

Connecting the dots: Choosing the dissertation topic

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Perhaps you've heard me, or someone else, say that taking courses counts for only half of your doctoral education. In terms of time and energy required, the dissertation easily equals or exceeds what you put into your coursework. What you take away from completing a dissertation study in terms of knowledge and skills about your topic goes well beyond what you learn from any combination of courses. Thinking about it that way points to the importance of picking your dissertation topic wisely. You will literally live your life around your dissertation for two or three years.

Understand that I'm not a person in favor of forcing the dissertation topic selection early in your program. Doing so narrows your opportunities to learn about education broadly, and I believe a wide exposure to theory, policy, and research is a critical aspect of one's doctoral program. Even so, the pressure to choose a dissertation topic is one you will be aware of from the beginning of your program. I'd like to offer four ideas for you to consider as you imagine possibilities and then begin to narrow your choice of a dissertation topic: problems of practice, connections, access to data, and relevance. As I develop these ideas, I'll share my own experience and how these considerations helped me make important decisions about my own dissertation.

In my educational administration department, most of our students come to us with significant professional practice as teachers and school leaders. Over their years as educators, certain **problems of practice** have nagged at them and are often the

impetus for doctoral study. When this is the case, I notice the student weighing new ideas and theories in his mind, searching for how this new learning might apply to the enduring problem that engages his mind, heart, and spirit as an educator. One of my students, as an example, is a curriculum director for a nearby school district, and before beginning her doctoral program, she had worked for several years to equalize access to rigorous mathematics content for all students. She has arrived at her dissertation proposal stage intent on developing a case study of a school district that has reduced tracked classes in mathematics by two-thirds across all schools, including the high school. In my own case, I didn't recognize my own problem of practice until I began to read the theoretical and research literatures on professional community during my first year of study. As a high school teacher, my own experience of community was more "laissez-faire" than "professional." This experiential gap helped me identify *teacher community* as a concept I wanted to investigate in my own research.

Early in your program, you will begin to notice compelling ideas that crop up again and again in your course readings, in conversations with your advisor and other faculty, as you talk with other doctoral students, and in the many presentations and colloquia that you choose to attend on campus. Pay attention to the **connections** among ideas that gather in your conscious thought. Connections that surface across classes, disciplines, or theoretical paradigms often point to compelling ideas that you can be passionate about, and thus, happy to spend a good part of your life on, both during the dissertation and after in your eventual career. For me, I love thinking, reading, and writing about leadership and learning, in many configurations. In my

first year and a half, I encountered various approaches to thinking about these topics in education courses, public policy courses, and sociology courses, and I was equally drawn to thinking about them as properties of individuals, groups, or organizations. A graphic depiction of my doctoral journey at the end of my first year of study identified the importance of leadership and learning as concepts in my academic work, but also signaled the presence of these ideas in many areas of my personal life. This was an important early awareness that these topics should be present in my eventual dissertation. So, add *leadership* and *learning to teacher community* as concepts I wanted to explore.

One of my colleagues points regularly to the fact that our educational administration students can get good school-based data through their professional networks. This is an important consideration to think about early on – where and how will you get **access to data** for your study? Are the concepts you are beginning to focus on appropriate for data that you have the ability to collect? Perhaps you are being funded to work on a research project for your advisor or for another professor. Does the study offer the possibility to investigate your concepts? Working closely with your advisor can open other possible data sources, particularly if you connect to a line of work he or she has been part of. In my case, my advisor offered me information about using national data sets and provided me access to the lists of variables available for analysis. Through many conversations over a period of time, she helped me understand how data generated through surveys on a national sample of teachers and administrators could help me to inquire about the *learning and leading dynamics of teachers in their communities of practice*.

Most of my educational administration students are dedicated educators who study part time and are intent on improving the quality of education for all students in the state of Michigan. As such, they want their dissertation study to have practical **relevance** in their future careers as superintendents, central office personnel, state agency directors, etc. Having started with a problem of practice, they seek a possible solution strategy: that de-tracking classrooms makes a difference for students' attainment in mathematics or that when teachers work together they have more power to raise a school's level of achievement than when they work alone. In articulating the strategy, a student refines the topic for the dissertation and also sets the stage for the study design. My intention was to enter the academy. In addition to shining a light on a strategy for *improving teachers' learning and practice through community participation and leadership*, relevance, for me, meant that my study would be an important step in a long-term *research trajectory* and would demonstrate my competence with *advanced quantitative analysis*. I had an advisee who wanted his dissertation to demonstrate the application to education of a method he had learned while doing cancer research. Writing a dissertation that makes a difference for your future career *and* influences educational discussions is, as they say, priceless!

Maybe some have arrived at their dissertation topics as a result of a moment of pure inspiration. While waiting for that inspiration, try bringing conscious attention to what you are studying. Take the time to read broadly and deeply, and to process your reading slowly and reflectively so that fresh ideas can emerge. Which problems of practice represent compelling ideas? Which ideas can you inquire into with data that are accessible? Which topics and approaches have the most relevance to your career

choices post-PhD? Along the way, you will connect the dots... and be on your way to a dissertation you can be proud of.