

Learning Together, Learning Apart: Enhancing Doctoral Research Methods Teaching

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Introduction

This case focuses on how a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) programme has developed engagement and skills in research methods. DBA candidates are distinctive in Higher Education; they come from a diverse range of fields, and in this case, study part time, whilst also working in senior positions. There is also a clear focus on developing professional practice through their research, This addresses the initiative that was instigated and the challenges of developing scholarly practitioners through a 'blended' approach to teaching, which enables them to learn together and to learn apart.

Professional Doctorate research methods training

Candidates undertaking DBA studies are researching complex workplace problems (Lester, 2004). A basic principle of professional doctorates alike, is that candidates use their experience and expertise as a starting point (Costley & Lester, 2012) then engage with the academic body of knowledge to make sense of the intricacies of becoming a scholarly-practitioner (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). A distinguishing feature of professional doctorates and PhD's is the mode of research where there is a focus on a situated view of knowledge, where new possibilities can emerge. This requires both scientific expertise and non-technical communications that facilitates the production of knowledge This process requires a process of transferring learning, reflection and assessing the impact of work, this thoughtful action as Lester (2004) notes, is what enables professional doctorates to advance both knowledge and practice. Consequently, there is a need to provide opportunities for engaging candidates becoming researching professionals.

Due to this complexity and the profile of professional doctorate candidates, there are still questions in the approach in developing effective learning environments (Maxwell, 2003). Blended learning is broadly defined as the use of face to face instruction, combined with the use of technology (Torrisi-Steele & Drew, 2013). Blended learning allows learners to be connected anytime and anywhere (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), which enhances the traditional methods of face to face teaching. Blended learning allows a more flexible, learner centred (Yang, 2009) approach to learning and can support reflection, collaborative learning and interpersonal skills development (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). This makes a blended learning approach appropriate for teaching at doctoral level and even more so for a part-time distance-learning programme.

Integrating online learning with traditional face to face methods enables learning that happens in class to be reinforced, by enabling opportunities for reviewing experiences in depth with their group (Liaw, Chen, & Huang, 2008; Mumford, 1996). Online learning, otherwise referred to as learning communities, empowers collaboration through social interaction between learners and tutors, which enhance learning experiences (Huang, 2019) and can help to increase engagement (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Additionally, blended learning approaches enable candidates to organise and manage their own learning (Henderson, Selwyn, & Aston, 2017), which is important at doctoral level as it emphasises the development of individual researchers. This mix of methods and media can enhance and reinforce learning, but it is important to consider the complexity of blended learning to identify the most suitable approach for teaching to enable simultaneous individual and collaborative learning (Garrison

& Kanuka, 2004). Furthermore, the blend of learning must be fully integrated and complement each other.

Although embarking on a doctoral programme candidates are open to, and aware of the need to develop their research skills, the added complexity of a professional doctorate requires candidates to engage with both the academic body of knowledge, but also the environment under investigation. To support candidates in developing on their doctoral journey and as scholarly practitioners we developed the, *learning together, learning apart* blended learning approach. This provides scope for the teaching of research methods skills and to enhance collaborative learning. This 'blending' of methods, over a sustained period of time, enables candidates to move to a deeper level of knowledge and understanding.

Infrastructure

Although generally the course has high completion rates, engagement with sessions, transfer of learning and certain areas of student satisfaction could be enhanced. Due to the nature of the course, candidates are distance learners who work full time whilst studying. Attendance with the scheduled monthly sets is difficult and due to this, momentum and learning can be lost over time. Moreover, as the action learning sets run alongside all three modules and no formal record of sessions was kept, learning from sets can be lost. Therefore, there was a need to appraise how learning was integrated across the programme to enhance knowledge of research methodology and advance approaches to inquiry in for the scholarly practitioner. Another factor of concern was about the course design, as there are only four workshops candidates feel they lose contact with their cohort, which is where we see a drop in student satisfaction. Therefore, another challenge was how to keep candidates engaged when unable to attend and keep this momentum going for three years of teaching.

This case considers a part-time distance learning DBA programme. Drawing on theory presented previously, the 'blended' approach integrates small group teaching, in four one-week workshops, and monthly action learning sets over a three-year period. We have a cohort model, where candidates join at one time point. They undertake three modules; the planning module that develops the research plan; the reflective module that focuses on turning experience into learning; and the investigative module, which equates to the research thesis. In this first year two residential workshops are held, which focus on the fundamentals of research to support in the development of a research proposal and a learning agreement. In years two and three, there is one workshop, which develops advanced research skills as well as a focus on publishing and impact. Alongside this, monthly action learning sets are held, which requires candidates to come together via a virtual classroom. Following on from these initial three years, candidates focus on finishing and writing up their research. Reflection and questioning on learning together, and apart, is facilitated and captured via an online platform with a multi-user collaboration tool. In the next paragraphs, we will discuss three tools we use to develop our learning together, learning apart approach to blended learning.

Alongside traditional taught research methodology sessions for the residential workshops, interactive 'research café' workshops have been introduced within the first three workshops, with the fourth incorporating a presentation session to enhance communication of research. The research café sessions are broken into three sessions aimed at promoting discussion around the candidates' research, background and literature, research methodology and Impact and making a contribution. Candidates break into small groups of three or four, each candidate has 5 minutes to present their research and then the rest of the café is open for discussion. We encourage notes to be taken by using tablecloths and post it notes for graffiti walls, and provide prompts for questioning. This not only supports candidates in reflecting on

their own research and the taught elements of the course, but also helps encourage insightful questioning and evaluation of each other's research. This moreover encourages collaborative learning which helps to develop a sense of cohort identity whilst candidates are attending the residential workshops. We have also found that this encourages links between the different elements of the course where candidates are starting to contribute to their research and their professional learning through the process of reflection and questioning.

To form the basis of our online offering, we hold virtual action learning sets. Virtual action learning sets are used, as they allow for our distance learning to come together to discuss problems and opportunities with opportunities for reflection and questioning (Plack, Dunfee, Rindfleisch, & Driscoll, 2008). The action learning sets are facilitated by a member of staff to support in the functioning of these groups, but as the set develops this becomes more self-directed by the candidates. In initial meeting the form and structure of the action learning sets are established for each set, however the general structure is 5 minutes catch up and then for each candidate 5- 10 minutes recap and discussion of issue, 10 minutes questioning and 5 minutes action setting. Action learning for professional doctorates can help candidates to develop their capabilities as professional; their capacity to bring about change that contributes to professional practice and to contribute to the advancement of knowledge (Bourner & Simpson, 2014). These sets allow candidates to develop insightful questioning skills and together develop the expertise required to individually: clarify the nature of their research problem, reflect on possible solutions and to take action.

The action learning sets are short to facilitate engagement, as individuals work full time whilst studying. To enhance this an integrated action learning approach has been developed. To encourage sustained learning together and learning apart, an online multi-user collaboration tool is used to capture and facilitate discussion. Within this tool, each candidate has their own notes area where they are encouraged to keep a reflective log. This includes materials or notes from the workshops, discussion from the action learning sets and a diary of their research process. Additionally, at the end of each learning set, the facilitator adds in additional notes from the discussion such as, questions that may have been asked and actions that have been agreed upon. This platform allows candidates to collate any notes, drawings or external sources that can enhance their own learning, but that can be shared with others. We have also found that this additional platform has supported deeper questioning and the sharing of multiple perspectives and ideas. Further to this, the asynchronous discussion has facilitated further communication, additional to the formalised sessions, which has supported candidates feelings of belonging.

Challenges

Two main challenges that were faced in the delivery of the blended learning approach were around engagement and the use of extra-technology. Whilst the residential workshops have very high engagement, engagement in the past with online sessions has been low. The integrated action learning, learning together learning apart approach began with framing the sessions with a facilitator to help the teams form and encourage ways of reflecting and questioning. It was also important that each set had the opportunity to set their own 'rules for the running and form of the set. Additionally, through the integration of the research cafes and online learning, in the blended learning approach, there was recognition of the functional benefits of contributing to their understanding of research methodology, their contribution to practice and their own learning. As well as realising the benefits of contributing to, over a prolonged period, the collection of data about their own learning for the reflective portfolio.

Considering this, a continuing challenge we face is a tendency for the action learning sets to slip into a feedback and advice session, which is especially apparent when attendance in

low. This may reduce the effectiveness of the learning strategy. This is something that we are still working on, through developing the integrated action learning approach and enhancing collaboration throughout the course.

Another challenge faced was the integration of additional technology into teaching. The profile of candidates on our programme is very diverse, which has caused several issues with the platform used for the virtual action learning sets. Firstly, there was issues around time differences of candidates in different locations for the synchronous virtual sessions. There were also issues concerning the platform that was accessible to all. We adopted adobe connect, however with this comes issues, like with any software about connections and accessibility on certain devices. To overcome this we provide additional sessions in the workshops and offer support on a one to one basis and through IT services. We have also found that the use of OneNote to minimize the adverse effects of issues with the virtual action learning sets. By enabling discussion and knowledge sharing via the multi-user collaboration system, candidates can continue collaboration even if there are issue with the technology.

How the initiative was received

Engagement with research methods, methodologies and participation in action learning sets had previously been a problem within the DBA programme. The blended learning approach to teaching continues to have a positive impact on engagement and participation across the course. The attendance and engagement with the integrated action learning sets has increased, with candidates enhancing their learning by building reflective research dairies. We have also noticed, although only anecdotally currently, that candidate have started to engage in their own collaborative learning activities outside of the formalised sessions.

Candidates have also highlighted the benefits of the blended learning approach, during our first Board of Study following on from integrating the initiative, with some noting they find the action learning sets rewarding. Additionally, it helps with their sense of community with another highlighting the ability to stay in communication with the cohort and the teaching team. The research cafes have also gained a lot of positive feedback, with candidates highlighting the importance of these sessions to be able to discuss their work, hear about other research and to apply the learning gained from the formal workshop sessions. This is echoed by many of the candidates who have voiced their preference for more opportunities to discuss their work, as well as opportunities for quiet reflection throughout the day.

The learning outcomes

The teaching initiative has improved the quality of the research proposals produced by DBA candidates. We have seen that candidates engage in a deeper level of critical thinking when approaching their complex work-based research problems. Furthermore, candidates have developed their understanding of research methodology, with the confidence and skill to approach innovative methods. We have also seen a far greater engagement with the reflective element of the course, seen in the learning agreement. This learning agreement has now become a continuously evolving document for candidates to reflect on and enable their research journey. The bridge between academia and practice is more apparent and consequently we hope to build upon this to enhance learning on our DBA programme. This evaluation of the learning outcomes are still in the initial phases, due to length of the

programme we hope to see more timely completions and a higher level of professional doctorate skills in their final thesis.

Plans to further develop

Plans are in place to further develop the 'blended' initiative. We would like to enhance the online offering of the course to support the residential workshops by developing short courses that candidates can access anytime and anywhere. Following on from request from candidates to develop the asynchronous teaching, we also plan to integrate opportunities for creating blogs. These can provide more opportunities for reflecting on their learning and sharing this with other candidates. It is hoped that this could be rolled out across the enrolled cohorts to provide opportunities for peer support from those at different points on their doctoral journey.

We are also looking to extend this initiative to other groups of DBA candidates as we expand our programme. Due to the nature of the programme, this initiative is in its infancy and has currently been rolled out to one of our current DBA cohorts, but with new cohorts beginning and the programme expanding there are plans to integrate this into future teaching models. Likewise, looking forward, plans are also in place to evaluate the impact of the teaching initiative on the DBA thesis.

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Appendix 1 - Research Café concept workshop plan

Overview of session

- Three different research café's, roughly one hour each
- Each café split in to two groups of 3-4 members
- Each member allowed to do a short presentation based on the café theme (no more than 5 minutes each). The rest of the café is for open discussion
- Table cloth and marker pens to make notes
- Post it notes for graffiti wall
- Prompts for questioning

Session	Topic and example prompts
Session 1	<p><i>Background and literature</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain (in very simple terms) the background and context to how your research came about? Feel free to tell a story, use your personality. • What developments have there been in this field since you began your doctorate? • How have these changed the research context in which you are working? • What would you say are the key pieces of literature which have informed your work? • Describe the process by which you developed your research questions?
Session 2	<p><i>Methodology</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you choose to use your specific approach for your methodology? (Justifications) • What were the alternatives to this methodology? • Explain and describe the main data collection phases of your methodology? • How does your methodology map to your aim and objectives? • What are the main ethical issues of conducting this research?
Session 3	<p><i>Impact and making a contribution</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your key theoretical contributions? • What are your key managerial contributions? Your impact?? • Who will be the main beneficiaries of your work? • How will you claim that your work creates a significant contribution to knowledge? • How will you disseminate your research to a wider audience?