

## A Signature Pedagogy in Doctoral Education: The Leader–Scholar Community

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Since 2005 there has been an explosion of interest and debate about alternative futures for the doctorate in education. The authors take the debate from the abstract to the concrete by describing a signature pedagogy in doctoral education that combines theory, applied scholarship, and the wisdom of practice in new ways. They describe *leader–scholar communities*, whose goal is to assist and support students to conduct applied research in local educational contexts. They argue that leader–scholar communities are particularly useful for helping doctoral students persist to graduation, become socialized into a new identity as leader–scholars, and bridge the gap between what is learned at the university and what is practiced in schools.

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The years since 2005 have seen an explosion of debate about the doctorate in education, much of which appeared in these pages. Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, and Garabedian (2006) proposed that educators reclaim the professional doctorate, partly in response to a critique of doctoral programs in education published by Levine (2005). The public conversation continued with a philosophical critique-and-response exchange between Evans (2007) and Shulman (2007). Golde (2007), offering examples from neuroscience and from English, advocated that we adopt “signature pedagogies” from other fields to meet the needs of education doctoral students. Here, we hope to advance the conversation by describing a signature pedagogy, unique to education, that has been in operation for 2 years in an innovative professional doctoral program in the College of Teacher Education and Leadership at Arizona State University.

Shulman (2005) uses the term “signature pedagogy” to describe “the characteristic forms of teaching and learning . . . that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (p. 52). Examples include “the case dialogue method of teaching in law schools and bedside teaching on daily clinical rounds in medical education” (Golde, 2007, p. 345), as well as the journal club in neuroscience and “the

list” in English (Golde, 2007). Signature pedagogies are credited with socializing doctoral students into the discourse community of the profession, providing practice in articulating summary and critique of research literature, helping faculty and students keep up with the latest literature and with active controversies in their fields, making connections across disciplinary boundaries, and helping doctoral students discover and claim a topic and direction for their dissertation projects (Golde, 2007).

We agree with Golde (2007) that there can be great value in developing a signature pedagogy for use in doctoral study in education. We also side with Ball and Forzani (2007), who argue that the field of education must invent its own distinctive ways of studying educational practice, educating students, and preparing them for distinctive forms of professional practice. Here we describe the *leader–scholar community* (LSC) as one candidate for a signature pedagogy that is especially apt for professional doctoral programs in education.

We are faculty members at the Arizona State University College of Teacher Education and Leadership, in the doctoral program where LSCs were first invented, implemented, and refined. We present the idea of the LSC as a conceptual proposal for organizing learning and advising in applied doctoral programs in education. The interview data presented are not offered as grounds for making claims about the effectiveness of using LSCs. Rather, the quotations are offered to illustrate the kinds of testimony offered by doctoral students and faculty who were engaged in teaching and learning both in the graduate program and, specifically, in one LSC.

### Leader–Scholar Communities

A persisting problem of practice in professional doctoral programs in education is how to organize pedagogy so that it is both meaningful and practical for teachers, administrators, and other leaders who are working in the field while they are completing their doctoral degree requirements. Professional programs for the doctoral degree in education (usually labeled the Doctorate of Education, or Ed.D.) are generally designed around pedagogical and curricular goals similar to those of Ph.D. programs, making them poorly suited to providing leaders in education with the tools and knowledge to effect change in local school settings (Murphy & Vriesenga, 2005; Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993; Shulman et al., 2006). This incongruity between the curriculum and instruction offered in traditional doctoral programs and lived

experience in schools decreases the usefulness of the pedagogy to help students graduate and to make positive and sustainable changes in the practice of education (Golde & Walker, 2006).

The Ed.D. in Leadership and Innovation in the Arizona State University College of Teacher Education and Leadership is not designed to prepare academic researchers to staff college of education faculties. Rather, the goal of the Ed.D. program is to build capacity among leaders in education to introduce small-scale innovations into their practices through action research, to study the consequences, and to make evidence-supported arguments for improvements in local education contexts. Cultivating “inquiry-driven leadership” is the program’s essential goal.

To meet this goal, the doctoral program faculty decided to employ a different pedagogical approach to teaching, learning, and advising by creating a signature pedagogy that we named the LSC. At the end of the first year of this 3-year program, each doctoral cohort group of 20 to 24 students is divided into smaller groups of 5 to 7 students and assigned one faculty member as their collective doctoral advisor. Soon thereafter, a second faculty member is assigned to colead and coadvise the 5 to 7 students. This group, then, is designated an LSC, with all members agreeing to work together for 2 years, culminating in action research dissertation defenses and degree completion by all student members. In addition to the two faculty members leading each LSC, each doctoral student nominates an outside member for his or her dissertation committee—an accomplished professional who holds a doctoral degree and is in professional practice outside the college and usually from the world of practice outside the university.

What makes LSCs productive for educational leaders’ learning and development is the organization of collaboration and practice by both faculty and students around student-driven, contextualized inquiry projects, also known as action research (Lewin, 1944/2005; Stringer, 2007). This signature pedagogy is atypical because the faculty mentors are not the subject-matter experts of each student’s doctoral research project, as in the traditional Ph.D. academic discipline-centered model (Golde & Walker, 2006). Both faculty and students are experts and stakeholders in the learning process because the knowledge necessary to meet overall action research goals in the students’ workplaces is distributed among all members of the doctoral community: The faculty members are experts at applied research, writing, and scholarly literature, and the students are experts and responsible leaders in the particular practices and contexts in which they conduct research and effect change. It is this multivoiced aspect of expertise that encourages professors and graduate students to collaborate and learn from each other (Tsui & Law, 2007).

In the Ed.D. in Leadership and Innovation, members of LSCs explicitly take on the goal of providing mutual support to all members, intellectually, practically, and socially. Each member assents to cultivating an ethos of support of all other members—helping and being open to receive help, with the goal of all members completing the doctoral program successfully.

### **Theoretical Roots of Leader–Scholar Communities**

There are practical and theoretical reasons that the designers of the Ed.D. in Leadership and Innovation decided to create and implement the LSC as its signature pedagogy. The faculty members leading LSCs aspire to blur the traditional boundaries between the

university and school systems so that what the students learn is directly meaningful in the context of their practices, yet richly informed by scholarship and theory. LSCs are intended to mitigate the theory–practice divide by grounding doctoral work in the theoretical construct of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Lave, 2001; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) to facilitate faculty and student learning and development. As well, the doctoral program’s embrace of the epistemology of action research (Lewin, 1944/2005; Stringer, 2007) shortens the distance between theory and practice so that the students’ doctoral research projects are likely to make immediate, positive differences in local educational contexts.

The construct of community of practice is grounded in socio-cultural theories of learning and development that contend that all human development is founded upon social interaction in cultural practices that are mediated by the use of cultural artifacts, tools, and signs (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1987, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). As Wenger (1998) contends, people construct and develop their identities and transform their thinking through their active participation and engagement with others in cultural–historical practices that are situated in social communities. Thus members of a community of practice interact, share, and participate in the creation and re-creation of the practice and, through that engagement, develop, reify, and transform their identities.

Rogoff’s (1995, 2003) notion of guided participation and Wenger’s (1998) concept of legitimate peripheral participation are most relevant here. Both constructs help us understand how teachers and students co-construct their involvement in situated, cultural activities and how this participation leads to development of the practice and the participants. Through apprenticeship and collaboration in communities of practice, participants’ roles in the practice change and develop as they move from novice to expert in their understanding of the tools, concepts, and processes that co-construct and cultivate the practice (Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger et al., 2002). As the faculty and students interact and collaborate in LSCs, community-of-practice theory predicts that they will be socialized into understandings and dispositions that support teaching and learning about how to conduct applied research and study their practices in local schools, organizations, and communities.

Few studies have examined the benefits of working in communities of practice at the doctoral level. Leshem (2007) and Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham (2007) examined innovative doctoral programs that utilized the construct of communities of practice to support graduate students and their supervisors in their development and understanding of graduate research. The mentorship, interaction, and purposeful practice portrayed in both studies demonstrate that the community-of-practice construct can be helpful in providing students opportunities to reflect on and make sense of research at the doctoral level.

Tsui and Law (2007) demonstrated how university and school relationships cross traditional boundaries of learning when expertise is distributed among professors, graduate students, and mentor teachers. Although this work did not address doctoral programs or communities of practice per se, Tsui and Law showed that when expertise is distributed among professors, teachers, and preservice students to solve problems and contradictions in lessons together, expansive learning occurs for all participants. This

study shows how faculty and students who work collaboratively in education can create new knowledge that is an artful blend of the best of what each community member has to offer.

We found no research literature that specifically addresses the organization of the mentor–advisee model in Ed.D. programs and its effectiveness in supporting doctoral students in their learning and development. But we infer from the aforementioned studies that communities of practice can promote grounded knowledge development in graduate school when scholars and practitioners in education work together to solve problems.

### **How Leader–Scholar Communities Work in Practice**

In the Doctoral Program in Leadership and Innovation, LSCs typically meet face to face once per month for 90 minutes. During these meetings, members build and sustain community, communicate about the developing focus of doctoral student research topics, discuss readings in the scholarly literature that may be helpful in support of students' applied research projects, provide feedback on student writing, advertise opportunities to attend professional conferences, and help one another stay current in meeting program milestones (e.g., nominating an external member for each student's doctoral committee, drafting the dissertation proposal, and preparing for the proposal defense). Faculty members who lead LSCs also meet with doctoral students individually when requested, and LSCs may meet more often than once per month when a high-stakes milestone such as dissertation proposal defense looms large.

Faculty members who are coleaders of LSCs also become members of a community of practice of their own. The LSC Leaders Group meets monthly with the director of the doctoral program and has become the de facto advisory committee for the doctoral program. Faculty members in the LSC Leaders Group communicate with one another and with the director about successes and challenges for their students, ideas for program and policy fine tuning, and successful activities tried in one LSC group that may be useful for others. This faculty community of practice is committed to becoming more effective as faculty advisors in the Doctoral Program in Leadership and Innovation.

### **Preliminary Study of Leader–Scholar Communities**

Although this research is preliminary, we have collected data to begin our conversation about the LSC as a good candidate for a signature pedagogy in the education doctorate. Our ongoing research goal is to describe and understand how or whether participation in LSCs transforms both faculty members' and students' identities as leader–scholars, enabling them to begin to bridge the gap between theories learned in graduate school and practice conducted in educational settings. In this article, we report faculty members' and students' accounts of how their participation in the program has helped develop their habits of leadership and scholarship and transformed their thinking and behavior as educators.

First, we administered a two-item, open-ended survey in April 2008 to all 17 instructors in the doctoral program and to the first cohort of 20 doctoral students. This survey was based on Wenger's (1998) notion of identity transformation and reification through participation and interaction in a community of practice. The survey asked the faculty members to reflect on their experiences

in the program and to indicate how they were different as a result of their participation.

In May 2008, the first author conducted a semistructured, formal interview of a faculty advisor and a focus group interview with the 6 graduate students of one LSC. The goal was to explore their beliefs about the graduate program, its organization and practice, and about how their participation in the program had evolved and how their identities as teachers, students, and scholars may have changed.

For analytic purposes, we typed and transcribed the survey and interview data. We coded and categorized the data using grounded theory (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each statement was coded according to the faculty members' and the students' beliefs about the doctoral program, the LSCs, and their experiences and ideas about how the program helped develop their identities as teachers, doctoral students, researchers, and/or leader–scholars. These codes were then clustered with similar responses to determine prevalence in the data. Once the patterns were established, representative quotations of interview and survey data were used to illustrate the presence of particular beliefs about LSCs and the doctoral program.

### **Doctoral Student and Faculty Testimony About LSCs**

By the end of May 2008, four LSCs had been operating as the signature pedagogy for 1 year. In our preliminary analysis, we learned that our faculty and students attributed a number of benefits to their participation in LSCs, which we highlight below.

#### *Faculty*

Faculty reported that participating in an LSC afforded multiple opportunities to grow professionally and personally. The act of supervising action research studies in local settings in a community of practice influenced the development of the LSC faculty advisors. This professional growth was attributed to the faculty advisors having to troubleshoot their own historical notions of graduate work and research in education in order to provide their graduate students the necessary guidance to conduct action research in their local contexts, as the following interview quotation illustrates:

There are times when I am on cognitive overload, and I have to keep reminding myself that if this were a traditional Ph.D. [program], I would be the subject expert and I would guide in that way. Now I'm not the subject area expert; I am the action research expert and colleague that happens to be asking the questions they need, but because I'm so grounded in the schools, I'm OK with that except for the cognitive load, the expertise load, and I just have to pull back from that and say, "That's OK, we are solving a local problem. We are not finding the cure for cancer." I just have to ask the questions, "How is this working in your classroom? What evidence do you have that it is working? Does your principal support this? Who else are you pulling in?" The discomfort that I feel with my subject area expertise being tested is probably part of the program and I have to accept that and keep moving with the program because that is what it is supposed to be about—the localized problem. But it doesn't make it any easier.

The faculty advisors had to redefine their understanding of being a faculty mentor for doctoral students. They reported that their expertise and knowledge in a particular subject-matter area of research

were not sufficient to meet the needs of their graduate students. Problem solving about the role and study of action research in the LSC afforded the faculty advisors opportunities to transform their identities as teachers, in the words of one faculty member interviewee, from “sage on the stage to guide on the side.”

The faculty members indicated in both the surveys and the interviews that their constructive collaboration with students in LSCs had revived their belief in research and deepened their understanding of what it means to be an educator, as the following survey response illustrates:

One of the most memorable and influential learning experiences was having and helping four students in a LSC group as they were working on their first action research projects. . . . Providing academic support and personal encouragement was a rewarding, yet time-consuming and demanding, task. The students’ projects varied, as well as their skill levels in conceiving and beginning to execute their projects. . . . Observing the growth of these students was also a rewarding aspect of the process. Taken together, the growth of the students and the outcomes of the projects in schools made the whole endeavor a valuable experience that renewed me as well as benefited the students and their schools.

The faculty members all wrote about moments of ideals being reaffirmed, skills developed, and optimism and engagement reawakened. It was evident in both the survey and the interview data that doctoral faculty were deeply engaged in attempting something new and challenging, working in constructive partnership with highly motivated expert leaders (their students), and playing a crucial role in making a difference in schools.

### *Students*

The doctoral students formally and informally testified in both the surveys and the focus group interview that the key to the doctoral program’s success was the LSCs and the experience of learning in a community of practice. The LSC provides the safety, trust, and connection that students say they need to persist in and achieve their doctoral goals. Because this pedagogy is structurally incorporated into the fabric of the program, the students have a required membership in a community in which to develop relationships, provide empathy, share stories, scaffold their work, and provide feedback, much like a family. To them, this “family feeling” was the crucial aspect of their development in the program, as it encouraged their progress and countered their doubts, fears, and thoughts about dropping out, as the following quotation illustrates:

We support each other and we look out for each other and we push each other in our community of practice. But we get it; we are speaking the same language. We’re doing the same thing together. The leader–scholar communities are the key to the success of the program and I think that is why we remain so intact—no one has dropped out and I don’t think we would allow each other to drop out. . . . I mean we are a family; we are a community of practice.

The students reported that the community-of-practice model provided them with a team that helped them feel that they were all working together to meet their personal and professional needs and goals. The interaction and collaboration in the LSC practice validates the students’ work, makes them feel that it is significant,

and reminds them that practicing inquiry-driven leadership is difficult but not impossible, and is worth the effort.

Through these interactions in the LSCs, the students also develop their identities as applied researchers and gain a better understanding of the practicality and usefulness of their work in real, messy settings. Their work in the LSCs helps them to connect their understanding of what they know and learn in doctoral studies with the immediate influence it has on their practices:

[I now have] the confidence to address the different things going on at my school and I look at everything differently; I look at it as research: How can I apply something [an innovation] to make it better? I look at whatever problems that are there in the school and know that I can change them. Being immersed in action research allowed me to grow significantly.

The students attested that this connection and participation in the LSC practice helped to transform their identities as leaders and scholars. More significant, they reported that the program afforded them opportunities to bridge the distance between what they learned at the university and what they practiced in their schools, making the work that they did relevant and meaningful:

I can see instant changes in the groups [at school] I’m working with. I also see that I am in the same role [as a teacher] but I am able to expand my role even more. As a teacher I can influence others to improve their practice. And the relationship will be lasting between the university and the school system. . . . It builds the bridge so that the research that we do affects the schools.

Faculty and student testimony suggests that LSCs can be a positive, practical, and powerful source of influence and support, helping educational leaders develop the confidence and competence to transfer and adapt their new habits of mind and skills as leader–scholars for use in contexts quite different from graduate school (Shulman et al., 2006). The socialization, collaboration, and apprenticeship that occur in this signature pedagogy have the potential to provide them with the guidance needed to meet graduation requirements; to reify the students’ thinking and identities as leaders, scholars, and practitioners (Wenger, 1998); and to empower them to use research to guide and study their own practices.

### **How This Practice Is Suited to the Professional Doctorate in Education**

We believe that the LSC is a particularly promising way to help scholars in academia and leaders in the field build connections and collaborate in efficient ways to study contemporary issues in education. There are several reasons why the LSC is particularly useful for helping doctoral students persist to graduation and become socialized into a new identity as leader–scholars.

First, we believe that the LSC is a particularly useful way to provide doctoral students in education, who are full-time administrators and leaders in various educational contexts, with the support, guidance, and collaboration they need to persist in their goals of proposing and completing their dissertations to graduate with the degree. Because the LSC is an embedded structure that meets regularly and consistently throughout the program, doctoral students in an LSC have an immediate and consistent community of peers and faculty with whom they can work in

partnership while they are conducting their research and writing their dissertations. LSC members are not left alone to determine how to navigate and manage the world of dissertation research and writing after they have completed their doctoral courses. The LSC serves as a group of critical friends (Curry, 2008) that creates and cultivates a mutually supportive atmosphere that provides doctoral students with the social, emotional, and scholarly assistance needed to graduate.

Research suggests that the doctoral students who are most successful in completing their dissertation research studies and earning their degrees are those who have been successfully socialized into the research community through interaction and collaboration with faculty and peers (Gardner, 2008). The LSC affords students multiple opportunities to work with others as they learn how to write, use, and critique scholarship in thoughtful and systematic ways as they conduct inquiry projects in their workplaces. This purposeful collaboration on research and writing in a community of practice provides opportunities to socialize and reify the students' identities as leader-scholars in education (Wenger, 1998).

### Rethinking the Professional Doctorate in Education

We do not have a single prescription for the design and implementation of a signature pedagogy in all professional doctoral programs in education. What we have learned is that the synergy between theory and practice can begin in a university graduate program that aspires to build connections between what is learned in the academy and what occurs in schools.

Our description of the LSC illustrates how one doctoral program socializes educational leaders to examine their practice thoughtfully and systematically together in a research community focused on making a difference in schools. We believe that the resolution of the Evans-Shulman debate (Evans, 2007; Shulman, 2007) will not be found in a single ideal program design or doctoral curriculum, but in crafting a consensus about the goal of doctoral pedagogy: the alignment and integration of theory and practice that allows doctoral students to perform as leaders and work as scholars in a safe, supportive research community as they examine and attempt to promote progress on immediate, important issues in local educational contexts.

It is beyond the scope of this article to claim that LSCs constitute a uniquely superior signature pedagogy for Ed.D. programs in educational leadership. However, we have learned that integrating theory into the lived practice of doctoral study through LSCs has exercised students and faculty in the practical use of theoretical constructs and the theoretical framing and critique of contemporary practice. Doctoral students and faculty members give great credit to the benefits of interacting in purposeful communities of practice. So far, we have learned that integrating theory with practice and providing support through collaboration in LSCs constitute a promising model for a signature pedagogy in doctoral education.

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