

ASSESSING DISSERTATIONS IN A DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Assessment guides instruction; objectives form the basis of curriculum evaluation as prescribed by Ralph Tyler's model (Tyler, 1949). What are the objectives of a dissertation in a doctorate of education program?

Yale granted the first doctorate in 1861 (Rudolph, 1962). Doctorates, throughout the first 100 years of the degree, were awarded primarily to prepare the next generation of faculty (Thelin, 2004). The degree granting department or school determined the requirements for the degree. The requirements were listed in terms of process or, to use the vernacular, *hoops*: graduate hours, graduate seminars, foreign languages (now, technical competence and statistics), comprehensive examinations, research proposal, written thesis, and final defense before an academic committee.

Today the doctoral degree has expanded to include professional doctorates, clinical doctorates, and executive doctorates that focus on adding to the knowledge of practice rather than only addressing pure research, which continues to be the tradition of the doctorate of philosophy (Walker, G. E, 2008). However, this dichotomy between theory and practice, pure research and applied research is not a clean or consistent break. Ernest Boyer (1990) convincingly outlines three motives for scholarship that have "... changed throughout the years – moving from teaching, to service, and then research" (page xi). In addition to these three purposes, Boyer suggests a fourth, integration, which is the academic task of making meaning, connection, perspective, and interpretation of knowledge.

The observations of Boyer are echoed by the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID). The CID anchors their vision of scholarship in a theological term, stewardship, and then addresses the four types of scholarship described by Boyer.

...we (CID) adopted the notion of stewardship as encompassing a set of knowledge and skills, as well as a set of principles. The former ensures expertise and the latter provides the moral compass. A fully formed scholar should be capable of *generating* and critically evaluating new knowledge; of *conserving* the most important ideas and findings that are a legacy of past and current work; and of understanding how knowledge is *transforming* the world in which we live, and engaging in the transformational work of *communicating* their knowledge responsibly to others. (Walker, 2008, page 12)

Research, *the scholarship of discovery*, is the process of generating and critically evaluating new knowledge. This is "knowledge for its own sake," a "freedom of inquiry...that

¹ An assessment tool was developed, based on the E. J. Boyer model of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching.

contributes...to the stock of human knowledge” (Boyer, 1990, page 17). *The scholarship of integration* conserves knowledge, by making connections, providing interpretation and meaning so that the legacy of human knowledge is maintained and expanded. This work of integration is not a stockpiling duty but a creative endeavor of “...fitting one’s own research – or the research of others – into larger intellectual patterns” (Boyer, 1990, p. 19). The scholarship of discovery and integration conceal the tension between the academic as polymath and specialist. The polymath scholar ranges freely among disciplines and areas of interest although the specialist is a focused expert. Taken together, the scholarship of discovery and integration begins with theory that (may) lead to practice. The academic questions include, “What is to be known... (and) what do the findings mean?” (Boyer, 1990, p. 19).

The mirrored challenge, practice that builds on theory, finds expression in the scholarship of application and teaching. The *scholarship of application* or service served as a nation-building enterprise funded by land-grant universities for over a century. “The goal was to not only serve society, but reshape it” (Boyer, 1990, p. 6). This is knowledge applied to transform the world. The question of service is “How can knowledge help solve social problems?” The academic work of application also reveals knowledge that is only learned by doing. Application, to be fully used, must be shared, taught, to others. *The scholarship of teaching* communicates knowledge responsibly. The goal of teaching “educates and entices future scholars” (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). This is the empowering process of academia. Combined, the scholarship of application and teaching hold the tension between the practitioner scholar and the teaching scholar – learning to apply and teaching others to apply knowledge.

Theory and practice form the axis of the practical dissertation for the doctorate of education. Good assessment of a dissertation project requires more than a cursory test of the balance between the two. A solid dissertation demonstrates the mutual dependence of theory and practice. A strong dissertation demonstrates the discovery and integration of new knowledge that is applied and taught to others. What would such an assessment of a dissertation include?

First, an assessment of *theory that leads to practice*:

The scholarship of *discovery*:

What was the quality of the research process?

What was the level of creativity in the research study?

What was the contribution to the academic conversation?

The scholarship of *integration*:

What was the quality of the integrating literature in the field?

What was the creativity of including literature outside the field?

What contribution was made through interpreting the findings?

Second, an assessment of *practice drawn from theory*:

The scholarship of *application*:

What was the significance of the social problem addressed?

What lasting improvements resulted through the project?
What knowledge was learned through the process of application?

The scholarship of teaching:

What was the level of clarity in the written presentation of the project?
What was the level of quality in the public presentation of the project?
What was the researcher's role in mentoring others during the process?

Visualizing the assessment of a dissertation begins with the two axes, theory (vertical) and practice (horizontal). The axes are created by the four scales: theory comprises *discovery* on the top and *integration* below; practice is made of *application* on the left and *teaching* on the right (see Figure 1).

By assessing each of the four measures and plotting them on the graph, a kite is formed that indicates the quality of the dissertation. A tall, narrow kite points out a theoretical project that has little practical application or value (see Figure 2). A wide, thin kite indicates a project that is useful to a local group but does not contribute to the wider sphere of knowledge (see Figure 3). A large, diamond shaped kite points to a strong, solid dissertation (see Figure 4).

To assess dissertations that are espoused to be both theoretical and practical, that add to the academic conversation and make a contribution to society, faculty need a system for maintaining the full dimensions of a strong, solid dissertation. All faculty have a preference for one dimension over another. A clear, concise visualization with strong questions for each dimension help faculty achieve a full perspective on each dissertation project, not only at the time of final assessment, but at the time of inception and proposal as well, that, indeed, is the foundation required for quality implementation and results of the study.

However, there is one more dimension of doctoral work. In addition to theory and practice, the Ed.D. degree infers a level of character development and practical wisdom that transcends Boyer's scholarship categories. To return to the Carnegie Foundation study of 2008, it is a matter of stewardship. Scholarship is more than asking important questions, formulating appropriate strategies for investigation, conducting research, analyzing data, and communicating results in ways that advance theory and improve practice.

A scholar is a steward of the discipline, or the larger field, not simply the manager of her own career. By adopting the care of the discipline as a touchstone, and by understanding that she has been entrusted with the care of those in the field on behalf of those in and beyond it, the steward embraces a larger sense of purpose. The reach of that purpose is both temporally expansive (looking to the past and the future) and broad in scope (considering the entire discipline, as well as intellectual neighbors in related fields). (Walker, 2008, p. 12)

For the Christian scholar, stewardship also carries a duty to God and humanity. The steward leads and serves at the behest of God. The academic steward is to lead *discovering* and *integrating* new knowledge as well as to serve in *applying* and *teaching* that empower others. Such a steward moves beyond the motives of curiosity and control, motives that often drive the search for theory and practice, respectively. The Christian steward is moved by the knowledge that comes from compassion. This is another kind of knowledge,

...one that begins and ends with a different passion and is drawn toward other ends. This knowledge can contain as much sound fact and theory as the knowledge we now possess, but because it springs from a truer passion it works toward truer ends. This is a knowledge that originates not in curiosity or control but in compassion, or love – a source celebrated not in our intellectual tradition but in our spiritual heritage. (Palmer, 1983)

A Christian assessment of academic work must also include the scholarship of compassion. The questions in such an assessment include: What has been learned about self? What has been learned about God? What has been learned about humanity? What has been learned about making the broken whole? These are the inward and spiritual questions that reverberate the external issues of discovery, integration, application, and teaching.

Figures:

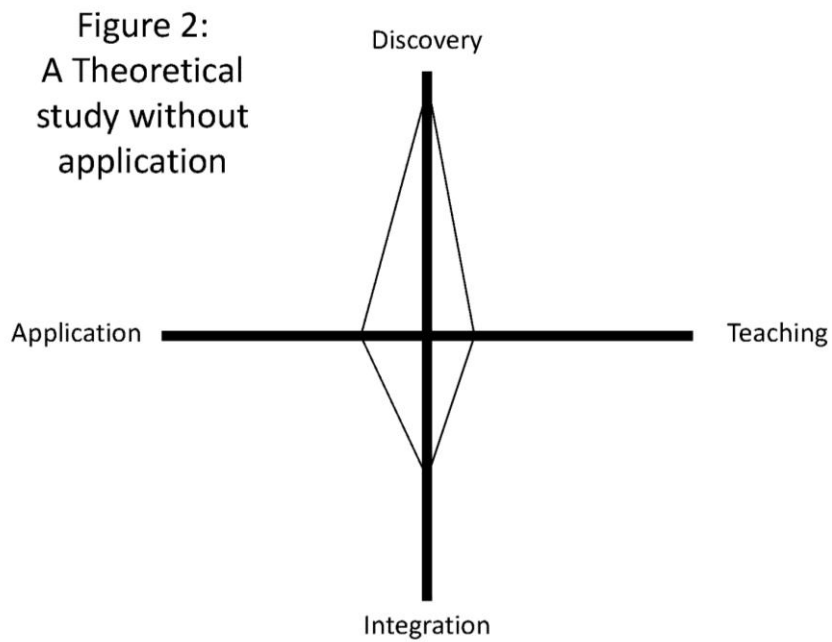
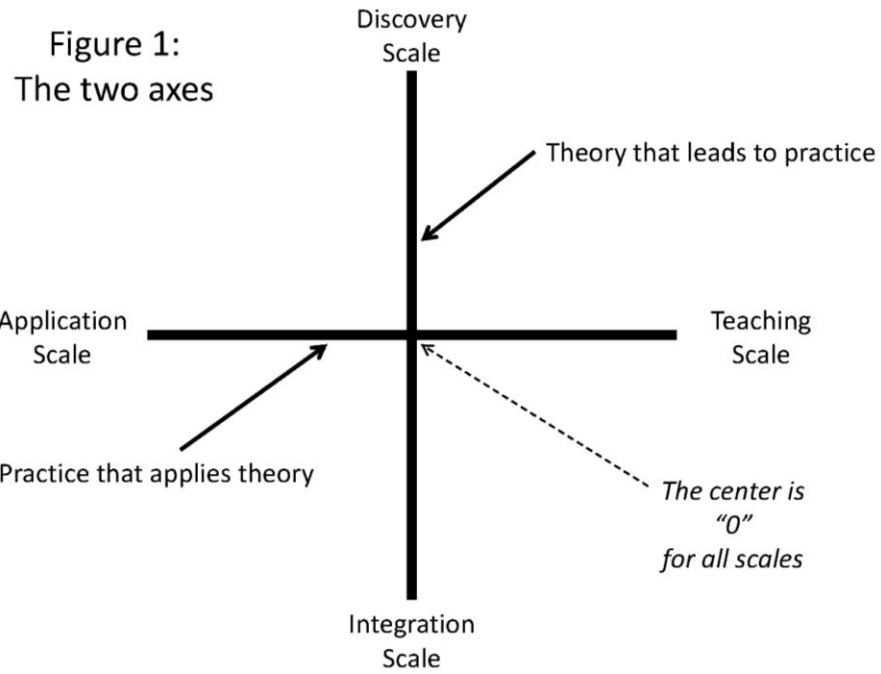


Figure 3:
An practical
study without
theory

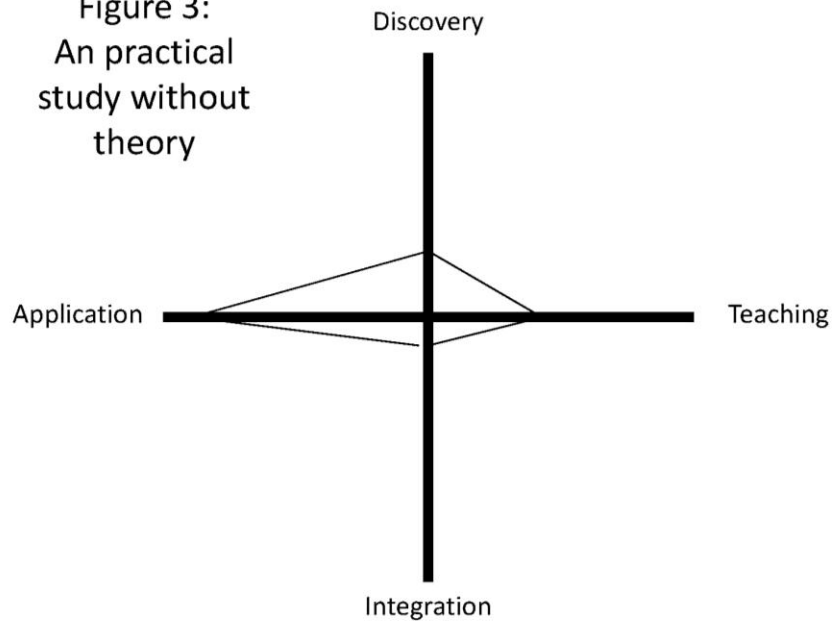
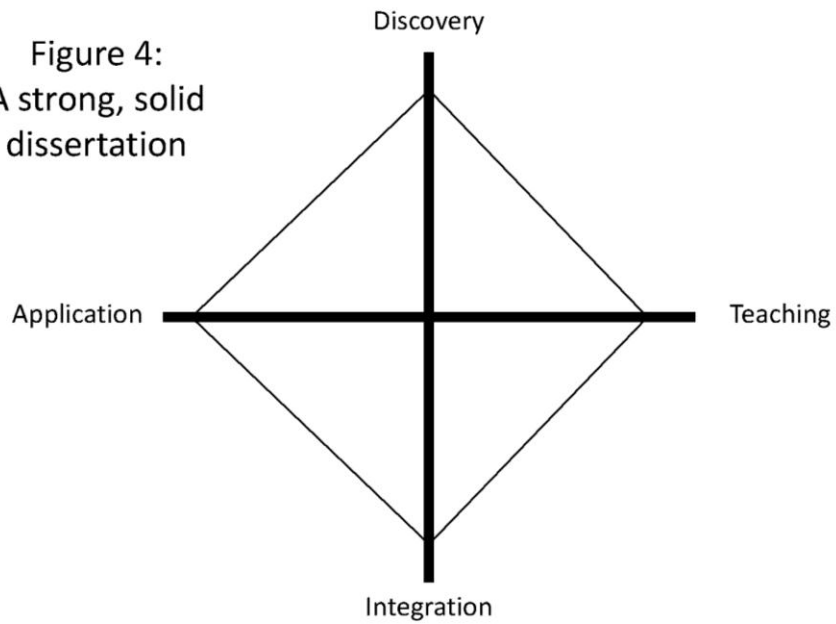


Figure 4:
A strong, solid
dissertation



Resources

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