 5, 000 words)</p> <p>See Tasks 7 and 8</p>	<p>Formal assessment (Satisfactory/ Unsatisfactory)</p> <p>Peer feedback</p>
5. Submission of article to journal	<p>The journal article is a response to some aspect of the research investigation and involves problematising the topic. Candidates select an appropriate journal for submission. The journal may be of academic or professional category.</p>	<p>Journal article. In consultation with members of community of practice (including peers), protem supervisory team and teaching team members.</p>	<p>Submission by end of 3<sup>rd</sup> semester</p>
6. Prepare draft of research proposal using the five questions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In what field is your proposed study situated?</li> <li>2. What central question(s) is your study trying to research?</li> <li>3. Why is your study worthy of doing?</li> <li>4. What method(s) will you use and what will your data be?</li> <li>5. How might your study contribute to scholarships and professional practice?</li> </ol>	<p>Submitted overview (maximum of 1,000 words) end of each semester to teaching team and protem supervisory team.</p> <p>By confirmation, submission of paper presenting research problem (5,000-7,000 words)</p>	<p>Formal assessment (Satisfactory/ Unsatisfactory)</p>
7. Key conceptual work	<p>Write a paper outlining the key conceptual work underpinning your research problem. This paper should also identify the contribution made by one or more Researcher Activities.</p>	<p>Paper (5,000 words)</p>	<p>Formal assessment (Satisfactory/ Unsatisfactory)</p> <p>Peer feedback</p>

8. Implications for research design	Write a paper outlining the implications of conceptual framework for your research design.	Paper (5,000 words)	Formal assessment (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory)  Peer feedback
9. Completion of portfolio.	The portfolio consists of <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. evidence of submission of paper to journal and letter of acknowledgement</li> <li>2. paper presenting research problem</li> <li>3. review of relevant literature</li> <li>4. review of conceptual framework</li> <li>5. review of research design</li> <li>6. peer feedback</li> </ol>	Portfolio	Formal assessment (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory)
10. Researcher Development Activities	Researcher Development Activities include, but are not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional workshops</li> <li>• Audited courses</li> <li>• Advanced Information Retrieval</li> <li>• Endnote</li> <li>• Australian Technology Network's LEAP project.</li> </ul> These activities are selected in consultation with the teaching team and protem supervisory team.	The contribution made by one or more Researcher Development Activities will be noted in at least one of the written papers (Tasks 4, 7, 8).	

These tasks are mandatory but there is flexibility in their sequence. The candidate negotiates the timing and sequence of these tasks in consultation with the teaching team and protem supervisory team.

## Appendix B

### *Student Evaluations of Semester 1 unit, 2002-2004 (5 point scale)*

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	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
Aims and objectives are clear	4.3	4.5	4.5
Unit content is structured and delivered in ways which assist my learning	4.1	4.2	4.2
Teaching staff in this unit have a good manner	4.7	4.7	4.6
Organisation of the unit supports my learning and needs	3.9	4.1	4.1
<i>Assessment methods and feedback in this unit help my learning</i>	3.8	3.8	4.2
Unit is structured and delivered in ways that help me understand	4.0	3.9	4.2
Teaching and assessment methods are compatible with unit objectives	3.8	4.4	4.3
I get the impression that genuine attempts have been made to improve this unit	4.5	4.5	4.4
<i>Assessment methods used in this unit are useful learning experiences</i>	3.6	4.1	4.4
Overall, how would you rate this unit?	4.1	4.2	4.4

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