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# Developing online resources to support student research theses and dissertations

*Evidence from the EdD at the UCL Institute of Education*

Denise Hawkes

## Introduction

Professional doctorates aim to enable experienced professionals to gain doctoral level academic research skills through research based within students' working environments (QAA 2011), allowing students to make an original contribution through exploring a problem of practice identified in the candidates' workplace. Of all the professional doctorates, the EdD is one of the most established within the UK (Mellors-Bourne, Robinson and Metcalf 2016) and the most studied in the academic literature, although relatively little is written about the online support for the thesis stage of the programme (Hawkes and Yerrabati forthcoming).

The Doctor in Education (EdD) programme has been running at the UCL Institute of Education since 1996. The programme consists first of a year of taught modules, in professionalism in education and research design/methods, which build up a portfolio of practice, followed by a 20,000-word Institution-Focused Study (IFS) which sets out the problem of practice the doctoral candidate faces and the context within which this happens. Finally, the student writes a 45,000-word thesis which attempts to address the problem of practice through a piece

of academic research. The aim of the EdD programme is for the candidate to make a contribution to professional practice through work on the three parts of the programme (portfolio, IFS and thesis) (UCL Institute of Education 2016).

This chapter reports on our experience of improving the online resources for our students at the thesis stage of the EdD programme. The development was funded through a Connected Curriculum staff-led grant motivated by student feedback.<sup>1</sup>

I was the principle investigator and worked with two colleagues on this development project. Through online forum posts, students were encouraged to provide their thoughts on the content and future resources they would like developed. Student representatives were also encouraged to seek student views of the resources developed, both in terms of the content of developed resources and which additional resources may be useful.

The aims of this project were:

1. to convert the module leader's library of resources for the face-to-face thesis workshops for a successful EdD thesis into resources for the new online site;
2. to develop a range of Web 2.0 resources to build on the original materials used in the classroom for the thesis workshop;
3. to explore tools to develop a sense of the EdD peer community for those who cannot make it to the face-to-face workshops; and
4. to consider the transferability of the resources developed for other research project modules within UCL, likely within social science and related areas in the first instance.

This chapter attempts to address point four, above, and to build on our experience of developing these resources and attempt to identify some broader design principles to help those developing online resources to support student dissertations and theses. This chapter also builds on an earlier presentation at the UCL teaching and learning conference (Hawkes 2016). While these resources were developed to support students at doctoral level this chapter will present the key design principles identified during this process. These provide general advice for developing online resources to support student research dissertations and theses at any level of study.

The chapter will proceed as follows: firstly, I set out how the EdD programme fits within the wider institution research-based education strategy, Connected Curriculum. Secondly, I present the context of the

ongoing rework of the programme in which the thesis workshops development occurred. Thirdly, I set out the development undertaken for the thesis workshops. And finally the chapter sets out the lessons learned from this project and presents student feedback on the development.

## **EdD and the Connected Curriculum**

By its very nature as a professional doctorate, the EdD programme meets many of the Connected Curriculum ideals (UCL 2016), the institution's research-based education strategy, which, among other aims, seeks to bring research and education closer together, ensuring all students have opportunities to learn through research and enquiry. The EdD is designed to support experienced professionals within the broadly-defined education field, to facilitate the development of research skills and academic knowledge. It allows one to add to a body of research which makes a contribution to professional practice. Before the developments on the thesis resources, the EdD nicely mapped to the core principles and many of the Connected Curriculum dimensions (Fung 2017; Fung and Carnell 2017). That is, students learn completely through research and enquiry (core principle), with their work making real connections between their academic learning and their workplace (dimension 4). Our students are often very experienced professionals within education and related fields. The programme enables these experienced professionals to connect with UCL Institute of Education staff and their world-leading research, both through working with their research supervisor and engaging with the teachers and tutors on the taught modules (dimension 1). By its very nature the programme has a 'throughline' of research activity throughout the programme built through the taught modules and assignments (dimension 2). During the first year, the modules are designed to help these professionals develop the necessary academic and research skills to undertake their own independent research, which is first explored in the Institution-Focused Study. The students produce not just the thesis for the award of their doctorate but many produce publications for academic and practitioner journals. They therefore learn to produce outputs directed at a range of audiences (dimension 5).

EdD students are required to have a masters degree and at least four years' professional experience in education, although many have much more experience than this when they join the programme. Our students are seeking to extend their professional understanding and develop skills in research, evaluation and high-level reflection on

practice (UCL 2016). The student cohort provides an important element of the programme working as critical friends throughout the modules and thesis. This helps the students to develop their own support network of fellow research students, with these connections often lasting throughout the thesis stage and beyond the EdD itself (Hawkes and Taylor 2016).

## General programme development

The thesis workshop development built on an increasing use of online resources on the EdD programme inspired by the Institutional Validation<sup>2</sup> in 2014. In this validation the programme team proposed the development of virtual alternatives for students who were unable to attend the face-to-face delivery as well as to build towards an online version of the EdD programme (Institute of Education 2014). This started with the development of online resources for the taught modules and the IFS.

The change was most dramatically found on the IFS workshops. In addition to the development of online resources for each face-to-face workshop, at the IFS stage the curriculum for the workshops was refocused away from knowledge of more research methods towards information of the research process especially around scale and scope of the project proposed. These developments led to more students designing valuable and feasible research projects which enabled them to complete their IFS on time, with significantly fewer extension requests made since the redesign (Hawkes and Taylor 2016). This development was important given the nature of the part-time and very busy student body.

## Thesis workshop development

The EdD Thesis Workshops had run exclusively in a face-to-face mode with little supportive material on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Moodle. The module leader had developed a range of resources which he used in his face-to-face thesis workshops to support the students with a range of issues. Only around 20 per cent of the eligible students actually attended the face-to-face delivery. Given the non-compulsory nature of the workshops, many students, especially those based overseas, often miss out on these workshops and the opportunity to benefit from peer community dialogue. With the programme team having developed enhanced Moodle sites for the taught phase and the

IFS workshops, it was timely to redesign the Moodle site for the thesis workshops, building on the face-to-face resources developed already.

The development enabled the enhancement of the mapping to the Connected Curriculum. EdD students develop their theses, drawing on the early programme taught provision and IFS, which connects academic learning with workplace learning. They write for their own practitioner publications so that the findings of their research are disseminated to other practitioners to ensure their research has a real-world impact on professional practice. They also write for academic journals as part of the research degree journey making contributions to academic knowledge. Both types of contribution draw heavily on the academic research skills taught on modules and their own professional experience. Writing for publications helps these experienced practitioners become researching professionals. The module leader had developed a range of resources to support the students in developing their thesis, make a contribution to professional practice and publishing their work. This project sought to build on the development of the online resources based on these face-to-face sessions and leading on from the IFS workshops development, which largely focused on the research process and management.

In addition to making online resources for the thesis stage, the development has built on the experience of the IFS workshops to provide a space for students to 'connect with each other, across phases and with alumni'. The thesis workshops are open to students from completion of their IFS in mid-year 3 of the programme to their completion of the programme within years 4 to 7. In the face-to-face sessions recent alumni are invited to share their EdD experiences with the current students. The development of online resources sought to develop tools that could enable those missing the face-to-face workshops.

## **Lessons learned from the Thesis Workshop Moodle Site development**

The thesis workshop development was underpinned by Salmon's five-stage model (Salmon 2014), which gives a framework for a structured and paced programme of activities online. It provides a link between the degree of e-moderating the academic module leader needs to provide and the level of technical support needed for the learner to develop online learning skills. The development focused on the first two stages of Salmon's five-stage model as this was the initial development of

online resources for this module. Considering the EdD is a part-time programme completed over four to seven years, many of the current thesis stage students had experienced the taught phase of the programme before the IFS development and validation. As a consequence, they had little programme experience of online resources. In future developments, we will explore the next three stages of Salmon's model, as students who have experienced the enhanced programme in the IFS and taught modules reach thesis stage. Starting with stage one, access and motivation, it was important to think about the underlying organisation principle for the online site.

### Stage one: explore key themes

The first design principle in the development of the Thesis Workshop Moodle Site was to think through with the module leader the key themes which would act as the organising principle for the online resources. The face-to-face sessions took an overarching design principle of a journey through the thesis, from the thesis proposal to the viva and beyond. It was thought by the module leader that this structure was helpful and so was mirrored for the online environment.

The key themes for the material were:

1. Moving from IFS to Thesis
2. Thesis Writing
3. Thesis Components
4. Contribution to Practice
5. EdD Viva
6. Entry to the Academic Community

It was very clear from experience on the face-to-face sessions that the signposting process really mattered. This also built on the IFS workshop development which moved from a focus on research methods to a more research-process focus. This shift was to acknowledge the role of the thesis workshops which was distinct from the role of the research supervisor, who was the academic lead and guide for the project. With the diversity of topics among the student body, the research process was the common theme which could promote discussion and engagement with peers. Of course subject-based discussion was not excluded but the organising principle was on research process.

Focusing on research process was also important as the thesis workshops are accessible by anyone at thesis stage, those working on the thesis proposal and those just completing their viva. Therefore, the focus on process and the research journey would enable students to get from the site what they need and enable those at different stages of the thesis to support each other. Within the broad community of EdD thesis-stage students, there are various communities of practice. Wenger (1999) defines a community of practice as a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. For EdD thesis students, communities of practice develop based on location (being based in London and beyond), by subject expertise, by work role, by institution of work and by year of study. Therefore, the online space needs to enable students to meet and discuss within, as well as across, cohorts. This interaction could be enhanced by the module team's use of online posts in face-to-face sessions. In short, the key principle of design focuses on the research process being as important as context/academic knowledge in supporting dissertations and theses.

Through monitoring the student access of the digitised resources we found that the main resources frequently accessed by students were those which focused more on demystifying the processes of how to actually write a thesis and the assessment process for the work when submitted, as well as materials on the viva. Student feedback suggested that the section on thesis components and contribution to practice were important in understanding supervisor feedback about the structure of their work. It seems that regardless of topic of study, the focus on process was found to be helpful.

## Stage two: developing individual resources

There are three design principles in the development of resources for individual activities for the thesis workshop online: exemplar extracts, sharing experiences and certainty in process. In each example is a description of the resource developed and a discussion of why it was found to be useful based on student feedback and programme team reflection.

### Exemplar extracts

One of the resources used in the face-to-face workshops is extracts from previous EdD theses. In one example an extract from the



introductory chapter is used to highlight how the student uses this chapter to highlight their contribution to practice as well as act as a map for the examiners with regard to the structure of the thesis. The extract shows how the student signposts the content of each chapter for the examiner and manages the scale and scope of the project so that the examiner is clear what is and is not included. This extract is used in the face-to-face class to facilitate discussion of the structure of the thesis, the need to signpost this for the examiner as well as a discussion of the scale and scope of an EdD thesis. In the online environment the resource is used to prompt discussion on a forum. Guided questions used in the lesson plan for the face-to-face sessions are amended for this online forum. The forum enables students across cohorts to communicate and share, with those later in the thesis writing stage providing different insights to those earlier in the process. The online environment can also be accessed by those who attended the face-to-face sessions and this provides an important link to discussions between the two modes of delivery.

The use of exemplar extracts from previous EdD theses helps our students to decode the research process vocabulary and supports the students to see what others have achieved, and provides hope that they can produce something similar (Lawrence and Zawacki 2016). As our students are experienced professionals they are very competent workers but are not necessarily academics. Therefore, they can feel 'lost in translation' between their strong professional knowledge and the requirements of the EdD thesis. Terms well known to academics, such as 'rationale' and 'theory', can be confusing. Sharing of exemplar extracts helps the translations through both the access to the document and the peer sharing of the examples. The students are able to have discussions both online and in face-to-face arenas; even good students need this reassurance of confirming the meaning of terms well known to academics. This translation is the toughest part of the EdD journey, that of the final transformation of the practitioner to the scholar-practitioner (Dailey et al. 2016).

In sum, exemplar extracts from previous theses and dissertations can be used as discussion points, in both face-to-face and online settings, to help students develop an understanding of terms common in academic writing. The sharing of these with peers in either mode helps the students to see that struggling with understanding is not unusual, and by developing this task it is also acknowledged as challenging. The role of students' peers is important in helping to understand the terms and the exemplar extracts can help to scaffold that discussion.

## Sharing experiences

Thesis workshops provide those who attend with a safe environment to share concerns and experiences of the EdD thesis journey. Throughout the EdD the students are encouraged to share with their cohort their experiences during the workshops. At the thesis workshops there is an added dimension of being able to share between the cohorts with those at different stages on the EdD, as well as with alumni who are also encouraged to share their experiences. Moving to the online arena it was important to build on this tradition to give opportunities for online sharing. Successful EdD completers report that they were significantly supported by members of their cohort, and those who have these strong connections finish the EdD quicker than those who do not (Hawkes and Taylor 2014).

The sharing that was developed built on the notion of connectivism (Siemens 2004) as the EdD students have a strong bond after completing the taught phase of the programme. The online space needed to be both unstructured and structured. In the unstructured space the use of real-time chat and cohort forum were open for the students to share as they wished. Often sharing in this area was focused on things people were unsure of in terms of process and university services, for example library facilities and workshop dates. The more personal concerns seem to be shared outside of the university system and students develop their own networks through social media. Our light into this world comes from the student representatives who come to our programme team meeting. As part of the Connected Curriculum grant, we encouraged the student representatives to seek their peers' views of the resources developed and to ask which resources were found most helpful. We also exploited the Moodle site data which records how often and for how long resources in various parts of the site are accessed. The student representatives were often able to help us interpret the data from Moodle in terms of why resources were accessed, for example in terms of the students' perceived value of the resource. This link between the quantitative data from Moodle and the qualitative data of the student representatives' feedback helped us fine tune the online resources provided.

The more structured sharing is designed using forums through two main areas. Firstly, in the face-to-face sessions the module team had a series of questions to help facilitate small group discussion around common concerns and challenges. These lesson plan prompts were used as the material to develop these forums. These forums enable members of the cohort to act as each other's guides both online and face-to-face.

This linkage between students is highlighted in the Dissertation House model which suggests that moving away from the apprentice-master model to a more collaborative model is ideal for improving completions on the doctoral programme and reducing dropouts (Carter-Veale et al. 2016).

Secondly, the face-to-face environment was also an opportunity for peers to review each other's work and if they desired to present what they had for feedback. In the online environment it was possible to replace this with posts of a two-minute video and requests for feedback by forum message. This has worked well for those who previously had not come to the thesis workshops and appears to be prompting more engagement with the face-to-face sessions. In addition, the use of forums means that conversations in the past are recorded and can be used by new students when they face similar issues, which is a benefit beyond the face-to-face delivery. Student representative feedback suggested that this was well liked by those with good IT skills but not so well appreciated by those who struggled with making a two-minute video. We are exploring options of developing resources or linking to existing institution resources for those who lack these skills. Unfortunately, the willingness to try a new resource is a more challenging problem to resolve.

In sum, encouraging the use of both unstructured and structured discussions online enables the EdD students to share their concerns and knowledge. This sharing helps support the students' academic development through helping them to see their concerns are normal and addressable. This safe environment to ask what may be silly questions is vital to the EdD students and an important aspect of the thesis workshops. Making a virtual equivalent has enabled those who work on the EdD at a distance to experience this peer support too.

### Certainty in process

By far the most used part of the online resources and the most requested by students are resources on the assessment (viva) and on processes (for example formal review prior to thesis and ethics application). Students often find the university processes difficult to navigate and are unclear about the expectations.

The key assessment for the EdD thesis is a viva and the viva can be a mystery which causes many concerns for the students. As it is unlike any other assessment they have completed on the programme, they often request more information on the viva. In the face-to-face sessions this is addressed through the alumni talks, who share their EdD journey

and experience of the viva. With the move to the online environment, a wider body of EdD alumni have been able to share their experience. Alumni focus on what the viva is like on the day, including feelings and preparation expected.

The most accessed material was a collection of the most common comments from examiners on EdD thesis. This was put together by a member of the EdD administrative team and has been used extensively by the module leader of the thesis workshops to show what the common concerns of examiners are. These thoughts have been drawn from the examiners' reports from EdD vivas, with the permission of the examiners.

In addition to demystifying the viva process, material on the site presented examples of good practice documents. These documents related to the university monitoring process on the thesis stage with notes on why this is so important. Information was also provided on how these processes are intended to be used by the student and supervisor. Annual reviews, for example, are a valuable opportunity to reflect on the year that has gone and set milestones for the year ahead, provided students actively engage with the process. Sharing assessment experiences and exemplar documents, together with text explaining the value of these processes are an important part of demystification which helps the student to engage with these processes productively.

In sum, not assuming that students understand assessment processes and university processes is an important part of demystifying the environment for the students and improving their confidence in working within university processes and regulations. This is especially true of processes for research students and the viva, which for many is different to any previous experience in higher education. This demystification can be enabled by making it possible for recent alumni to share their experience with current students and for the module team to both provide examples of good practice documents and share practical tips to navigate processes. These examples can be delivered face-to-face or online.

## Conclusion

The EdD programme as a professional doctorate fits many of the characteristics of the Connected Curriculum, which at its heart seeks to promote learning through research and enquiry. Although a doctoral-level programme, insights from the development of thesis workshops can be

relevant to other programmes at any higher education level, with a particular focus on a dissertation or thesis. The first step in this development was to ensure that the online resources were presented in a logical way. We selected an approach linked to the journey through the thesis, as the organising design principle. This helped students access the resources appropriate to them. It is worth noting that the movement of resources to the online environment was not merely about replication, but rather translation. In addition, many of the developed resources exploited the principles of connectivism which were possible because of the strong community of practice within the EdD cohort.

There are three design principles for the content of the online resources. These are: Exemplar Extracts, Sharing Experiences and Certainty in Process. The underlying message is that processes and structure matters as much as academic knowledge development to students completing dissertations and theses. Many processes and structures need to be translated for our students, to make them understandable and useful. If the process is important, then, it is worth exploring with our students to enable them to develop an understanding of its value. As part of this project's development we actively sought feedback from student representatives. This helped to reassure our students that processes achieve their aims. The same translation exercise is important for the vocabulary and structure of the dissertation/thesis. Exemplar resources and room for discussion can be invaluable here.

The role of the thesis workshops, whether face-to-face or online, does not replace the role of the research supervisor. The thesis workshops in any mode provide students with hints and tips to develop their work and an opportunity to share concerns with peers and alumni. This function makes the focus on process and structure appropriate. This is not to replace the role of the thesis/dissertation supervisor who will lead on the academic content and support the student's academic development. Clearly both are needed for a successful research output.

Finally, in relation to the aims of the Connected Curriculum, the project has successfully converted the module leader's library of resources into resources for the online site. A range of Web 2.0 resources were designed to enable students to collaborate and share information online through peer discussion. Access to exemplar resources and discussion forums helped to develop a sense of the EdD peer community for those who face geographic restraints, unable to attend the face-to-face

workshops. This chapter and the presentation at the UCL Teaching and Learning Conference have started the process of considering the transferability of the resources developed for other research project modules within UCL, likely within social science and related areas in the first instance.