
Preface

Can I do it? This is the question I am consistently asked by experienced educators—teachers, principals, and central administrators—with years of success in the classroom and in leadership positions. Can I really complete the dissertation? This question may sound strange coming from individuals who are accomplished practitioners. Yet, they have all heard stories of students languishing for years pursuing research that is never completed; they have seen colleagues frustrated by the lack of support; they themselves have little patience for seemingly technical and abstract “academic” writing that has little relevance to their day-to-day professional lives.

But, I say to them, that is the wrong question. The right question is, How do I begin? Writing a dissertation is, of course, not easy. It may take many years and require immense focus and commitment. And, of course, one must have a passion, something about which one cares about, and a willingness to completely and deeply focus the dissertation research on this passion. With the requisite skills, passion, and dedication, then, an individual can indeed write a quality dissertation. Moreover, I say to these educators, the education community desperately needs more individuals capable of linking theory and practice. Such applied or “translational” research is crucial for improving education practices and policies; and yet, it is so difficult to do well. We need more practitioner scholars—educators able to bridge the divide between academic research and daily practice—who can bring ideas to life and research to fruition in their classrooms, school buildings, and districts.

The problem, as educational research and national data inform us, is that more than half of all doctoral students never complete their dissertations. For those that do, the average time for completion is over a decade. Doctoral programs and advisors may spend a lot of time on the explicit aspects of doctoral study—for example, the content of coursework, the importance of a solid research design—but there is usually very little guidance about the implicit and oftentimes most important part: how do I actually make it through this process? “How do I begin?”

is, thus, the key insight of this book. Specifically, I have written this book to show the step-by-step process in developing and completing a quality dissertation in a time-efficient manner.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK AND WHY

This book is meant precisely for those individuals who have the passion and commitment to write a dissertation. Ideally, it is for students just beginning their doctoral studies or dissertation work. But, it can support students (and their advisors) at any stage of the dissertation process because it serves as a scaffolding—the strong support mechanisms—to complete an education dissertation in a timely and academically rigorous fashion. This book is grounded in adult-learning theory presuming that adult students are engaged learners who bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to their studies and, in turn, simply need a structured context to demonstrate and transfer their skills. This book, as such, provides the “big-picture” framework and the nitty-gritty details.

Doctoral students may have taken numerous research and theory courses; dissertation advisors may be experts in their fields. Yet, all too often, neither students nor faculty usually address the salient aspects of actually doing one’s dissertation: How do I frame the research question? How do I begin a literature review? And when do I end it? Why do I have to use APA style? What’s the point of a theoretical framework? What exactly does a dissertation chair do? And when do I go to her for help? It is not that doctoral students are incapable of asking or doctoral faculty unwilling to answer such questions. It is that we only rarely make explicit and systematize the tacit knowledge of writing a dissertation. This is exactly what this book offers: supporting the student–advisor relationship through the numerous stages and hurdles of the dissertation.

The dissertation process, nevertheless, is all too often presumed and expected to be a bumpy ride, as if the months or years of detours along the hallways and byways of the academy are somehow badges of honor. The intellectual, emotional, and financial scars along the way are preferred to the seemingly only other option of “dumbing down” to accommodate those who cannot handle this journey. In other words, we all too often either provide too much latitude for our students (hoping that they will figure it out on their own) or believe that we have to “babysit” our doctoral students through each and every step (demeaning the academic integrity of the doctorate).

However, there is a third way. Namely, it is possible to provide perspectives, protocols, and guidelines for what to do at key stages in the dissertation process. This will facilitate both stage-specific strategies and the heuristics (the “rules of thumb”) that foster a student’s metacognition, allowing more independence the next time around.

A couple of years ago, a doctoral student from a local prestigious university came to me in tears because, for six months, her committee had given her minimal guidance and did not expect her to defend her dissertation proposal for another ten months. Yet, she had already done the hard work of thinking through her ideas. All she needed was a clear structure for how to articulate her research questions, think through the implications for her methodology, and then format her dissertation proposal to a standard and acceptable protocol. She needed six weeks of focused help, not two years of self-guided wandering.

This is what this book provides—conceptual models to clarify thinking and pragmatic tools to focus the writing. The book offers effective templates, and guidelines for avoiding the tangents that are ineffective. Put otherwise, this book helps practitioner scholars focus, and explicates the key features of how and why such a focus functions, all without compromising the academic quality of the work. In fact, it only strengthens the academic quality of the work as it frees up time to focus on what is truly important: your dissertation research.

This book is not a cookie-cutter recipe for creating a dissertation “by the numbers.” There is no such thing. (Or at least there shouldn’t be.) A dissertation is an in-depth and rigorous examination of a particular issue that provides new knowledge and/or perspectives. As such, it contributes to ongoing scholarship and discussion around that issue. That can’t be done for someone. Nor is this book a compilation of anecdotes and “war stories” about the journey ahead and seemingly sage advice for picturesque photo opportunities or places to avoid. While every dissertation is unique, every dissertation also has a highly formulaic academic structure. This book describes and details this structure in order to provide concrete and focused guidelines and guideposts at every stage of the dissertation process.

KEY FEATURES AND HOW TO USE THEM

I have provided a host of strategies and features that will make the dissertation process much more effective. Specifically, I have created useful templates, synthesized key research, highlighted important milestones, and provided specific guiding activities and examples of student work. My overarching goal, above and beyond all of the known challenges to the dissertation process, is to shed light on and systematically overcome much of the uncertainty of the process. Doctoral students are often frustrated by the fact that there is so much that they do not know: What am I missing that everyone else seems to know about? What should I have asked that I did not even know to ask? Such “unasked questions”—the ones we don’t even know to ask—are crucial to answer. I answer such questions at every stage of the dissertation process: What is a quality

dissertation? What does my committee do? How long should chapters be? Is there a chance that I will fail my defense? Some of these questions do not have definitive answers, but they still must be explored. I do this in multiple ways.

Organizational Templates

Organizing one's time and effort is crucial to success. I have provided templates to, among other things, organize a research timeline, structure the table of contents, and focus a literature review. These templates serve as heuristics that can be directly applied to, and modified for, a specific institution and research focus. I have listed these templates as figures in the table of contents so that they can be easily accessed and used; one can copy the page and personalize it for the specific context.

Synthesis of Research

There is an immense amount of educational research on nearly every aspect of the dissertation process; it is difficult to know where to even begin. Therefore, I have focused on some the most important components—choosing a theoretical framework, developing a research design, and using the appropriate methodology—and provided suggestions for deeper investigation. In each chapter, I cite some of the key literature, and at the end of the book, I provide a list of key texts as additional resources.

Key Milestones and Procedures

All too often, the dissertation process appears as an immensely abstract and distant goal. I have broken it down, step-by-step, and articulated the key milestones for each stage and how to most effectively obtain them. Whether this involves the Institutional Review Board (IRB) submission, aligning data and conclusions, or publishing dissertation research, I provide concrete goals and workable methods.

“Hints” Along the Way

There are dozens of occasions in the dissertation process where we want to say, “Oh, by the way, I should have mentioned that . . .” I provide numerous “hints” throughout the book: How do I know when my topic is focused enough? What exactly is the role of a dissertation chair? How should I best prepare for my defense? These hints help students realize and think through situations that they may not even have realized they needed to know about. These are also listed in the table of contents for easy reference.

Relevant Activities

It is critical that students understand important concepts—how to start a literature reviews correctly, how to focus research questions, and how to operationalize ideas. I provide specific activities at each stage of the process and list these activities in the table of contents to help students and faculty do these activities on their own or together in class.

Examples of Student Work

We all have to start somewhere in developing our own research tools and organizing ideas; where we start greatly determines where we'll go and how fast we'll get there. That is why the first steps are so crucial and so difficult to make. I provide examples of student work throughout the book and analyze what was done well and what could have been modified or expanded. This allows the reader a chance to see helpful and workable examples, as well as realize the opportunities for modification to one's own studies and situations.

I provide such features and strategies throughout the book with the premise that the more one knows about each step and the more one understands how each protocol functions, the better one will move through this process. I thus suggest that you read this book from start to finish at the beginning of your doctoral program and continue to use it along the way. I want you to know where you are going before you begin because this will help you to think about each step in a much more conscious, clear, and coherent manner. You can, of course, return to specific sections of the book when you are at those stages in your own dissertation process. Additionally, many of the activities and templates are useful at multiple stages. The real key, though, is to understand your goals in order to focus your means.

So, when someone—a prospective applicant, a doctoral student stuck at the dissertation-proposal stage, or a faculty member editing a rough first draft of a dissertation—asks me whether or not he can do it, if it is actually possible to complete the dissertation, I don't simply encourage him to continue or just commiserate with his situation. I don't give abstract suggestions or anecdotal advice. Instead, I provide detailed and concrete suggestions, guidelines, and examples. I provide the big picture, a conceptual framework that clarifies how to think about this process. I have written this book to provide you with such support during this important stage in your career. I hope it is of help.