Guest Editors’ Introduction to Special Theme Issue:
Doctoral Designers: Challenges and Opportunities in Planning and Conducting Educational Research

Robyn Henderson (robyn.henderson@usq.edu.au) and
Patrick Alan Danaher (danaher@usq.edu.au)
Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland, Australia

For Glenda Lord, Gaye Lovelock and Christine Elizabeth Danaher
whose unconditional love and support
helped us survive the challenges of the doctoral design journey

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.
(Christina Rossetti, “Goblin Market”)

Rationale

Research methods textbooks (see for example Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Opie, 2004; Somekh & Lewin, 2005; Wiersma & Jurs, 2004) generally highlight the need for educational research to be rigorous and systematic in character. These characteristics are clearly crucial on a number of levels, from ‘being true’ in representations of research participants to demonstrating the researcher’s competence to offset recurring criticisms of educational research as fragmented, ideologically biased and/or having little or no effect on practice (Pring, 2004; see also Hammersley, 2002; Scott, 2000; Wellington, 2000).

Despite these injunctions, the planning and conducting of educational research are neither automatic nor easy. On the contrary, every step in the process involves a complex and sometimes controversial set of decisions and requires the exercise of finely honed judgment about the design and shape of the project. Educational researchers draw on multiple sources of information and inspiration to frame and inform their negotiations around, past and through these potential shoals. The research process involves complex navigation of ethical, methodological and political stances to ensure legitimate, trustworthy and hopefully useful findings (see for example Bridges, 2003; Carmine, 1995; deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Gold, 1999; Swann & Pratt, 2004; Tabachnick, 1998).

This special theme issue of the International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning is entitled “Doctoral Designers: Challenges and Opportunities in Planning and Conducting Educational Research”. It presents diverse engagements – by several
intending, current and recently graduated doctoral candidates presently associated with the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia – with the processes of planning and conducting educational research. What emerges is a rich array of methodological approaches to research which have been foregrounded as these particular doctoral designers have reflected on and interrogated the characteristics of doctoral research. Their considerations have focused on what was and what might have been, as well as what was not and will not be, included in their research. This decision-making about the intentions and impact of doctoral research offers valuable knowledge about the difficult and challenging task of ‘designing’ doctoral study.

Despite the diversity of approaches, contexts and foci revealed in this theme issue, the papers have in common an engagement with one or more of the following organising questions:

- Which issues are most important in making decisions about the planning and conduct of an educational research project?
- Which factors help to facilitate and/or restrict an educational research project’s legitimacy, trustworthiness and utility?
- How can and should educational researchers negotiate with multiple and sometimes competing stakeholders and gatekeepers?
- What are the particular challenges and opportunities of designing doctoral educational research?

**Overview**

Four anonymously peer refereed articles have been selected for inclusion in this special theme issue. In the first article, Mark A. Tyler explores the phenomenography of his own experience as a doctoral candidate, examining the work and identity of Technical and Further Education teachers. In the process, he canvases a wide array of emotions and perceptions of both himself and the participants in his study. Tyler deploys five striking and evocative themes to frame the analysis of his doctoral journey: impostorship; cultural suicide; lost innocence; roadrunning; and community. The author concludes by arguing for inextricable links between personal identity and doctoral research design, thereby inviting us to consider the place of the themes of growth and struggle in the planning and conduct of contemporary educational research.

The second article, by Shirley Reushle, shifts the focus to a retrospective consideration of her doctoral study of transformative learning in and through an action research project about the professional development of a group of online educators working in a polytechnic in Singapore. The powerful metaphor of the journey is employed as an organising technique for identifying several key design decisions about such issues as moving from outsider to insider perspectives, conducting research in an online environment and articulating a comprehensive research framework. The author concludes by synthesising the perceived benefits of revisiting a doctorate’s design decisions some time after the study’s conclusion.

Patrick Alan Danaher uses the third article to engage in an equivalent revisiting – with a longer intervening timespan than that of Shirley Reushle – of his doctoral study of the educational experiences and opportunities of Queensland travelling show children
and their families. That revisiting is structured around four writing issues that are likely to exercise the hearts and minds of most doctoral candidates regardless of discipline: interpretation; representation; legitimation; and desiring. Danaher concludes by eliciting three challenges and opportunities that link academic writing with broader questions of research design, with important implications for the roles and responsibilities of doctoral researchers.

The fourth article, by Michel N. Trottier, moves the discussion from Australia to the Republic of Korea, with the author’s research focus on Korean English villages as putative sides of curricular innovation. The author considers a number of political and ethical issues and what they might mean for his proposed research design and planning. He thus situates doctoral design decisions in the complicated messiness that is characteristic of most research sites. Trottier argues in favour of a modest and provisional design framework that strives for balance among the competing interests of multiple stakeholders and gatekeepers while remaining true to an ethical stance.

Individual authors have provided specific responses to one or more of the guiding questions about doctoral design, ranging from particular issues influencing their decision-making about planning and conducting a research project to examples of the challenges and opportunities that they faced. Doctoral design emerges as highly complex, contingent and situated, as involving an emotional as much as an intellectual dimension and as having at times unforeseen implications or unanticipated interactions with other elements of doctoral research. Sometimes it can exhibit rational predictability; at other times serendipity takes a hand and the results can be surprising.

As the guest editors of this theme issue expected, no definitive or permanent ‘answers’ have been adduced from the articles presented here. As much as it is a journey, doctoral design is a text, with multiple authors and sometimes contradictory readings, rereadings and rewritings by researchers and others. We salute the rich diversity of texts rendered here, and we commend them to doctoral designers elsewhere.

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References


