The purpose of this document is (1) to provide an overview of the dissertation in practice, (2) to situate the dissertation in practice within the larger program design, and (3) to provide a set of criterial questions to guide researching and writing a dissertation in practice. The dissertation in practice and the ideas and guidelines offered below will be examined further in the context of ProDEL courses; most especially in the Stewardship of Practice course that serves as the professional seminar for the program.

After a reminder of the program’s mission and goals and a reflection on the etymology of term doctoral dissertation, we provide a working definition 1 of the dissertation in practice (ProDEL’s culminating product of learning). The working definition includes key concepts or parameters; each parameter is then discussed in order to provide context for and situate the dissertation in practice in the ProDEL program. A checklist of criterial questions follows and the overview concludes with a description of how the dissertation in practice is successively approximated through the learning products that occur earlier in Years 1 and 2 of the program.

Mission and Goals

The mission of Duquesne’s Professional Doctorate in Educational Leadership program is to transform the practice of educational leadership to improve schools and to do so as a matter of social justice.

To fulfill its mission, ProDEL pursues the following goals:

• to prepare leaders who can collaborate effectively across school, academic, and community boundaries to (1) identify and understand real problems in real schools, and (2) to design and develop solutions to those problems of practice;
• to prepare leaders who can establish and grow intra- and inter-institutional capacity for continuous, evidence-based improvement of schools; and
• to prepare leaders who can advocate effectively for and drive efforts to achieve educational equity and excellence.

1 Note: Because ProDEL is a designed learning intervention, we are obligated by the pedagogical imperative [Shulman, 2002, 2005] to research the ProDEL design in order to pursue continuous improvement. Thus, definitions of ProDEL design elements are assumed to be “working definitions.”
A Working Definition of ProDEL's Doctoral Dissertation

The Dissertation in Practice is a scholarly doctoral dissertation, but not a traditional one. The dissertation in practice is expected to have generative impact beyond that of traditional doctoral dissertations in education. Indeed, generative impact of ProDEL dissertations in practice will be a key measure by which the quality of the program will be judged. In this program, we are serious about generative impact.

The first definition of the term doctor in the Oxford English Dictionary is as follows: A teacher, instructor; one who gives instruction in some branch of knowledge, or inculcates opinions or principles. In our program, an educational leader is one who helps others learn continuously and inculcates in others principles that guide the mind, heart, and spirit in that learning. Following the OED further, the term dissertation refers to a formal, comprehensive discourse on a topic, either written or spoken. In our program, the dissertation in practice is a formal, written discourse, but not an esoteric one. It is a product of learning that is meant to be read, understood, critiqued, and-most importantly-used by others in the field.

With those etymologies—and the program’s mission and goals—in mind, here is ProDEL’s working definition of the dissertation in practice:

A Dissertation in Practice is scholarship focused by a lens of social justice on a problem of practice that is addressed by a design for action that yields generative impacts on the practice of educational leadership the aims of educational improvement.

The boldface terms in the working definition can be considered parameters—the factors that delimit and characterize the dissertation in practice. Each parameter in the working definition is discussed in turn below. The discussion concludes with criteria to help you conceive, plan, and execute the work that will result in your dissertation in practice.

The Parameters of ProDEL’s Dissertation in Practice

The parameters of the dissertation in practice are discussed in the order in which they appear in the working definition of the dissertation in practice.

Scholarship

The mission and goals of the ProDEL program require doctoral students to develop the capacities of a scholar and to apply those capacities in the practice of educational leadership. Because ProDEL seeks to form Scholars in Practice, the products of learning generated by doctoral students should constitute Scholarship in Practice. ProDEL’s working definition of scholarship in practice is addressed below.

To arrive at a working definition of scholarship in practice, we begin with what we mean by “scholarship.” Our definition of scholarship is adapted—if only slightly—from Lee Shulman’s work on the scholarship of teaching and learning (2004). According to Shulman, work that qualifies as scholarship meets three conditions: (1) learning is shared, made public; (2) learning is shared in a form that is susceptible to critical review; and (3) learning is shared in a form that allows others in the field to build on what has been learned and shared.

Implied in Shulman’s conditions of scholarship—and in most people’s everyday connotation of scholarship—is the notion that the learning that is shared is of some consequence, that it matters in some way to others in the field. We have chosen to make that implication more explicit in our working definition: Scholarship is significant learning that is shared publicly in a form that engages others in critical review and that
allows others in the field to build on that learning. The term “significant learning” in the working definition refers both to the nature and focus of the learning that is expected.

Consider—in Figure 1 below—how significant learning is situated in relation to the conditions of scholarship identified by Shulman (and promulgated through the work of the Carnegie Project in the Education Doctorate).

Figure 1. An illustration of the working definition of scholarship in the Professional Doctorate in Educational Leadership program. (Adapted from Shulman, 2004).

Scholarship in Practice
Figure 1 illustrates the claim that significant learning is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the emergence of scholarship. In the discussion that follows, we examine that claim first by describing what is meant by the phrase “significant learning” and then the other conditions necessary for the emergence of scholarship as it can be applied in practice. (The other parameters in the working definition of the dissertation in practice—and the criterial questions that will serve as guidelines—will situate the scholarly work expected in the ProDEL program.)

Significant Learning
Significant learning is not easily accomplished; it requires struggle. It is learning that changes the way one understands past experiences and perceives and/or conceives new experiences as one acts in the world. Significant learning is the kind of learning that causes one to stop and take stock of what they thought they knew; it requires—in the Piagetian sense—accommodation rather than assimilation to resolve cognitive disequilibrium (including moral or ethical conundrums). Placing ourselves in the uncomfortable state of disequilibrium is necessary if we are to pursue significant learning. Said another way, significant learning goes beyond simply incorporating new information into old patterns of thinking, beyond “…the acquisition of schematized knowledge and skills. [Significant learning prepares one] for continuous lifelong learning, as well as abilities to solve novel problems or be inventive.” (Bransford, Vye, Stipek, Gomez, & Lam, 2009, p.13).
In the design of ProDEL, we have used a variety of characterizations in our discussions of significant learning, but the current form of our claim is as follows: *Significant learning reveals and the challenges one’s beliefs and assumptions to such an extent that the learner commits to arguments that she or he was not willing to make earlier.* That claim aligns with the signature pedagogy that we have adopted to facilitate significant learning in the ProDEL program. The signature pedagogy employed in ProDEL—called *systematic and intentional inquiry*—was developed through the work of our Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning. One way to think about the nature of significant learning in the ProDEL program is to assume that it will take the form of systematic and intentional inquiry.

The focus of the inquiry—and the significant learning it will yield—is the ProDEL mission. In order for significant learning—learning that first reveals and then challenges what we believe or assume to be true—to serve the mission and goals of ProDEL, it must be shared, reviewed critically, and used by others in pursuit of educational equity and excellence.

**Significant Learning that is Shared**

Sharing the new arguments that emerge from significant learning—making our new patterns of thought and action public—can occur in a number of ways, in a variety of forms, and across diverse venues. Publication—making learning public—is not only a matter of submitting our work to peer-reviewed journals. Peer-reviewed publication is an important tool, but there are other forms of publication and other forums for communication that can and should be used to engage the multiple audiences who hold stake in educational improvement as a matter of social justice.

The manner and venues of sharing significant learning are important considerations for those who would lead educational improvement. In the context of the dissertation in practice, is it necessary to share in ways that make our learning susceptible to critical review and that allow others in the field to build upon it.

**Significant Learning that is Shared and Critically Reviewed**

Sharing makes significant learning susceptible to critical review. Unless the new arguments that derive from significant learning are critically reviewed by others, however, one cannot learn how others perceive and respond to the argument. Thus, in order for the learning that occurs in ProDEL to emerge as scholarship it must be more than susceptible, it must compel critical review.

The *Task Force Report on the Professional Doctorate* by the Council of Graduate Schools states: "a professional doctoral degree should represent preparation for the potential transformation of [a] field of professional practice, just as a Ph.D. represents preparation for the potential transformation of basic knowledge in a discipline" (2007, p. 6). Critical review is a necessary condition for scholarship that has the potential to transform professional practice of education. Unless others engage in a critical review of the arguments that emerge from significant learning they can neither contribute to its development nor advocate for its use in practice.

**Significant Learning that is Shared, Critically Reviewed, and Generative**

In order for scholarship to be generative—to make an impact on practice—it must be used by practicing professionals. The previous conditions of scholarship described above are prerequisite: if significant learning is shared in ways that compel critical review, it then—and only then—becomes potentially generative. Thus, a dissertation in practice that meets the conditions of significant learning that is
shared and critically reviewed meets the criterion for a professional doctoral degree set forth by the Council of Graduate Schools. In the ProDEL program, that is a minimal standard for a dissertation in practice. The mission of the program includes to aspiration “to transform the practice of educational leadership” (the contextual qualifiers of that transformation—to improve schools and to do so as a matter of social justice—will be addressed below in other parameters for the dissertation in practice). Therefore, the goal for the dissertation of practice is that it be used, tested, and improved upon by those who practice educational leadership.

To summarize: the parameter of scholarship—as it operates in ProDEL’s working definition of the dissertation in practice—requires minimally that doctoral students achieve significant learning that contributes to the program’s mission and that they share their learning in a form that engages critical review. The goal, however, is that a dissertation in practice also will be generative: that it will impel other professionals to act upon its arguments.

While the ProDEL mission serves to frame the scholarship that will be generated, the other parameters in the working definition of a dissertation in practice serve as lenses within the frame of scholarship to focus the work from which scholarship will emerge.

**A Lens of Social Justice**

The second parameter in the working definition of the dissertation in practice requires that a doctoral student’s scholarship be “focused by a lens of social justice.” Note that the statement uses the indefinite rather than the definite article. There is not a single, demonstrably essential definition of social justice as it applies to education (McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley, González, Cambron-McCabe, & Scheurich, 2008). Social justice is a generalized concept that points our efforts in a general direction (cf., Kumashiro, 2009; Rodríguez, Chambers, González, & Scheurich, 2010). Within the ProDEL program that general direction is social justice and it is informed by a key element in the School of Education’s identity: the Spiritan tradition of caring.

In the context of the practice of educational leadership, the Spiritan tradition of caring calls us to act: we cannot wait for another generation of children to pass through our schools before we realize the promise of each child. However, we cannot realize that promise unless we understand collectively and communally the obstacles to equitable learning opportunities that our children—and those charged with the development of their minds, hearts, and spirits—face.

The transformation of the practice of educational leadership, guided by the Spiritan tradition of caring, requires practice that ensures equal opportunity and provides equitable allocation of resources to engage those opportunities. In short, our attempt to transform the practice of educational leadership in the Spiritan tradition must be measured on the scale of social justice.

As Peter Miller (personal communication, January, 2008; see also Miller, 2008, 2011) describes it, leadership is a practice that affects conditions of justice (positively or negatively) in a given organization, community, or society. Social justice, broadly defined, refers to a condition whereby all people are afforded fair opportunities to enjoy the benefits of society. Although many different specific conceptualizations of social justice have been posited, most agree that it is directly related to and influenced by the larger social, political, economic, and educational schema of a society and that it exists in varying degrees in each given context. When arbitrary distinctions are made between individuals and groups in the assigning of basic rights, responsibilities, and opportunities, conditions of social justice are greatly diminished, whereas when
all members of society are given equal freedom to pursue their desired ends, social justice can potentially flourish. This generalized notion of “a social justice lens” is simply a parameter, a proscription, that invites the aspiring scholar in practice to argue that a particular framework functions to focus one’s efforts to improve schools as a matter of social justice.

You will encounter a number of social justice lenses throughout the ProDEL program, but especially in the core course on *Education and Social Justice*. To provide only one potential example of a “lens of social justice,” consider the argument that Paulo Freire’s “dialogical tenets” can inform urban leadership (Miller, Brown, & Hopson, 2011).

So, a social justice lens is a requirement for the dissertation in practice. It is a requirement because, in ProDEL, we operate on the assumption that the improvement of schools is a matter of social justice. But what, specifically, will you try to improve? How and why will you do so? These questions will be addressed in your dissertation in practice by attending to the three remaining parameters: problem of practice; design for action; and generative impacts.

**Problem of Practice**

A key distinction that has evolved from the work of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate focuses on the provenance of problems. In research programs (e.g., Ph.D.), the problem that drives a doctoral student’s dissertation is a “research problem.” In professional programs (e.g., Ed.D.), the problem that drives a student’s culminating product of learning—in the case of ProDEL that is a dissertation in practice—is a “problem of practice.”

One way to conceive of the distinction is that research problems are typically found in the investigation of theory, while problems of practice are found in the investigation of practice. Both types of problems require theoretical study, but the reasons for consulting theory are different. In the case of research problems, theoretical study is done to *reveal* a problem (often a gap in extant theory). For a researcher, a theoretical gap is a potential research question. In the case of problems of practice, theoretical study is done in an attempt to *understand* a problem that has been identified in a professional practice setting. For a scholar in practice, an obstacle to attaining a practical outcome is a potential problem of practice.

Additional conceptual insight can be gained by studying the questions in the “Elements and Criterial Checklist” section below. (The same is true for the following two “elements” of a dissertation in practice, which follow immediately below.)

**Design for Action**

In alignment with its mission, the research approach used in ProDEL yields “scholarship in practice.” That approach is built on three frameworks: the *scholarship of teaching and learning* (SoTL), *design research* (referred to in earlier iterations as design-based research), and *improvement science*.

The scholarship of teaching and learning has an interesting history that goes back over two decades. That history is beyond the scope of this document, but can be traced to the work of Ernie Boyer, an earlier President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (Boyer, 1990). More recently, the scholarship of teaching and learning has been characterized by Lee Shulman—the current President Emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation—as “a concept of moral action, aimed at cultural change” (Shulman, 2002, p.vii). Over the last two decades SoTL has evolved into the bedrock for serious investigations of the teaching-learning process (see Boyer, 1990; Huber, 1999; Huber & Hutchings, 2005;
The work of the Carnegie Foundation Academy for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning draws “the line between excellent teaching and the scholarship of teaching,” the latter of which requires faculty to both “frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning” (Hutchings & Hutchings, 2005). The moral claim that underlies SoTL is what Shulman (2002) called the *pedagogical imperative*, an obligation that comes with attempts to influence teaching and learning. If we commit to influencing teaching and learning, we are obligated to make our efforts “public and thus susceptible to critique. It then becomes community property, available for others to build upon.” (Shulman, 2004, p. 43).

SoTL—and its underlying moral claim—is the reason why our efforts to improve schools as a matter of social justice qualifies as design research. Not so incidentally, you should understand that the ProDEL program itself is a design effort: it has—and will continue—to utilize design research protocols to investigate and improve its outcomes and impacts.

In education, design research is a way to investigate empirically the effects of our efforts to influence teaching and learning (i.e., the effects of schooling): we design ways to help teachers and students engage more effectively and efficiently in the teaching-learning process. In the design of ProDEL, we have and will continue to argue our design decisions, document the theoretical and empirical antecedents of those decisions, and develop and test the “proto-theories” that are consequences of our design decisions (Barab & Squire, 2004; Cobb, 2001; Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer & Schauble, 2003; Collins, 1992; Dede, 2005). “[D]esign-based research, which blends empirical educational research with the theory-driven design of learning environments, is an important methodology for understanding how, when, and why educational innovations work in practice” (Design-Based Research Collaborative, 2003, p. 5).

Our designs for action will emerge from well-understood problems of practice. If those designs for action are to embody the pedagogical imperative—and contribute to the formation of those who engage in or influence the professional practice of education—our designs must generative, they must initiate and sustain field-based efforts to pursue social justice by improving schools.

**Generative Impacts**

A dissertation in practice must be driven by a problem of practice; a design for action to address the problem must be specified; and the generative impacts of the problem and the action taken must be anticipated. The idea is that the work documented in a dissertation in practice will be engaged by others, tested with others, and—through collective efforts—be improved in the field. In this way, the dissertation in practice will be generative.

The anticipated generative impacts must be argued in your dissertation of practice. The nature of those anticipated impacts can fall into one or more of the general categories that follow:

- Engaging education for all students
- Effective in advancing learning
- Efficient in its use of resources

The categories listed above derive from an approach to research and development promulgated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: improvement science. The Carnegie Foundation approach identifies the categories as “Aims of Education.” One way to argue the generative potential of a
design for action is to anticipate how that design might contribute to educational experiences that (1) engage all students, (2) advances learning, and (3) uses resources efficiently.

We will learn more about the parameters of the dissertation in practice through the learning experiences in ProDEL. As that learning progresses, we will revisit the parameters and the more specific guidelines provided in the criterial checklist that follows.

**Elements and the Criterial Checklist**

A ProDEL Dissertation in Practice comprises, proscriptively, four elements:

- Introduction
- Problem of Practice
- Design for Action
- Generative Impacts

What follows is a checklist of questions for the Dissertation in Practice. The questions are organized into the four elements identified above.

**Have you provided an introduction for the dissertation in practice that …**

… prepares readers for and encourages engagement in the discourse?
… justifies using a lens of social justice to explicate a problem of problem and a design for action?
… informs the reader how argumentation will guide the discourse?
… introduces the “guiding” claims: What is the problem of practice? What is the design for action? What generative impacts are expected?
… situates the claims in the context of practice in which they will be argued?
… provides a useful roadmap for how the arguments built around the guiding claims will be organized?

**Have you argued compellingly that the problem of practice …**

… is a high leverage problem that is likely to yield educational improvement?
… is defined through the process of systematic & intentional inquiry?
… is informed by critical review of data and perspectives across the boundaries of school, academy, and community?
… is informed by critical review of data through multi-disciplinary lenses?
… is informed by critical social theories and epistemological frameworks?
… is situated in relation to institutional networks of power?
… recognizes inequitable structures of power between dominant and subordinate communities?
… addresses one or more cultural dimensions of power?

**Have you argued compellingly that the design for action …**

… is situated within relevant theoretical and empirical antecedents?
… fits the context in which it will be implemented?
… seeks to challenge and transform status quo practices in educational leadership?
… is informed by, understood by, and supported by those who hold stake in the design?
… yields or will yield assessment data that test the claims of the design?
… includes the processes by which data are rendered into evidence and evidence into accounts of the design?
… places value ethically and in service of learners, especially learners from marginalized communities?
… provides for continuous cycles of improvement?
… is or will be useable in the field?
… will serve as the basis for effective advocacy for educational equity and excellence?

*Have you argued compellingly that the generative impacts …*
… can be measured?
… can leverage change in the practice of educational leadership?
… support the establishment of networked improvement communities?
… address a moral, ethical, and political vision for socially just schools?
… include products that serve educational leaders and marginalized communities or advance significantly our conception of leadership practice that improves schools for marginalized communities?
… account for the aims of educational improvement?

The questions can be used not only as a checklist for the final product, but also as a source of checkpoints throughout the program: questions to pursue and the claims that can be built into arguments.

**Successive Approximation:**

Because the Dissertation in Practice is the culminating product of learning in the Professional Doctorate in Educational Leadership (ProDEL) program, all of the learning products generated throughout the program are designed to serve as successive approximations.

In Year 1 of the program, students will develop their abilities to argue and will do so in the context of the Duquesne Educational Leadership Core (a set of learning experiences focused by the School of Education’s identity: transformation of the practice of educational leadership; school improvement as a matter of social justice; and scholarship focused relentlessly on problems of practice).

In Year 2, students will develop the capacity to formulate, communicate, and engage problems of practice in ways that (1) cross the boundaries of schools, the academy, and communities and (2) builds intra- and inter-institutional capacity for research and development that has been missing from efforts to improve schools through equitable opportunity and the excellence that follows. In the course of the second year, students will identify the problem of practice and the design for action that will focus their dissertation in practice.

In Year 3 of the program, students will render an account of the work and the generative impacts against which the work will be assessed, evaluated, and improved.

The Figure that follows represents how the dissertation in practice subsumes the learning activities and the products of that learning throughout the program; how each step in the program serves as a successive approximation of the culminating product of learning.
References


Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.