1

A Guide for Practitioner Scholars

Iof course knew I was going to France for my semester abroad. I had studied French in my college courses. I took out books about France from the library. And then I got to France and I was shocked, literally shocked, that everyone was speaking French." One of our doctoral students—let's call her "Lynn"—was relating this story of surprise and frustration in one of our regular doctoral debriefing sessions as a way to make a very poignant point: she had really thought she knew what she was getting into when she enrolled in our doctoral program. She had read our program literature, spoken to colleagues who had gone through a doctoral program, and reflected upon her educational experiences to date and goals for the future. She knew that a doctoral degree was necessary for her career advancement (she was currently the curriculum design specialist in her district) and that she wanted to make a difference in how curricula were designed in her district and statewide. She was excited to begin the process and thought she was more than prepared.

But then, the realities started to pile up. At first, Lynn could not decide upon which dissertation topic to focus on. Then, even with strong support from her dissertation chair, she had a hard time narrowing her topic so it would be manageable and doable. She was now struggling to balance her full-time job, continue reading, and finalize her dissertation proposal. She would, she confided, sometimes fall asleep on the sofa while trying to read yet another journal article. There were knowing nods around the room as two-dozen educators—teachers, principals, school psychologists, and

higher education administrators—heard their own situations being spoken out loud.

All of our doctoral students are seasoned and successful educators managing complex daily situations in classrooms, schools, and school districts across the country. They have advanced in the educational system, successfully completed graduate degrees, won awards and grants, and see themselves as change agents for educational renewal and social justice. They too thought they knew what they were getting into. All of our doctoral students came into the program thinking they were going to research and solve complex educational problems, gain deep knowledge in their specialization in order to become better teachers and leaders, overturn the inertia all too common in K–12 schools, and gain critical skills they could leverage to lead local educational reform and transform teaching and learning. Instead, they found themselves falling asleep on their sofas and questioning their ability to successfully complete their doctoral dissertations.

They are not alone. Nationally, more than half of all doctoral students drop out of their programs without ever completing their dissertation (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). (The more inclusive term "doctoral student" is used throughout this book since a "doctoral candidate" has technically completed all coursework and exams, passed the dissertation proposal, and is now "ABD," "all but dissertation.") Of those that finish, the average time-to-completion for a doctorate in education is over a decade (Planty et al., 2008). While the delivery and structure of K–12 education have fundamentally shifted over the last quarter century, much of doctoral education continues to operate through norms and practices that appear better suited for the nineteenth century when the doctoral degree first began being awarded in the United States. Our doctoral students are often, like most doctoral students in education, caught by what the philosopher and psychologist William James (1903) famously and derisively termed the "PhD octopus."

QUESTIONING THE DOCTORATE

James (1903), writing at the cusp of the twentieth century when the doctoral degree was just gaining traction in higher education, was deeply critical of a trend where the skills, experience, and character of an individual were cast aside such that only "the three magical letters were the thing seriously required" (p. 1). In many ways, James was a proponent of doctoral education for spurring innovative research and helping, as he called it, "to gain bread-winning positions" for those undertaking the arduous process (p. 2). What James disdained was the formalization of a bureaucratic process that could, by the simple granting of a diploma, seemingly confer the aura of intellectual brilliance. This was, for James, not just

charlatanism; it was the outright undermining of American principles of fairness in fostering "a tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption" (p. 2). Those who knew how to "play the game" and had the resources to do so could successfully receive a doctorate, whereas others potentially much more qualified but without insider knowhow or external support were deprived of this opportunity.

Unfortunately, James's fears have proven all too real a hundred years later. While the number of doctorates has dramatically increased—more than 40,000 are awarded each and every year—their value in actually helping to prepare the next generation of researchers, leaders, and teachers has never been more in question. Research across disciplines from the arts and humanities to the social and natural sciences has questioned the ability of the doctoral degree to adequately develop and nurture relevant skills (Golde & Dore, 2001; Golde & Walker, 2006; McWilliam, Lawson, & Evans, 2005). As one prominent report has noted (Woodrow Wilson Foundation, 2005), doctoral education, and its processes and practices, is fundamentally misaligned with many students' aspirations, careers, and real-world issues:

> The problem of a ridiculously long and costly number of years for earning the doctorate has many components, including an inertial tendency to require more and more, as if the doctorate is the last stage of knowing rather than a moment that leads beyond itself. (p. 6)

Doctoral programs in education are not immune from such criticism. In fact, a host of recent critiques (e.g., Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levin, 2006; Levine, 2005, 2007; Shulman et al., 2006) have argued that doctoral programs in education are fatally inadequate for teacher-leaders and administrators in bridging theory with practice and university knowledge with K–12 classroom realities. Moreover, the scholarship produced appears to be piecemeal and unable to answer pressing real-world questions. This, scholars suggest, is symptomatic of a long-standing stigma; the field of higher education views the educational doctorate as being the "poor cousin" of a "real" doctorate and without its own unique and legitimate identity, signature practices, and goals (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Labaree, 2004).

There have, of course, been attempts to rethink and rework the doctorate in education, dating back to almost the time it was first awarded—in 1893 as a PhD at Teachers College at Columbia University and in 1920 as an EdD at Harvard. Some scholars have suggested doing away with the PhD, while others have suggested the dismantling of the EdD (Deering, 1998; Orr, 2007; Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993). Some scholars have pointed to the dissertation format as the problem, while others find that the problem is the very nature of doctoral study (Barnett & Muth, 2008; Duke & Beck, 1999; Grogan, Donaldson, & Simmons, 2007; Pries, Grogan, Sherman, &

Beaty, 2007; Shulman, 2007). A host of recent scholarship, for example, has explicitly focused on shifting how institutions structure, support, and grant a doctorates in education (e.g., Archbald, 2008; Young, 2006) in order to develop doctoral programs better aligned with and supportive of practitioner scholars in education.

In part, all of these debates occur because the education dissertation lies at the crossroads of theory and practice. Traditionally, such a distinction was marked by the differentiation between an EdD (a "Doctor of Education") and a PhD (a "Doctor of Philosophy" in education). A PhD program in education is supposedly set up to prepare educational researchers who will immediately thereafter teach in higher education and focus on their research and teaching. EdD programs, on the other hand, are seen as preparing practicing educators who are then able to understand and apply theory to the immediate and important educational issues in front of them.

While higher education has traditionally privileged the so-called more scholarly path, there is, in fact, little evidence that a "life of the mind" is any more difficult than bringing theory to life. In fact, translating research into effective practice has consistently been the weak link within the educational research community. While it is usually true that spending five, six, or seven years immersed in a topic will produce expert knowledge, there is little research to suggest that a long dissertation (in terms of both time and pages) is a good dissertation. The debates and revisions to doctoral study in education can, as such, be understood as trying to solve the theory-practice divide of educational research and practice.

Such initiatives, however, no matter how worthwhile or genuine, cannot mask the continued problematic situation of the field. As one of the most scathing critics from inside the field (Levine, 2007) has argued, there is a lack of focus, rigor, and relevance for educators who may simply be using the doctoral degree as yet another stepping stone in their administrative enhancement. Levine's study found an appalling sense of rigor or quality in the preparation of educational researchers: "Deans and faculty, even at the highest-ranked schools of education, persistently complained that their doctoral curriculums did not equip students sufficiently for the dissertation" (p. 34); students seemed to have minimal understanding of research methods or paradigms; almost half of all doctoral recipients thought their doctoral curriculum lacked rigor; and "many of the faculty members advising doctoral students today are not productive scholars and lack the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to mentor students in preparing a substantial piece of research" (p. 55). Even more damning, Levine's study found that many education dissertations were weak, asked trivial research questions, used improper and shoddy methodology, collected and analyzed data improperly, drew conclusions inconsistent with the data, were poorly written, and were "so short as to appear stunted and superficial, the sort of thing that might suffice for a class project" (p. 58).

This is harsh criticism; it, unfortunately, is not unique either to education or to the current state of the field (e.g., Cleary, 2000; Geiger, 1997; White, 1986). Part of the criticism, it should be noted, is not necessarily focused on the education doctorate per se. It just so happens that the last two decades have seen a profound addition to the doctoral landscape. Doctoral degrees in education offered through nontraditional doctoral programs in traditional institutions, as well as through for-profit institutions, have become significantly more prevalent. While these programs graduate only a small percentage of the 6,000 to 7,000 doctoral degrees conferred yearly in education, their growth has been dramatic and noticeable.

Specifically, a hybrid or even fully online structure is deeply appealing to practitioners and may be noticeably better at supporting genuine learning (Ghezzi, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Sherman & Beaty, 2007). Yet, it is also understandable how such nontraditional formats (i.e., doctoral coursework done primarily online; minimal face-to-face interaction between a dissertation chair, doctoral committee, and doctoral student) raise questions about the quality and value of a doctoral degree. Given such tumultuous changes and critiques from within and outside of the educational field, there is no longer a clear vision of what qualifies as a legitimate and valuable dissertation, what form doctoral programs and dissertations should take, and how these dissertations can positively contribute to the later success of students. And, unfortunately again, doctoral students are caught in the middle of all of this.

SEEING THE DOCTORAL PROCESS THROUGH DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EYES

In one respect, Lynn and our other doctoral students can intuitively relate to this feeling of being caught in a situation not of their own making. They are attempting to write a highly formulaic manuscript, in a very prescribed style, for an audience of just four people. They must demonstrate particular "skills" through this manuscript that will most likely never be asked for again. They would, moreover, need to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy in rethinking and revising this manuscript if they ever wanted to use it for any other audience. It is, thus, not hard to understand why both the national dropout rate and cynicism may be so high in doctoral programs in education.

And yet, this is not the whole story. After Lynn had finished comparing her experience in France to her doctoral process, another doctoral student spoke up. She too now fell asleep on her sofa, and, she informed us with a laugh, this was highly ironic since she had been yelling at her husband for years not to do that. Interestingly, however, the reason she fell asleep—reading books and articles on her dissertation topic after long days as a special education coordinator—was actually empowering. She

was doing exactly what we told her a doctoral student should be doing at that stage in the process; she was reading every day, jotting down notes, writing summaries and critiques of what she read, and compiling a longer and longer bibliography. She knew it was slow going, but she could see her notes getting longer, her ideas getting sharper, and her brain making easier connections across topics and ideas. At work, she caught herself using phrases such as "as the research suggests" and "how can we operationalize that idea?" Falling asleep on the sofa, in fact, had become an informal sign of victory for her. She was continuing to move forward, to push herself, and in the process, she would naturally fall asleep from exhaustion. All the while, the next stage in the process was visible in the distance. This perspective brought widespread nodding from her cohort, and afterwards, Lynn agreed that, yes, she too was making progress. It was hard, but doable.

An anecdote, I tell my students, does not count as data. I do not mean to exaggerate this onetime event as some Shangri-La of doctoral achievement—except this was not a onetime event. In fact, the doctoral program that these students are part of boasts an 80 percent completion rate. Students pass their dissertation proposals within five months of starting the process, and successfully defend their dissertations an average of twelve months later. Graduates have gone on to teach at top-tier colleges and universities, advanced to high administrative positions in their districts, and become teacher-leaders in their schools and school districts. Our population of doctoral students, moreover, is overwhelmingly first-generation college graduates and 65 percent nonwhite. Our students are extremely motivated, as a doctoral degree is a milestone achievement for themselves and their careers. But, it is more than just their individual drive and perseverance that can explain such success.

A host of research supports the fact that doctoral completion has much more to do with the structural conditions at an institution than anything personal about the individual (Gardner, 2008; Goenner & Snaith, 2004; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2005; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004). In some ways, the unique structure of our doctoral program does in fact enhance the quality and timeliness of our students' success. With a concurrent dissertation-design model, students take specific research courses while they simultaneously design their research and collect and analyze data. They continue in a cohort group throughout the entire process, including the dissertation writing stage to enhance academic and emotional support, and receive ample one-on-one meetings and support from the dissertation chair.

More relevant, though, is the program's ultimate structure around, and focus on, creating a way for professional and experienced educators to display their skills and strengths while still undergoing a rigorous academic program to help them successfully conduct and write a doctoral-quality dissertation.

I teach the first course in the doctoral curriculum, Introduction to the Dissertation, as well as lead the dissertation seminar course taken each semester by all of the students as long as they stay in the cohort. This seminar (where Lynn spoke up) is a combination of debriefing, peer support, discussion of strategies for success, and readings about the dissertation process. In each of these courses and sessions, I very consciously provide detailed and concrete strategies to support our students' ultimate success (e.g., clarifying theoretical frameworks and research designs, discussing the minutiae of APA style and bibliographic reference tools, strategizing library research skills and the most effective means by which to do a literature review). But irrespective of which topic I am lecturing about or leading a discussion on, I focus on making visible the implicit norms of academic work, what is oftentimes termed the "implicit" or "hidden" curriculum.

This is a crucial component because doctoral students are rarely told about this. A so-called "traditional" dissertation is done by a full-time doctoral student who spends all of his time reading and researching in the library, writing at his computer, taking doctoral courses with other full-time students, and meeting occasionally with his advisor. In such a scenario, this doctoral student comes to understand the nature of academic work almost by osmosis. He lives it and sees it all around him. The knowledge he doesn't pick up in the first year or two can always be gained in the next few years or from other doctoral students a few years ahead who offer guidance and advice. Even then, he may graduate with large gaps of knowledge.

This is what is traditionally known as the doctoral "journey," and there are numerous how-to books, Web sites, and advice columns on how to survive such an "expedition" and make the most of it. The journey is portrayed as an exciting, albeit grueling, adventure, where stumbles, scraped knees, and diversions are just "par for the course," a seemingly enjoyable and necessary part of the trip. Most advice from such a "journey" perspective attempts to point out guideposts along the way and provide with suggestions of where not to drink the water.

The problem with this vision and accompanying advice is that the vast majority of doctoral students in education don't follow this type of path nor gain from such a "school of hard knocks" attitude mixed with anecdotal "war stories" of past practices. This is because the dissertation is not a journey; it is a process. This is not a semantic quibbling over terms. A journey is a trip with minimal guidance, direction, or goals. Before people start a journey, they are wished luck and asked to keep in touch. They may even be offered advice with stories about a well-wisher's own journey, presuming that such experiences may transfer to the forthcoming situation. But, this is not how one thinks about a process. A process has definable starting and ending points, as well as numerous points in between. A process has particular and idiosyncratic characteristics that can be better understood and worked out through specific, heuristic models. One may not be able to predict or prepare for every occurrence, but good models

and strategies can account for and help us to understand the vast majority of options and alternatives in a well-defined process. And, the dissertation is indeed a well-defined process.

Long ago, Dewey (1916) noted that a good teacher cannot truly teach a lesson or unit if she has not first thought through the ends of the process before starting at the very beginning. Understanding the end goals of the process can help us work backward to develop the most effective and efficient means by which to begin. The students may not realize why the teacher introduces what she does at the point she does, but a good teacher knows the relevant issues and key junctures at each stage of the lesson. It is likely this perspective that Lynn and most other doctoral students in education want: a means to support their objectives through academically rigorous yet time-efficient means.

We must remember, most doctoral students in education are not typical doctoral students. National data (Planty et al., 2008) show that doctoral recipients in education are on average age 42 (the oldest by far of any other field) and have over a decade of work experience. More than 60 percent of doctoral recipients in education are married; they are also the least likely group of all doctoral fields to have had parents with postsecondary education, with 59 percent of fathers and 67 percent of mothers without college degrees.

Put otherwise, most doctoral students in education are already experienced and excellent educators who do not have the desire or resources to spend ten years wandering around the hallways and byways of academia. Rather, doctoral students in education want to be treated as the adults whom they are. Adult learning theory (e.g., Keeton, Sheckley, & Griggs, 2002; Mezirow, 1981, 1997; Tisdell, 1998) presumes that adult students are engaged learners who bring detailed and useful practitioner knowledge and positionality to their studies; in other words, doctoral students are experienced educational practitioners needing a specific content and context to demonstrate acquired skill sets and the ability to transfer such skill sets to academic research contexts (Labaree, 2003). The fact, moreover, that these doctoral students tend to be about ten years older than doctoral students in other fields is not a simple temporal distinction, since those years "in the field" provide educators with maturity, a wealth of valuable insights and professional expertise in teaching and learning, and the opportunity for moving into and successfully rising in the administrative ranks.

Yet, there is minimal acknowledgement that doctoral study can be daunting for those who have been out of school for more than ten years and may not have the requisite graduate skills even if they have other skills and passion. Adult learning theory (e.g., Mezirow, 1997) is clear here that programs must move beyond a deficit model in order to offer "a rationale for selecting appropriate educational practices and actively resisting social and cultural forces that distort and delimit adult learning" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 12). If the challenge of doctoral study in education is

transforming successful educational practitioners into educational researchers and scholar practitioners, then a solution through the frame of adult learning theory must arise organically by from designing processes and protocols "that deliberately demonstrate respect for the skills and orientations that teachers bring with them" (Labaree, 2003, p. 21).

This "respect," it should be noted, is not simply the respect for the skills and aptitudes of the master teacher or visionary administrator. Another aspect to the national data is that many doctoral students in education—by the very nature of the fact that they are first-generation college graduates or the first in their families to pursue graduate studies—do not have the requisite "cultural capital" necessary for success. This is what William James (1903) referred to as some doctoral students being excluded and deprived of opportunities.

Cultural capital refers to the practices, norms, and patterns of particular groups of individuals. It is oftentimes used in educational research to discuss the differential academic success between students coming from low and high-income families. Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), a French sociologist who first popularized this concept, found, for example, that there was a direct correlation between the types of readings a family would do and the success of their children in school. This was not about some children having greater access to books or hearing more words every day and thus doing better in school. This was about the fact that children of parents who read "high culture" materials—what we would equate with *The New York Times* or *Harper's Magazine*—did better than those who read "low culture" materials. Bourdieu's argument, documented by dozens of studies thereafter, is that schools only reward certain types of culture (Delpit, 1995; Ogbu, 1970). To put it somewhat simplistically, the way one talks and dresses and the references one makes (whether it's to NPR or NASCAR), dramatically impacts whether one will be academically successful.

This is equally true in higher education as it is in K–12 schools. There are a multitude unspoken rules and norms in higher education, and oftentimes we don't even know where to begin to ask questions or what types of questions to ask. The problem is that while doctoral programs and advisors may spend a lot of time on the explicit aspects of doctoral study, there is usually very little guidance concerning the implicit and oftentimes the most important part: how do I actually make it through this process? This is what this book is about.

THIS BOOK AS GUIDELINES AND GUARDRAILS

Just as I do with my doctoral students in my courses and as a dissertation chair, this book provides a detailed and concrete protocol for successfully completing your dissertation. It provides strategies and perspectives about

what to do at key stages in the dissertation process, and how to do it. Lynn and her cohort, and many other doctoral students, have substantial skills and experiences. They are motivated and focused. What they all too often don't have, though, are the guidelines and "guardrails" to use as a starting point. Specifically, doctoral students—as mature, experienced, and self-motivated adults—are looking for a starting point with specific yet flexible parameters from which they can get their own bearings to move forward.

This is not a cookie-cutter approach to writing a dissertation. There is no such thing. A dissertation is an in-depth and rigorous examination of a particular issue that provides new knowledge and/or perspectives and, as such, contributes to ongoing scholarship and discussion around that issue. I cannot write that for you. What I can do, though, is offer support and scaffolding, providing you with freedom to focus your valuable time and energy on what matters: the content of your dissertation idea. To take an analogous example, nobody complains that all doctoral programs are cookie-cutter approaches because they all have a more-or-less standardized format: coursework, comprehensive exams, and the writing of a dissertation. Everyone understands that the standardization lies in the structure, allowing individuals to focus on the particular specifics of the content they want to focus on, in what order, and from what perspective.

Another way to think about this book is as the equivalent to a mnemonic or what is referred to as the ability to "chunk" information. Researchers who study the transformation of learners from novice to expert practitioners have shown that what separates chess masters from novice players is not the master player's ability to more quickly work through all the possible moves on the board and predict their long-term consequences (technically referred to as the greater breadth and depth of search); rather, chess masters were much more adept at "chunking" chess configurations and thus knowing quickly which were fruitful for further consideration. While novices spent equal time working through as many possible moves as time allowed, chess masters immediately focused on the limited set of moves they deemed relevant for the situation at hand (Chase & Simon, 1973; de Groot, 1965).

The point here is that there are concrete and highly effective strategies for maximizing learning, and how we learn about one thing is transferable to how we learn about other things (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). *The strategies in this book are not the dissertation.* The mnemonic of "please excuse my dear Aunt Sally" to learn the order of mathematical operations (parenthesis, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, subtraction) is a wonderful teaching tool; it does not, though, automatically turn students into mathematicians. It is a tool. Likewise, this book provides mechanisms that allow you to maximize your learning curve for how to think and write about your research passion.

This specificity and structure is particularly critical for educators who continue to juggle their studies with their professional career and are not

full-time graduate students. For, unfortunately, too many doctoral programs provide too much latitude for their doctoral students. It is of course valuable to take a wide range of elective courses or to read widely and deeply on fascinating and important educational topics. Nevertheless, the point is that the advocacy of "flexibility" and "following your (academic) whims" is too often shorthand for not having a program structure or advising capacity that carefully guides doctoral students in a timely and effective manner through the necessary stages of the dissertation process.

This book, moreover, provides a strong scaffolding exactly because there is all too often minimal guidance and minimal understanding of the exact type of focus that doctoral students need. Part of this may be due to professors frequently being busy with their own research, teaching, and advancement in their disciplinary field or at their own institutions. Many doctoral faculty advise anywhere between ten to thirty doctoral dissertations at any one time (Golde, 2000). Additionally, and no matter how well meaning an advisor may be, many faculty have minimal experience in the time-intensive process of helping focus dissertation ideas.

Research consistently shows that while mentoring is the single most critical component for on-time and quality dissertation completion, few faculty know how to be an effective mentor and advisor (Kam, 1997; Richardson, 2006; Rosen & Bates, 1967; Spillett & Moisiewicz, 2004). A recent study of social science PhD graduates (Council on Graduate Schools PhD Completion Project, 2008, p. 28), for example, found that just over half of all respondents were "very satisfied" with how their dissertation chair helped develop their thesis topic and their guidance in completing the dissertation. While very few (under 6 percent) were "very unsatisfied," it is troubling that more than 40 percent of doctoral students were just "somewhat satisfied" or "somewhat unsatisfied." You wouldn't think that this could be possible; professors are supposed to be intelligent individuals. They are. But, guiding doctoral students toward a clear, concise, and meaningful dissertation topic and then transforming that idea into a doable research project is a very different art form than mastering specific statistical techniques or being an expert in a specific educational subfield.

It should, of course, be acknowledged that simply reading this book will not miraculously allow you to pass the dissertation defense. This book is not snake oil, and no such promises can be made. To that end, I should also note that while this book is structured to maximize your focus and learning, I have to make some assumptions about you, the reader, and the dissertation process you are about to begin or already are on.

The first assumption is that you are indeed writing a traditional dissertation. While this may seem obvious, there is in fact a growing movement in higher education for nontraditional dissertations, ranging from action-research projects to multiple "articles" to a portfolio-capstone project (e.g., Grogan et al., 2007; Shulman et al., 2006). These are important developments in the field, yet they operate from different assumptions

and with different goals; as such, these types of alternative dissertation formats are not discussed.

My second assumption is that while this may be one of the first books you read as you prepare for and engage in your dissertation process, it is certainly not the only one. This book cannot substitute for the knowledge gained from your research courses or advising sessions. While I cover many of the basics about, for example, research design, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and structuring a literature review, this book is meant as a companion rather than a replacement for your own coursework and in-depth readings. If your advisor suggests a specific book, read it. If your graduate department requires a specific protocol, follow it. This book is meant to help you "chunk" your resources of time and energy so that you actually know the questions to ask your advisor, the most fruitful way to structure your literature review, and the most productive way through the process in your particular institution. It is a guide along that path, not a substitute for it.

A final assumption is that, obviously, I do not know what your dissertation is about. I do not know if it is exploring gender issues in elementary-mathematics classrooms or the role of emotional intelligence in leadership preparation. I do not know if you are taking a qualitative or quantitative approach to your research design. And, I do not know the type or amount of data you plan on collecting, or how you will go about analyzing and writing about these data. I am, as they say, flying blind.

But that doesn't mean I can't offer highly helpful strategies for success. "Flying blind" is actually common practice in the aviation world. It is known as "instrument flying," rather than "visual flying" and occurs whenever the pilot cannot see visual cues due to poor weather, clouds, or other problems. Pilots thus rely on their instrument panel and their years of honed experience to get them through the vast majority of situations that they may encounter. Similarly, this book draws on a large array of academic research to provide the key indicators for what constitutes a quality dissertation and how to get there. It synthesizes my own and many other academics' experiences in guiding dissertations and the best means to do so. Thus, while I cannot know your specific situation, the academic literature provides very good estimations of the major challenges and hurdles for doctoral students and, likewise, the best means to support them.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

My goal, then, is to increase your awareness of the key issues to address in your dissertation and then to give you the tools and strategies for success. This is critical because the dissertation is (or should be) a "different beast" from any other educational endeavor you have ever undertaken. The problem, actually, is not so much that a dissertation is in fact a different

beast; the problem is that no one usually talks to doctoral students about how and why it is so different, or what can be done to deal with such differences. For this reason, let me provide two quick examples to illustrate this focus on tangible support for success (these examples are discussed in-depth in later chapters).

The first is the question of what constitutes a quality dissertation. Since there is no single or easy answer, professors oftentimes sidestep this question (if doctoral students even know how to ask it in such a direct and forthright way) with the refrain "I know it when I see it." While this sounds pithy, it is of no help for the doctoral student attempting to find his way through what appears to be an infinite number of options, and the options themselves seem to have an infinite number of permutations. It leaves the doctoral student either to place everything in the trust of the dissertation chair or search for some "lowest common factor" such as the number of pages, which itself is ultimately of no use. I could, for example, tell you that research indicates a typical education dissertation is approximately 150 pages long, with a standard deviation of about 20 pages— meaning that 95 percent of all dissertations are between 110 and 190 pages. However, this information is of little help if you write 180 pages of jumbled prose.

So instead, at the beginning of my introductory course, I provide my students with some basic guidelines of both the big picture and specific examples of what counts as a quality dissertation. The attributes I provide (e.g., a quality dissertation has to have a nontrivial topic that can withstand the "so what?" question) offer students specific terminology and a conceptual overview closed-ended enough to be meaningful yet open-ended enough to foster their own growth and flourish within these parameters. More importantly, students can now use these parameters both as boundaries to be respected as well as limits to be pushed: "Is this really a nontrivial topic?" they can ask a committee member; "How exactly do my survey questions help me to answer my research question?" they can ask their dissertation chair. The articulation of specific guidelines provides a clear starting point and flexible "guardrails" within which students can now move forward.

The other quick example pertains to the table of contents. The table of contents is the skeleton, the fundamental structure, of your dissertation. Although it is just one or two pages, a good table of contents should quickly provide the reader with a sense of the logical structure, progression, and details of the dissertation. Yet, most doctoral students wait until the very end of the dissertation process to create their table of contents, since, they believe, they first need to figure out all of the different sections in their dissertation before they can put it into a table of contents.

This is in fact completely backward. The table of contents should be the very first thing you create. The reality is that most tables of contents have very similar structures. While some differences exist between qualitative

---

Hint! What Exactly Does a Quality Dissertation Look Like?

Educational researchers (e.g., Di Pierro, 2007; Holbrook Bourke, Lovat, & Fairbarn, 2008; Lovitts, 2005; Winter, Griffiths, & Green, 2000) suggest that all quality dissertations, irrespective of their research focus, methodology, or theoretical framework, have a set of common attributes:

They are nontrivial. A quality dissertation is nontrivial in the sense that it examines a potentially valuable research topic that can inform understanding, practice, or policy of a particular issue. While there is no easy way to answer whether any particular topic is nontrivial (this is, after all, why you need the expertise of your dissertation chair), the dissertation must be able to answer the "so what?" question of relevance and contextualize the issue within a broader field of research and discussion.

They are theoretically and methodologically explicit and clear. A quality dissertation can clearly articulate the basis for and procedure of analysis. A theoretical framework clarifies why the dissertation looks at one thing rather than another; the research design clarifies how the data were collected and analyzed. The key for each is not to cover everything and anything; in fact, it is usually quite the opposite: the goal is to be clear and explicit about the limitations of the dissertation so the reader understands the boundaries of inquiry.

Research methods are appropriate to the research questions. Different research questions necessitate different methodological techniques for data collection and analysis. This is true across different forms of qualitative and quantitative research. The techniques—be it statistical analyses, interviews, surveys, or fieldwork—should be adequate to gather the data actually needed to answer the questions.

Conclusions are based on the data. It is tempting but inappropriate to overreach in articulating one's conclusions in order to substantiate a particular worldview, policy, or practice. A quality dissertation, though, can only make conclusions based on an analysis of the gathered data.

They are analytic. A quality dissertation is more than a simple descriptive, formulaic, and/or rhetorical document. It cannot be a compilation of anecdotes, research practices, or synopses. It must examine and question the research literature, analyze and synthesize data, and provide a coherent and thoughtful evaluation of the research within the larger context of the study.

---

and quantitative dissertations (since qualitative dissertations have more flexibility concerning the number and structuring of chapters), most dissertations should have five specific chapters, and these should be broken down into specific sections and subsections. For example, quantitative dissertations usually need a subsection on the validity and reliability of the instrumentation used; qualitative dissertations usually need a subsection on the ethics of fieldwork. By creating such sections and subsections at the very beginning of the dissertation process, a

doctoral student will be much more focused and clear about what must be researched and thought through in the specific dissertation.

I am, of course, aware that even the best strategies may not prevent some doctoral students from calling it quits. Research suggests that two-thirds of all doctoral students drop out either right before or right after the start of the dissertation stage in their doctoral programs (Lovitts, 2001). There are naturally many reasons this may happen that have nothing to do with academic difficulties. Sometimes, "life happens." There are life situations that none of us can prepare for and that derail any and all plans we may have for our careers, education, and future. One of our doctoral students, for example, was called up by his army reserve unit to go to Iraq just before the start of his program. Another doctoral student lost her mother and then her father within the span of two months. These are traumatic situations that overwhelm even the most dedicated student.

Sometimes, students just procrastinate. This occurs with a complicated mix of personality traits, life conditions, and educational contexts. Sometimes, such procrastination—in the right context—is actually a highly positive response. In the middle of my own writing, I may decide that the dishes have to be done right now; or, perhaps I take a day or two to do other academic tasks that do not appear as never-ending. I have learned that these situations are my way of processing the enormous mix of data, ideas, and tangents I am struggling to comprehend and put into a logical argument. So I do the dishes, and my brain (whether I know it or not) spins and spins and spins. When I sit down again, I am (hopefully) able to write about what seemed impossible before. Yet, sometimes such procrastination becomes severe and ongoing, with weeks and months passing without the student able to sit down and write. The longer this occurs, the more likely that the student will drop out.

While all of the above may contribute to difficulties or the inability to move forward, the most documented reason for students' lack of success is a fundamental misalignment between what they think they are going to do and what they actually have to do to finish the dissertation. Part of this misalignment is that none of us were ever truly prepared for doctoral study by our educational system. Every other educational level presumes that the student is primarily and fundamentally a user of research. For the first time, you will produce your own research with your own voice. This is scary. You must now come up with your own research study. Most students have no problem doing the coursework. Many make it through the comprehensive exams with flying colors. But, that's the easy part— easy because in such tasks (taking coursework or passing exams) someone else has created the agenda and set up the process. A dissertation is about taking *your* ideas and passions and translating them into a realistic and doable project.

Moreover, this process is a scary one because to receive a doctoral degree is to become a part of a community of scholars. While all doctoral

programs differ across disciplines and institutions, what is constant is the emphasis on careful and rigorous analysis of a particular issue and the attempt to produce new knowledge. The analysis—through a comprehensive literature review, distinct theoretical framework, and a focused research question and subsequent methodologically sophisticated examination—offers an opportunity for the doctoral student to immerse himself in a "culture of thoughtfulness" that does not simply accept received truths, assumed doctrines, or immediate reactions. As the Nobel Prize–winning scientist Richard Feynman once wryly noted, the definition of science (and, perhaps, doctoral studies in general) is "the belief in the ignorance of authority" (as cited in Berliner, 2002, p. 18). Truth, from such a perspective, has to be achieved one careful and deliberate step at a time.

This "truth," moreover, is never complete. The literary theorist Stanley Fish (2008) has long argued that what sets higher education apart from all other institutions is its constant and never-ending search for truth, wherever this path may lead. More importantly, Fish argues that "truth," irrespective of discipline or topic, must be understood as a verb rather than a noun. One doesn't just find a "truth," accept it, and move on. What is "true" is a process of debate, analysis and reanalysis, formulation and reformulation, ad infinitum. Something is "true" so long as it can be questioned, built upon, or discarded. Put otherwise, once something is no longer questioned, it is not truth. It is dogma. As such, the creation of "new knowledge" at the heart of a doctoral dissertation is nothing more (or less) than the entrance into and participation within a long-standing discussion about a specific issue. The discussion may have been going on for thirty or three hundred or even three thousand years (as is often the case in philosophy). What is important for you to understand is that you have now stepped into this discussion. Your contribution is your dissertation.

What this really means is that all of my doctoral students who come in believing that the dissertation will finally, finally, give them the answers to solve all of their problems are sadly disappointed. They will certainly gain immensely in learning about cutting-edge research, thinking carefully and thoroughly about a particular topic, and realizing the multifaceted components of complex educational issues. But, they will not find the "truth." They will not save the world.

What they ultimately do with their dissertation and their newfound skills may indeed help a lot of people in a lot of ways. This is, in fact, what I believe it means to be a practitioner scholar. It means being cognizant of the complexity around you while nevertheless moving forward in your daily practices. It is about being what Schön (1983) calls a reflective practitioner, someone able to reflect both about practice and in practice. It is about taking the best research available, knowing how to think about it, and using it in your particular context and situation, and within context-specific limitations. This is a learned way of thinking, and the dissertation

can be thought of as the proxy, the process, to help you become that kind of thinker and actor. A dissertation is about helping you to become a practitioner scholar. In order to do so, the dissertation must be understood as a process to accomplish.

A doctoral degree is the culminating milestone in American higher education, and the doctoral dissertation is the visible manifestation of its achievement. Yet, the goal of this book is not simply to help you just finish. A bound dissertation sitting on your bookshelf should indeed be a goal, but it is the skills gained through the process of making that vision a reality that is truly the heart of the dissertation.

The dissertation process should help you focus how you think about complex and contested issues, strengthen your ability to carefully and systematically investigate the relevant research, clarify how to disentangle variables and frame the key issues, and marshal relevant data to substantiate your conclusions. This should all occur not only about the specific issue you will investigate for your dissertation, but also for every other issue you tackle as a practitioner scholar ever after. This book provides the intellectual frameworks, the guided activities, the research-based models, the heuristic processes, and the concrete examples to accomplish all of that. So it's just fine, like Lynn, to lie down on the sofa and keep reading. Let's begin.