Dissertation Design Options

The purpose of a dissertation in a Doctor of Education program is to provide the student with an opportunity to demonstrate the ability to use theory to investigate a problem or challenge of education leadership practice. This requirement may be met through various empirical research design options that *advance knowledge and inform practice* such as:

- Experimental methods
- Quasi-experimental methods
- Causal-comparative methods
- Qualitative methodology (e.g., case study, narrative inquiry, grounded theory, basic interpretive inquiry)
- Quantitative methods
- Mixed Methods
- Legal study methods
- Historical study methods
- Policy analysis methods
- Action research, or Analysis of Practice

The Analysis of Practice Dissertation

An Analysis of Practice (AoP) is a form of Action Research; it is distinct from many other forms of research in that it “focuses on a problem of practice; is conducted by practitioners in their own organizational settings; and aims at generating, implementing, and assessing an action plan to address the problem” (Osterman et al., 2014, p. 86). The student’s goal is to complete an analysis of a problem of practice. The problem may be identified by either the student or the organization and involves the development of researchable questions focused on educational practices *within a specific setting or context*.

Formatting / Chapters

While the understanding of a dissertation is dominated by the format of the 5-chapter dissertation, some authors structure their dissertation to have more than five chapters. For

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authors of an AoP dissertation – with its commitment to having the research serve the site – the format often has six or more chapters, with rich description of the site (more consistent with a case study). Ultimately, the format for this dissertation, like any dissertation, will be determined by the student and committee. However, a suggested format for an AoP dissertation is as follows:

1. **Introduction.** This chapter describes the research problem; states the research purpose and its significance; among other introductory elements (consistent with 5-chapter format.

2. **The Context [site & setting].** Here the reader learns about the organization that serves as the research site, describes the challenge or problem presented by the practice or program that will be studied. In a traditional 5-chapter dissertation, this context may be described in ch 1 (intro) and/or ch3 (methods). Consistent with case study research design, a rich description of the site and setting are central to an AoP. However, consistent with all research, the site must be masked and the confidentiality of participants ensured; this means all identifiable information (people / places) must be assigned pseudonyms.

3. **Review of the Literature.** The review presents the reader with a critique of the professional field’s understanding the practice or program being studied. The review presents the consensus among experts about “best practice” (if it exists) relative to the implementation of the practice. The review also presents questions or gaps in the field’s understanding of the practice. Finally, the reader is presented with an argument for using a theory (or theories) that is best suited to the analysis of this practice given the research questions that have been identified. [This chapter is equivalent to chapter 2 in the traditional five-chapter dissertation.]

4. **Research Methods.** This chapter describes how the student will conduct the analysis of practice, including data collection methods, data analysis, how threats to validity will be controlled and limitations to the study. [This chapter is equivalent to chapter 3 in the traditional five-chapter dissertation.] The dissertation proposal hearing will be a discussion of chapters 1-4.

5. **Description of Findings/Results.** This chapter is equivalent to chapter 4 in the traditional five-chapter dissertation.

6. **Discussion, Implications/Recommendations, and Conclusions.** This chapter is equivalent to chapter 5 in the traditional five-chapter dissertation. In addition to interpretive discussion of findings/results, implications for practice and future research must be delineated.

The following section/chapters are optional in the AoP dissertation:

- **Personal Reflections.** While not all AoP research is qualitative, the researcher is often a participant/observer in the research site, and thus an instrument in the research process. As such, reflecting on one’s role and subjectivity is essential. Further, the dissertation is a final culminating learning experience and students are encouraged to reflect on what s/he has learned about: 1) the implementation of the practice or program that was the focus of the study and how this reflected, or did not reflect, the professional field’s consensus of effective implementation; 2) the process of inquiry used in the analysis including the application of theory to the problem, data collection
and data analysis processes; and, 3) lessons learned for yourself and other education leaders. This could be written as a brief ‘epilogue’ at the conclusion of chapter 6.

**Report to the Site.** The author of the AoP dissertation may elect to prepare a report to the site. This may take the form of a memorandum to the site that: 1) provides a one-page executive summary; 2) summarizes the genesis and rationale for the analysis of practice; 3) summarizes the literature and research about “best practice” implementation; 4) states the research questions and summarizes the data collection procedures; presents the findings and implications for practice. 

**NOTE:** This report would not be part of the final dissertation, as it could risk unmasking the site.

**Common Questions About the Analysis of Practice Dissertation:**

1. *Does this option allow me to do my dissertation in my current organization?*
   Yes. However, note that this option requires that you obtain the same permission for entrée to conduct research. It requires you (the researcher) to negotiate your role as an insider/participant to the site, while concurrently being an ‘outsider’/observer as the investigator, and to balance the potential conflicts of interests that may arise from this ‘participant/observer’ duality. To moderate the conflict, you/researcher should ask yourself, “How/Would I have access to the participants/data if I was not an insider/participant in this site?” If your answer is “no,” then you likely have to take extra steps to gain access to data and ensure the informed consent of potential participants. The benefit to ‘insider’ research is that the investigator (you) has access and rapport, and the site may have a vested interest in the inquiry.

2. *Must I still apply to the Manhattanville IRB?*
   Yes, human subjects must be protected equivalent to any other approach to conducting research. And you must inquire into the approval process for conducting research in your organization – what’s also referred to as “research in your own backyard.”

3. *Does an Analysis of Practice require less work than the traditional 5-chapter empirical dissertation?*
   No, this dissertation format requires about the same amount of time and writing as the traditional five-chapter dissertation.

4. *Are the data analysis requirements the same as in an empirical dissertation?*
   Yes, the “burden of proof” for an AoP dissertation produces an evidence-based argument. However, this differs somewhat from those (more traditional) dissertations that aim to prove or refute specific propositions. The AoP dissertation presents evidence-based data-driven findings that will inform practitioners decision making. It is focused on "persuasion" rather than "proof."  

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