



*Original Research Article*

# Challenges navigated by 11 doctoral students in ensemble style group collaboration for the Ed.D. Nontraditional Dissertation in Practice (DiP) at Lynn University

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The previous study demonstrated the ensemble work of 11 doctoral students (known as Cohort 5) as a 21<sup>st</sup> century model for the Ed.D. nontraditional DiP. The researchers in this study tracked ongoing conversations about Cohort 5 members' proposal defense for the nontraditional group DiP. The conversations occurred at various times between October to December of 2014. These discussions produced a proposal defense script containing informed opinions about some of the inherent challenges of group student engagement. The purpose of this research provided an opportunity to explore two objectives in pursuit of (1) exploring Cohort 5 members' opinions and reactions to overcoming any initial decisive challenges to undertake a nontraditional group DiP; and (2) exploring the Cohort 5 members' opinions and reactions to overcoming any initial decisive challenges to construct a doctoral student informational iBook as a nontraditional group DiP project. A purposive total population sampling in this case study was the primary research strategy to analyze the qualitative data. The researchers analyzed and interpreted the findings to demonstrate the ensemble style group collaboration can facilitate to overcome inherent challenges of group student engagement, and succeed as a 21<sup>st</sup> century model for the Ed.D. nontraditional DiP at Lynn University.

**Key words:** Research Education, doctoral students, 21<sup>st</sup> century students, Teaching

## INTRODUCTION

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council of Academic Deans in Research Education Institutions has partnered to sponsor the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED), "to reclaim the education doctorate and to transform it into the degree of choice for the next generation of school and college leaders" (CFAT, 2007, [www.view.officeapps.live.com](http://www.view.officeapps.live.com)).

The evolving needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students and the current challenges confronting institutions of education underscore the imminent need for leaders to develop into adaptive change agents. Societal trends, technological advancements, political shifts in education policy, and a

changing student demographic provide the rationale for the development of educational leaders able to effectively navigate this dynamic climate of change.

CPED designed a newer Ed.D. DiP to follow 21<sup>st</sup> century trends. The aim is relevancy to practitioners through emphasis on "(a) scholarship of teaching, (b) identification of a signature pedagogy, (c) creation of laboratories of practice that undertake best evidence analyses, and (d) development of new capstone experiences in which doctoral students can work together to demonstrate their proficiencies in scholarship" (Browne-Ferrigno and Jenson, 2009). CPED encourages developing group styled DiP

designs, as well.

Through a collaborative process, a cohort of 11 doctoral students at Lynn University developed an informational iBook for prospective doctoral students, a comprehensive literature review, two publishable articles by each member, an executive summary and a group PowerPoint presentation.

The previous study (Guo and Rose, 2015) was to demonstrate the ensemble work of 11 doctoral students (known as Cohort 5) as a 21<sup>st</sup> century model for the Ed.D. nontraditional DiP. The researchers in this study tracked ongoing conversations about Cohort 5 members' upcoming proposal defense for the nontraditional group DiP. The conversations occurred at various times between October to December of 2014. These discussions produced a proposal defense script containing informed opinions about some of the inherent challenges of group student engagement. These informed opinions were identified in the findings section using a combination of ethnicity, age bracket & gender instead of the cohort member's individual name due to confidentiality protocols.

### **Definitions of terms (Guo and Rose, 2015)**

**Apple iBook** – “The app that readers use to preview, buy, download, and read books” (Apple, 2013).

**Cohort Model** – An intact group of students who proceed together (instead of solitary and isolated) throughout the DiP process (Barnett and Muse, 1993).

**Dissertation in Practice (DiP)** – Defined by Shulman (2005) as “the culminating experience that demonstrates the practitioner’s scholarly ability to solve problems of practice, the Dissertation in Practice (DiP) exhibits the doctoral candidate’s ability to think, to perform, and act with integrity” (Schulman, 2005, p. 52). Nontraditional DiP means utilizing an arrangement of students that proceed together as a group for completion of the DiP.

**Ed.D.** – Doctorate in Education. “The professional doctorate in education prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession” (Perry, 2012).

**Ensemble** – According to Trumbull (2008), the term of *ensemble* represents a sense of wholeness – everyone working together as a unit toward a common goal like a well-oiled machine (Trumbull, 2008, www.novaonline.nvcc.edu).

**Purposive total population sampling** – is a type of purposive sampling technique for examining a small entire

group possessing a specific set of characteristics (Lund, 2012).

### **The problem (Guo and Rose, 2015)**

The traditional five chapter dissertation method is said to require the stamina and solitude of a lonely long distance runner participating in an endurance competition hurdling over constructed barriers for upwards of five to seven years (Schulman, 2000). Instead of succumbing to this marathon approach, there is a new movement that emphasizing common standards, collegiality and usefulness for “the real work that individuals with doctorates are called upon to do” (Brown-Ferrigno and Jenson, 2012). One of the strong features of this new movement is often called the cohort effect, that is, a group of students start together and build up a sense of community, with peer group support and group identity, thus avoiding the social and intellectual isolation that a Ph.D. student might experience. It typically uses a closed cohort delivery model and individualized DiP approach. There are also pressures of different kinds not seen in the traditional five chapter approach where variety, individuality, depth of understanding and even idiosyncrasy constitutes conventional practices. The new movement makes doctoral work more accountable, to the institution, to the society, to the government, and also to the student (Barnett, 2000). The new movement is supported by an organization called the Carnegie Project on Educational Doctorate (CPED). One of the new cohort options for completing a doctorate that CPED recommends is a group styled dissertation.

Most higher education CPED cohorts deciding to undertake a group styled dissertation in practice (DiP) choose to divide up the cohort up into several small groups whom select a topic to complete (and it is optional whether or not the topics for each small group bear any relation to one another). An alternative approach is an ensemble style collaboration that produces one collective effort. This approach is not popular yet primarily because it requires a higher degree of teamwork, it poses additional challenges, and concerns if too much is on the line should it fail and turn into a wasted effort.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the challenges navigated by 11 doctoral students in ensemble style group collaboration for the Ed.D. nontraditional dissertation in practice (DiP) at Lynn University.

### **Research question**

How 11 doctoral students navigated challenges to build the interpersonal relationships inherent in ensemble style

**Table 1.** The Research Demographic Characteristic of Participants

<b>Research Demographics</b>		
<b>Participants</b>	● 11 participants (including nine males and two females) in total	
<b>Gender</b>	● All 11 participants are adults (according to laws, <i>adult</i> means 18 years old or above)	
<b>Age</b>	20-29 years old	1
	30-39 years old	3
	40-49 years old	4
	50-59 years old	3
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Caucasian American	2
	Black, African, Jamaican or Haitian American	6
	Asian Chinese	1
	Hispanic, or Cuban American	2

group collaboration for the Ed.D. nontraditional DiP at Lynn University?

### Research objectives

(1) The first objective explores Cohort 5 members' opinions and reactions to overcoming any initial decisive challenges to undertake a nontraditional group DiP.

(2) The second objective explores the Cohort 5 members' opinions and reactions to overcoming any initial decisive challenges to construct a doctoral student informational iBook as a nontraditional group DiP project.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Design

This study adopted the multi-method qualitative approach. A non-probability method called purposive total population sampling (Yin, 2011) permitted selecting characteristics in order to obtain deeper insights into how 11 doctoral students organized an ensemble style nontraditional DiP.

### Setting

Founded in 1962, Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida strives for recognition as one of the most innovative, international and individualized small universities in America. Students who enroll in Lynn's Ed.D. program usually are full time educators who desire a doctoral program that will prepare them to (a) apply theory and curriculum to their professional practice, (b) learn how to better solve in-the-trench challenges, and (c) simultaneously remain active at their employment while earning their doctorate (Perry, 2011). As a CPED partner since 2007, Lynn University recently added group dissertations as an option for a non-conventional DiP. By following the CPED Initiative to put theory into practice, Lynn encourages doctoral candidates to conduct a DiP as

part of the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership and Administration.

### Population and sample

In August of 2013, 11 students designated as "Cohort 5" embarked on undertaking the scholastic work required to earn a doctoral degree in educational leadership and administration. In November 2013, these scholarly practitioners were Lynn University's first cohort to begin the journey to construct a doctoral student informational iBook as a nontraditional group DiP project. They represent the purposive sampling utilized to collect and analyze data (Yin, 2011).

### Demographic characteristic of participants

The study demographics were diverse. The sample consisted of 11 individuals including nine males and two females. All 11 participants are adults. Specifically, one is 20-29 years old, three are 30-39 years old, four are 40-49 years old, and three are 50-59 years old. Meanwhile, two are Caucasian American, six are Black (African, Jamaican and Haitian American), one is Asian Chinese, and two are Hispanic, or Cuban American. Noted above, Table 1.0 illustrates the research demographic characteristic of participants.

### Data collection methods

The technique sampling method permitted collecting relevant data in various ways: emails, ooVoo meeting minutes, in-class discussion minutes, a proposal defense script formulated by each cohort member, and videos during the nontraditional DiP journey.

### Data analysis

The data were analyzed through a non-probability technique by selecting and arranging the data collection

into two research-objective categories within the total population of interest – all eleven cohort members, who were identified by any combination of ethnicity, age bracket & gender, instead of their names. Content analysis of the participant opinions in the cohort consisted of searching for significant characteristics, themes, patterns or relationships based upon key variables in each research objective.

## Findings

### Opinions and reactions to overcoming challenges during decision process

*Finding 1 – reactions to why the cohort entertained the idea of a nontraditional group DiP.* Understanding the basis for achieving successful group dynamics was a consideration from the outset for completion of the group DiP. Three cohort members offered their observations

“We are a diverse group of professionals who aspire to elevate our careers through collegiality” said the oldest African American cohort member. Then he continued, “Although we bring an individual skill set to the table, our cohort valued the collaborative model of the doctoral program”.

“The key is the concept of the nature of building the interpersonal relationships inherent in a group of scholarly practitioners working collaboratively toward a common goal” mentioned a Chinese cohort student.

A Hispanic American cohort member added, “Our cohort of like-minded scholarly practitioners is equipped with the knowledge to showcase our strengths individually and collectively, but more importantly are our interests as future agents of change”.

*Finding 2 – reactions about the importance of CPED.* CPED is an authoritative and certified organization providing the credibility and framework for structuring a nontraditional group DiP. The Dissertation Chair provided guidance by introducing CPED to cohort members. A Cuban American cohort member commented on the merits of CPED:

Understanding CPED and its many facets was a key underpinning to Cohort 5’s dissertation in practice. Watts and Imig (2012) along with Perry (2012) believed that there needed to be a distinction between a Ph.D. and Ed.D. CPED undertook a redesign of the Ed.D. in order to focus on reframing a terminal degree for scholarly practitioners and preparing educational leaders for practical application in education settings. Zambo et al. (2013) believe that scholarly practitioners should possess the skills to be a learner, leader and action researcher. Sawyer & Mason (2012), along with Perry (2012) believe that earning an Ed.D. from a CPED institution should not end at graduation, but should inspire graduates to stay connected with the consortium and the universities they graduated from. Watts and Imig (2012) and Sawyer and Mason (2012) write that

DiPs should contain problems of practice, allowing doctoral candidates to apply theories learned to practical settings. Finally, a key component that CPED supports is the use of critical friends as one completes a DiP. Senge (1990), Costa and Kallick (1993), and Swaffield (2005) believe that critical friends play an essential role in guiding the process and provide essential feedback needed for those wishing to pursue an Ed.D. The CPED principles acted as a guide and framework for cohort 5’s study of 21<sup>st</sup> century educational leadership.

*Finding 3 – reactions to Lynn University’s involvement in CPED.* Lynn University’s College of Education has participated in the CPED since 2007. Doctoral students may develop the skills and knowledge necessary to become productive scholarly practitioners. The College of Education at Lynn University is committed to providing doctoral students a structured Ed.D. program instead of a Ph.D. four cohort members discuss the relevance of this:

“Lynn University’s doctoral program embraces the CPED principles and uses a cohort model with an individualized and a group Dissertation in Practice (DiP) approach”, an African American cohort male member mentions.

The Cuban American scholarly practitioner says “As stated initially by Perry (2011), and thereafter by Zambo, Buss, and Zambo (2013) students enrolled in an Ed.D. program typically desire a doctoral program that prepares them to (a) apply theory of curriculum to their professional practice, (b) address modern educational challenges, and (c) remain actively employed while earning their doctorate”.

“By following the CPED Initiative to put theory into practice, Lynn University encourages doctoral candidates to conduct a Dissertation in Practice (DiP) as part of the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership” adds the Chinese cohort member.

“The DiP purpose is to illustrate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills in action” declares the one female African American cohort member.

### Overcoming selection challenges to construct a doctoral student informational iBook

*Finding 1 – reactions to why collaborate on the creation of a doctoral informational iBook.* Research, collaboration, and discussions with the Dissertation Chair yielded the cohort’s decision to create an interactive informational doctoral iBook designed for potential Ed.D. students and intended to provide an insight of scholarly practitioners work at Lynn University. Five cohort members expressed their reactions to the DiP process.

“Why the handbook? We observed the original Ed.D. Program Handbook each cohort member received during the orientation on August 23, 2013. After the Cohort 5 assembled, we started sharing similar feedback regarding

this handbook – Helpful? Sort of; Dry? For real!” exclaimed the Chinese student.

A Hispanic American student proudly states, “Early in the process we felt that the material in the iBook be appropriate but more importantly that it would be relevant to a prospective doctoral student. We as a cohort became the first at Lynn University to undertake a group DiP that involved all members working collaboratively”.

“The research for the iBook is based on the cohort’s collective experiences, the investigation of pivotal agencies, programs and events at Lynn University, and specific topics relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century educational leadership preparation. Based on this research the cohort agreed to revise and update the informational doctoral handbook to inform prospective doctoral candidates about Lynn University and the current research on 21<sup>st</sup> century educational leadership” notes the female African American cohort member.

The Caucasian female cohort member concurs, “Through ongoing conversations, Cohort 5 mutually decided to create an online informational iBook that is vivid and breathing, as a new type of 21<sup>st</sup> century handbook of the Ed.D. program for doctoral students at Lynn University”.

“Why does the current Lynn Doctorate Handbook constitute a problem of practice? The type of students taking doctoral degrees is changing. They are not simply youngsters fresh from undergraduate and graduate study, but are in many cases experienced mid-career professional or often already senior people in their own right, working on their degrees – meanwhile working full time” mentions the oldest cohort member.

These students also included what might be described as global professionals – “established in different parts of the world but enabled because of the development of rapid transport links and the information and communications revolution to contemplate taking a doctoral degree based half a world away” exclaims a Cuban American cohort member.

The Chinese student agrees, “While living in China, my career ambition was to grow into a high-qualified and professional leader within an educational institution. Therefore, I decided to earn a doctoral degree in Education outside of my home country. I researched on the internet and found out Lynn University enjoys a good reputation particularly for the educational leadership field. I believed studying at Lynn can greatly increase my ability to resolve complex problems and make the right decisions in today’s changing education situations and to become a drive in educational leadership and administration”.

A Haitian American scholarly cohort member provides an example:

Imagine that you are a future doctoral student interested in an educational leadership program. You have spent quite some time researching different doctoral programs around

the world that would best fit your career needs. During your search, you come across Lynn University: First, the iBook provides future applicants with access to an interactive handbook about Lynn University and the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership. Second, the technology used in the creation of the iBook is an example of an evolution in social learning that leverages media for delivering content to learners of all needs. Third, the CPED principles were incorporated in this process to engage scholarly practitioners in the creation of an innovative technological presentation by subject matter experts to create content rapidly and in a number of formats. Most importantly, the process allowed for learners to share experiences, contextualize content, and collaborate on different activities for building understanding and collective intelligence.

### **Conclusions and implications for education**

In conclusion, after analyzing the findings, the ensemble style group collaboration can facilitate to overcome inherent challenges of group student engagement, and succeed as a 21<sup>st</sup> century model for the Ed.D. nontraditional DiP at Lynn University.

In the pursuit of a nontraditional group DiP, the following process implications are essential for 21<sup>st</sup> century educational leadership.

(1) CPED is an authoritative and certified organization providing the credibility and framework for structuring a nontraditional group DiP for both doctoral students, professors and university administration.

(2) Institutional support is a key component.

(3) Understanding the basis for achieving successful group dynamics is an important component. Relational trust must be established and maintained between cohort members, as well as between the cohort members and the DiP chair, and between the cohort members and critical friends. Based on the study findings, further implications for education were identified.

(1) Higher education Ed.D. programs should infuse 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills, culturally responsive leadership, ethical and moral behavior and technology leadership throughout curriculum and coursework.

(2) Institutions of higher education must provide doctoral candidates with opportunities to demonstrate and practice ethical behaviors when utilizing technological tools.

(3) Ed.D. programs should prepare educational leaders for technological innovation and implementation within schools.

(4) Professional development is needed to ensure that the various components of technology leadership are implemented in the educational settings to maximize student achievement.

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