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## EDUCATION LEADERSHIP STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON A CONFERENCE COURSE

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### ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The purpose of this case study is to describe the experiences of educational leadership doctoral students when taking a conference course for the fulfillment of their program's experiential learning requirements. The research explains how the course added to students' understanding of educational research and development as research scholars.
Background	Research on doctoral student learning experiences in the contexts of professional conferences is limited. The present research examines a unique group context and the perceptions of doctoral student learning and development through the lens of adult learning theory.
Methodology	This basic qualitative case study includes doctoral student perspectives on their learning and development as a result of participation in a professional educational leadership conference as course experience. Researchers conducted a review of literature, engaged with participants in a focus group style debriefing, and completed a document analysis of participants' written reflections following a multi-day conference.
Contribution	The present research contributes to the field of educational leadership research by providing first-hand accounts of participation in a conference as course experience to promote student learning and development as research scholars.
Findings	Findings suggest that participant learning experiences varied when analyzed through the lens of adult learning theory and are categorized into three types of

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learning that include non-learning, non-reflective learning, and reflective learning. In addition, participants' development as research scholars is reported to be influenced by the conference and course design elements that promoted relative autonomy, embedded reflection, and interpersonal support.

Recommendations for Practitioners	The present research has implications for both doctoral program design and professional conference planning. Experiential learning activities that extend beyond classrooms present students with opportunities for learning and socialization into a field of study.
Recommendations for Researchers	The paper informs and challenges researchers to focus on the experiences of conference attendees and highlights a need for a more nuanced evaluation of conference courses.
Impact on Society	Professional conferences present opportunities for doctoral students to develop as research scholars that ask questions to address societal problems. The following research suggests that conference learning experiences may be enhanced through an experiential course design and principles of relative autonomy, incorporation of reflection, and embedded interaction.
Future Research	In the future, research of doctoral student learning at conferences may consider applying other methodologies (e.g., narrative research, quantitative) and consider the inclusion of student outcome variables like doctoral student motivation, interests, and social and emotional learning.
Keywords	scholarly development, educational leadership conference, doctoral students, adult learning theory, socialization, experiential learning

## INTRODUCTION

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Professional conferences have many of the familiar elements (e.g., keynotes, paper/poster sessions, and exhibits showcasing products) and provide participants with varied learning experiences. Some suggest that conferences present development opportunities for students and increase collaboration and advocacy (Mata, Latham, & Ransome, 2010). Others question the degree to which conferences can bring about significant changes to thinking and practice (Ainscow, 2005). Jacobs and McFarlane (2005) describe the formal presentation of recent developments in a field as serving to welcome inexperienced members, although a flawed presentation from an expert does not always lead to a lesson (Richards, 2015). Learning at professional conferences is subject of research (Coryell & Murray, 2014) and more is being done to explore the contexts of learning at conferences and doctoral student development (Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018). Research suggests there is a need to create learning spaces within conferences (Wiessner, Hatcher, Chapman, & Storberg-Walker, 2008). The present case study describes the experiences of educational leadership doctoral students enrolled in K-12 school leaders PhD program and attending a leadership conference as a course and explains how the experience added to their understanding of educational leadership research and their development as research scholars.

Wiessner et al. (2008) highlighted one participant's reflection that learning at conferences is more than simply collecting a number of Aha moments, suggesting that what is known about actual learning at a conference is more complex. One model for adult learning (Jarvis, 2006) describes an iterative process occurring within social contexts. The Jarvis models, though formulaic, are descriptive of teaching and learning and applicable within assorted contexts (Dyke, 2017). The present case study utilizes adult learning theory to describe doctoral student learning experiences and participation in a professional educational leadership conference. Researchers participated in a focus group style debriefing with participants, conducted a review of the literature, and completed a document analysis of written reflections upon a multi-day conference with the purpose to describe and understand the

learning experiences of educational leadership doctoral students when taking a conference course. The researchers, as participants, reflected upon their own learning experiences and of others that attended a professional conference as an elective course that was designed to develop students' as research scholars. The study has two research questions:

**RQ1.** What were students' learning experiences attending a professional educational leadership conference as a doctoral elective course?

**RQ2.** How did the conference course experience influence students' understanding of educational leadership research and their development as research scholars?

## ***REVIEW OF LITERATURE***

There is no single theory of adult learning and the research ranges from the conceptual to the practical and are generally oriented around the idea of individual change (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Adult learning theories and principles of adult learning serve the purpose of describing the learning process and guiding teaching and learning practices of adults. Mezirow (1997) described change as a transformative learning process occurring when "assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic or otherwise invalid" (p. 6). Wiessner et al. (2008) described "new learning" as "learning that provides new insight, diverse theoretical point of view[s], or unique or uncommon conceptual frameworks, which challenges the status quo or that points out cumulative learning within a topic or research thread not identified previously in research" (p. 369). Multiple theories of adult learning (Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 1997; Wiessner et al., 2008) describe practices of reflection to spur change and gain insights. Reflection has a long history in education literature and, as Dewey (1910) stated, is more than sequential; it is a consecutive train of ideas building upon one another. A change in perspective can arise from a series of thoughtful reflections although the process is also influenced by other factors.

Professional conferences provide adult learners with opportunities to select from a variety of topics and activities that support self-directed learning. Knowles (1975) provided a practical framework for guiding adult learning with principles that have implications for teaching in classrooms whether at schools or at conferences. Knowles' (1975) model of self-directed learning (SDL), or "self-teaching" (Tough, 1967, p. 3), is where the learner sets goals, determines how to achieve them, selects resources, plans strategies, and maintains the desire to learn independently (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes & Norris, 2000). Researchers agree that adults learn best when directing their own learning (Barnett et al., 2000). This active process for learning aligns to Dewey (as cited in Mayhew & Edwards, 1936) as he claimed the memorization of facts divorced from the learners' context, expertise, and interest "made a bore of learning" (p. 460). Merriam (2001) noted one criticism of SDL is it being too learner-centered and ignoring context.

Professional conferences are by nature social affairs and present a means for scholars to interact, share ideas, discuss, and support. Learning is situated in these social contexts (Jarvis, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and relationships can promote or inhibit learning (Jarvis, Holford, & Griffen, 2003). Cherrstrom, Zarestky, and Deer (2018) showed the benefit of peer to peer "cheerleading" (p. 50) among graduate students that also had less need for supervision in communities of practice. Richards (2015) described how hampering discussions and excessive hierarchies are counterproductive to learning and suggested "building time and space for conversations into the program and offering alternative avenues for triggering conversations" (p. 68). Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva (2018) cited the importance of both advisors and peers in promoting learning at a conference. Collective forms of learning, either as a group or a cohort, promotes conversation and aspires to be more than the sum of their parts (Nesbit, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Cohorts have become increasingly popular within school leader programs for promoting student interactions, widening student engagement in the community, and enhancing critical thinking (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Barnett et al. (2000) stated, "Students' academic performance and interpersonal relationships are likely to be

influenced by the cohort structure” (p. 258). From an evolutionary perspective, group learning promotes group survival and is also a means to influence society or culture (Jarvis et al., 2003). Some research extends learning beyond the group and into *learning organizations* (Senge, 1990). Some adult learning research (Jarvis et al., 2003) is critical of separating individual learning from that of the group.

A unified theory of adult learning remains elusive, but researchers provide a number of principles and suggestions for supporting learning. Gardner (2009) reported that learning and professional growth among doctoral students happen as a result of interactions, which provides some support to the notion that learning has a social component. Radda (2012) highlighted that learning occurs outside of classroom activities and recommends that graduate programs develop structures that allow for scholarly interactions and group learning opportunities for their students. Wood, Luow, and Zuber-Skeritt (2017) explained how a professional conference could be a learning conference when there is a deliberate plan for reflection, including before and after attendance, as well as active interaction and engagement among other attendees. Richards (2015) favors variety at a conference and gives praise for those “building time and space for conversations into the program and offering alternative avenues for triggering conversations” (p. 68). Similar suggestions are made by Graham and Kormanik (2004) for “meaningful dialogue and substantive interaction with fellow practitioners” (p. 391). Utilizing a patchwork of adult learning theory and principles to design educational activities may provide a greater opportunity to promote learning.

### ***CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK***

The present study utilizes Jarvis' (2006) model of adult learning that expresses learning as an iterative or nonlinear process occurring within a social context. The model describes learning occurring at the “intersection of inner self and the outer world... when the two are in some tension, even dissonance” (p. 7). Jarvis (2006) calls this experience or event that provokes a disruption of belief the point of “disjuncture,” which is similar to Mezirow's (1991) “disorienting dilemma.” The disjuncture then gives way to either cognitive reflection, or emotional reaction, or active processes, or any combination thereof (Jarvis, 2006). A point of disjuncture and learning processes might yield personal change, development of new meaning regarding the world, or gains in beneficial experience; it may also result in no changes at all (Jarvis, 2006). Jarvis' model presents the potential for learner change or in the rejection or acceptance of disjuncture. A learners' own personal biography and beliefs could be one such reason to reject disjuncture. Jarvis' (2006) model provides the tools for researchers to uncover and describe the social contexts of disjuncture and to account for the nature of the individual. While human learning process does not differ according to format, that is, whether learning occurs within a formal setting or informal has little to do with the mechanism of the model, as Jarvis (2012) stated “it is the nature of the interaction that provides for different learning experiences and it is these that affect emotion, motive to learn, and so on” (p. 12). The model presents researchers with sufficient tools to examine doctoral student reflections of learning experience that promotes further inquiry into specific contexts and individual beliefs.

### **Learning types**

Jarvis (2012) described that disjuncture can trigger affective, reflective, and behavioral processes that resolve disjuncture and result in new meaning and personal change. In other instances, disjuncture may persist or be rejected without personal change. Socialization, peer interactions, or environmental factors may apply pressure on an individual and create disjuncture. In a previous model, Jarvis (2006) described the learning experiences of adults at education workshops and categorized them as non-learning, non-reflective learning, and reflective learning. Non-learning experiences can result in some incidental learning; these are described as events or situations that align with one's own perceptions and life view. Learners may also reject an opportunity to learn as they bring with them a history of prior beliefs and perspectives that could cause them to reject learning that is contrary to these beliefs.

Non-reflective learning relates to the process of socialization, where learners model experts' conduct or learn to conform in behavior (Jarvis, 2006). Learning new skills and habits of mind can be encapsulated in what Jarvis (2006) called imitative behavior and described within a memorization component of an earlier learning model. For example, participation as members of a professional organization requires the acquisition of knowledge and skills in which learning through imitation of experts and copying approved practices is often accepted without question (Jarvis, 2006).

Reflective-learning incorporates contemplation, practice, and experimentation. Contemplation and experimentation that leads to the practical application of new skills is a desirous adult learning outcome. For instance, in not completely accepting a lesson, but working through it and as a result innovating and then adapting it to the learner's current context or environment exemplifies reflective learning.

## METHODOLOGY

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Data collection involved qualitative and quantitative methods. The basic qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009) included a review of five participants' reflections of their experiences at conference. The five participants are researchers in the study. As Corti, Reddy, Choi and Gillespie (2015) argue, the third-person experimental method "becomes impoverished by excluding the rich, lived-in, subjective first-person experience of research subjects from consideration and by making researcher-subject role segregation overly rigid" (p. 289). Corti et al. (2015) described first-hand methodologies being used in early psychological experiments, especially in norm violating studies, and that the method also appears among contemporary social research as it affords researchers more direct experiential knowledge, richer mental models, and improved reflexivity. The researchers-as-participants in this study interpreted and analyzed written reflections to give meaning to the topic (Bowen, 2009) of doctoral student learning experiences as a result of conference course participation. Documents were the primary source of data and analysis in this research in order to interpret participants' first-hand experiences. Bowen (2009) states while researchers "should guard against an over-reliance on documents" he does provide a caveat for "studies designed within an interpretive paradigm" (p. 29). Document analysis has been used as a suitable stand-alone method and can provide context and information on past events and give details regarding the conditions surrounding the phenomena of the study (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis was also chosen for its potential to track changes (Bowen, 2009) in development from pre to post-conference. Researchers shared notes following the post-conference group meeting and analyzed participants' comprehensive reflection papers that included participant created purpose statements and questions relating to the individual's research interest that was generated prior to conference attendance in addition to a summative narrative reflection on the research interests and new learning moments following the conference. These documents served as class assignments with the original purpose of student planning and reflection on research interests and documenting learning moments. Documents were made available in electronic format and placed in shared online data storage (i.e., Google Drive). As described by Merriam (2009) a constant comparative method was used in the analysis as written documents were parsed into segments of meaning relating to learning experience and coded by researchers. This process of *open coding* of content was then used to generate a code list and to look for emerging categories (Merriam, 2009). As researchers were also participants, member checking permitted coders to actively consult with participants during analysis to clarify and make new insights (Saldaña, 2015). The qualitative data was collected to assess intercoder agreement. Twenty excerpts and a code list were presented in online survey format (i.e., Qualtrics) to all five researchers. Results were used to inform active coding process and as a tool to learn of differing perspectives regarding the coding of latent content. Data discussions occurred through a series of team meetings that resulted in the emergent themes.

## ***PARTICIPANTS***

Participants were five doctoral students in an educational leadership school leaders (K-12) program. Participants in this study were all enrolled in a three-credit *directed independent study* (i.e., EDA 7905) doctoral-level course which required attendance at the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) conference. Participants include three female doctoral students and two male doctoral students, all of whom attended the conference as part of a doctoral course experiential learning requirement. All volunteered to participate. Each participant shared their written work for analysis.

## ***SETTING***

This study is bound within the time period of a fall semester and the spaces of a multi-day professional educational leadership conference, classroom, and extended settings. The course was designed for “doctoral students in the later stages of their coursework who are ready to start writing and preparing research papers for presentation at conferences or are engaged in developing their concept paper and/or literature review and looking to see what the most current research and thinking is in their area of interest” (See Appendix A). The course requirements included traveling to the conference and attending a session in the program specifically for graduate students, four special sessions, an opening reception, a banquet, a minimum of eight sessions relevant to the students' individual interests, and a department dinner. The department's dinner included a prominent guest that shared experiences as an educational leader and a researcher. Attendance at the conference is described as providing students “the modeling and exposure to ethical research techniques and the most recent findings of academics and practitioner-researchers that will enhance their global perspective of their areas of scholarly interest” (See Appendix A). The syllabus shared the theme of the conference and did not make explicit any other student learning objectives.

Written requirements included a pre-conference paper with a purpose statement and questions formulated around one's own research interest and a post-conference reflection that contained a purpose statement, research questions, and reflection on the UCEA Conference in relationship to each student's dissertation research experience and significant learning moments or new knowledge creation. Participants were asked about learning “not only significant to the scholar, but also to the student as practitioner and should discuss how this experience or experiences shifted the student's thinking related to praxis” (See Appendix A). The final written reflection was shared with colleagues through a class presentation during a focus group style “debriefing meeting.” Each class participant created a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation summarizing their written work and presented to the class. Each presentation was followed by peer feedback, questions, and discussion that allowed for elaboration on significant learning moments.

## ***DOCUMENT ANALYSIS***

Documents available to researchers as participants included the course syllabus, meeting notes, event program, and comprehensive writing assignments and presentations. The conference website was also a resource for documentation and provided access to a digital copy of the conference program and a detailed agenda. Communication between participants using the conference's mobile instant messaging application was also available to participants. The document analysis was conducted exclusively on comprehensive student writing assignments. Each of the five researchers independently coded all five participant writing assignments. An initial coding meeting was used to generate and refine a list by merging and adding codes to develop a master code list. Examples of codes included *practice*, *values*, *reflection*, and *buzzwords*. Next, the researchers met to compare individual coding, refine or eliminate codes and discuss emergent categories. Through the analysis, participants were checked and provided reference and added clarifying detail. The research team reviewed documents as a group discussed the organization of codes, developed categories and identified themes (Saldaña, 2015). A faculty researcher was available to consult for any coding questions or concerns.

### **Intercoder agreement**

Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002) instruct to assess intercoder reliability both informally and formally. The researchers received coding instruction during an initial coding meeting and also performed a pilot test of 20 random excerpts to assess intercoder agreement (Fleiss, 1971). The assessment included coding for latent content and provided for some description of the subjectivity among five coders. As a result of the assessment, codes were merged due to similarity and excerpts that highlighted more differences informed discussion of additional codes.

### **Limitations**

Documents included in the current study present a potential for biased selectivity (Bowen, 2009) and responses to class assignments may show greater social desirability towards learning outcomes that could be balanced with interviews or responses that were not subject to grading. Additional doctoral students were enrolled in the conference course but did not participate in this study. Two students of the class chose not to participate in the voluntary research activity. One of these students discussed in a phone conversation that work obligations as a school administrator as the only reason for deciding not to participate in the research study. The findings of this study are non-generalizable outside this sample.

## **KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS**

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In response to the first research question (What were students' learning experiences attending a professional educational leadership conference as a doctoral elective course ) results from the analysis of participants' reflections uncovered that experiences could be categorized as exhibiting characteristics of:

1. non-learning
2. non-reflective learning, or
3. reflective learning experiences.

Further these learning experiences were credited as enhancing scholarly development. Researchers found three main findings in relation to the second research question regarding the impact of the experience on the understanding of educational leadership research and participation in scholarly learning communities. The findings suggest:

1. Relative autonomy and conference variety helped to support an individual's learning goals and research interests
2. Participants value reflection within the scholarly learning community
3. Participants had a greater understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationship building and peer support within scholarly learning communities.

### ***NON-LEARNING EXPERIENCES***

Some experiences at the conference were reaffirming for participants but did not present a disjuncture and are categorized as non-learning. For instance, one participant stated that a particular presentation resonated because she could "relate to the findings." In the required planning activity prior to the event participants selected some presentations that were aligned with their interests. In one instance where interests were not aligned the participant considered the presentation relevant to professional practice but did not indicate if experience resulted in additional skills or change in actions. The participant stated appreciation for the content and "presenting information that resonates."

### ***NON-REFLECTIVE LEARNING***

Not every lesson learned by participants was explicitly taught or experienced in one situation. Some general experiences presented feelings of unease or disjuncture and were categorized as non-

reflective learning. One example of this learning type is reflected in responses that expose a knowledge gap between novice participants and others in the community of practice. As one states, "from the sessions and overall conference, I...reached a better understanding of the importance of the conceptual framework and how it links all the pieces of the research together." This shows some evidence of either memorizing and observing practices of others enhanced learning. Imitation was reflected in the statement "I feel that I might have been able to present some of my ideas." Non-reflective learning could also be described as passive learning as one participant stated, "I had the opportunity to gain exposure and learn from researchers' first-hand about their work and their findings."

### ***REFLECTIVE LEARNING***

Reflective learning as a result of conference participation shows a much more iterative process that can extend over greater periods of time and can require greater practice, experimentation, and have more potential for personal change and growth. One participant reflected upon this situation that occurred following a presentation:

The discussion was much more than I had anticipated. I know that next time I present at a professional conference or anywhere, I will maintain focus on the research and not allow others to pull me into a discussion that is completely unrelated.

Emotions were associated with learning as one participant stated "the most glaring anecdote" came when a presenter shared a personal story relating to the disproportion of minority offenders in juvenile justice. Participants also shared critical perspectives as one stated of the "professional colloquium" and described how it "could very well be an example of how academics have lost their sense of creativity." This participant described how instructional leaders stress the importance of getting students involved with learning, but paper sessions at the conference did not always promote engagement. Participants exhibit creative elements through visuals in the presentation that show both learning and experimentation. One student presentation included graphics and prop of a chessboard to describe "significant learning" as "connecting the abstract strategies of chess to leadership." The participant draws from a presentation about music and discussion with peers to practice a new metaphor for describing leadership. One attendee had also been a presenter and described presenting and discussion as "a positive learning experience."

### ***RELATIVE AUTONOMY AND CONFERENCE VARIETY***

One of the more evident influences on learning had been participants' relative autonomy to pursue topics of interest. This learner autonomy coupled with a catalog of topics and session types helped participants situate themselves among current educational leadership research of interest. Participants were asked to converge as a group during keynote addresses or special sessions permitting the remainder of the time to explore a minimum of eight sessions from an array of presentations. Participants described attending a variety of presentation formats showcasing a diversity of topics and methodologies and expressed shared values of academic researchers. As noted, they attended multiple sessions that often related to their own research areas of interests. Students established goals to increase understanding of their chosen topic and research methodology.

As participants sought presentations that aligned with areas of interest one noted: "I identified three presentations that seemed most aligned with my dissertation interests." Moreover, this participant stated that she wanted to learn from other researchers about issues relating to school finance, teacher turnover, and low student achievement. Another graduate student mentioned in a reflection that the "conference experience allowed me to start thinking about my dissertation work." The participant also stated that the conference helped to "enhance [her] research focus." A practicing school leader stated:



“Each presentation varied in research and style and offered me significant insight on possible frameworks and ways of researching that I am now reading more about, and the work of many presenters was new to me, and I’m always enthusiastic about learning something new.”

Another participant shared, “I attended sessions that included presentations, panels, round table, workshops, and mere conversations with students from around the country; I was able to correlate these into my research process and ideas.” One participant wrote that “the choices are overwhelming” and that “I couldn’t help but schedule four or more sessions in a row because I felt that I just could not miss out on them.” As shown here, learner choice and variety of options appear as a common thread among participant reflections. Next, participants express how learning resulted from a process that prioritizes reflection as a common practice among scholars in a learning community.

### ***THE VALUE OF REFLECTION***

Participants were required to produce a written reflection that would be completed following the conference. Reflection was reported to frequently occur following presentations and outside of conference rooms. One participant explained that “learning...happened after the conferences when I had the time to sit and reflect.” Another suggested that organizers should provide “more opportunity for reflection.”

Reflections often expressed a confirmation of beliefs and helped to solidify previously held positions, many reflected upon more tangential research. One participant acknowledged attending sessions that support a dissertation topic, namely, how “the game of chess better prepares students to problem solve complex situations.” The participant stated sessions “gave me ideas that can easily connect to the rules of chess, the strategies and even the history of the game.” The participant wrote that “one of the sessions that tied directly to my dissertation was The School to Prison Pipeline: The Role of Culture and Discipline in School Symposium.” The participant made relevant connections to educational leadership research, which was possible through reflection!

Online program material shows that UCEA includes both presentations and discussions. In some instances, the learning can take place after the presentations and well outside of the conference rooms. One participant went so far as to suggest “providing more opportunity for reflection and brainstorming sessions, and more ignite session formats for papers.” Some sessions presented more papers and provided less time per presenter. Two conference attendees had similar insights about how and when the learning took place. One stated, “I was able to learn from the sessions I attended; the takeaways were not in the minutiae of each session, but for me in the overall lessons learned from attending.”

New information did sometimes result from minutiae and in one way from catchy buzzwords and jargon that piqued participant interest. One participant described when “the presenter used a *post-colonial Tribalrit frame* [emphasis in the original statement], which is new to me, and quite fascinating.” One participant stated that new ideas, especially “creative”, appeared scant in presentations and stated, “Student achievement remains epithetical throughout UCEA.” In reflection, the same participant expressed wanting to bridge the gap between theory and practice and the need for more “experiential” or “learning by doing” opportunities. A participant in attendance stated that “significant learning” occurred as a result of “meaningful communication, and the most significant conversational moments during the conference came with time to ask questions.” A provided example was information shared at a policy panel discussion, which seemed to raise more questions than answers and where one participant “wondered... what we can possibly do to fight these injustices.”

As part of the required overall reflection on the conference experience, participants noted that questions and answers are only one way that presenters engage with attendees. Some had felt that conference officials needed to go a step further as one stated by “having more opportunity for fun, empowerment, and renewal.” Another suggestion was that all participants should have permission to attend special sessions, typically by invitation only, as these were also valuable experiences. Reflection

provided participants opportunities to work with ideas which were enhanced with the support of others.

### ***INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND PEER SUPPORT***

Several attendees noted that networking and building interpersonal relationships were important aspects of the conference experience. The conference permitted participants to network and develop friendships. Conferences are networking opportunities, and it is this interpersonal relationship building that was meaningful for participants. One participant concluded that "I was able to solidify my relationships." One participant felt that this time was important in that it afforded opportunities to get to know faculty better stating, "even more meaningful was the time I spent with professors and colleagues in both professional and social settings." Underscoring this idea, another participant stated, "One of the most amazing parts of the session is that our department chair, professors and colleagues attended and were supportive."

Participant reflections expressed that the support from professors and classmates make the experience enjoyable. As many were first-time attendees of this conference, one participant reported being overwhelmed with the choices available and "If it were not for candid conversations with [name omitted], I would have missed not only one of the better presentations, but the presentation that best aligned to my dissertation topic." Some participants described learning that occurred as a revelation or epiphany. One response highlights the journey of discovery was harder sought. In response to the question of what was learned one participant described how classmate support enhanced the learning experience:

Another session that opened my eyes to the possibility of looking at chess to reducing recidivism by teaching life skills or even comparing it to leadership skills...was on Educational Leadership and Music... This session was the most powerful and most memorable for many reasons. First, I had no intention of attending this session until my professor... asked me to introduce our guest speaker... to our class at our dinner that evening. One of my colleagues... told me that he [the honored dinner guest] was going to be presenting one of his latest books and that the approach to leadership was similar to my dissertation topic.

As shown above, evidence of instructor and peer support was ubiquitous in participants' reflections. One participant indicated the thematic focus of the event *Echando Pa'lante: School Leaders (Up)rising as Advocates and (Up)lifting Student Voices* set a tone for coming together and reflecting "we are uplifting and uprising and we should be doing it together, for each other." The positive peer support generated this reflection

For me, this is where I belong and this conference was the reminder I needed to get my voice back in order to see that my experience and expertise coupled with my knowledge from the program, places me in the unique position to affect change

Relationships were coupled with an enhanced sense of belonging to the educational leadership scholar community in addition to improved self-efficacy as noted in the above statement.

An overall finding of the authors and not the result of the data analysis is that attendance at sessions is necessary to engage with content although it may not be sufficient for learning to occur. The conditions conducive to learning and building relations as noted in data includes time spent between sessions and after conference processing what has been experienced, as one participant acknowledged, "I was able to solidify my relationships and have fun at the same time." While the conference aimed to bring people together it may not have met expectations as one participant wrote, "The theme and opportunities were beneficial; however, in a time where division is apparent in every aspect of American society, I yearned for some togetherness in this conference." This is in response to many sessions being segregated per focus(e.g., a separate session devoted for issues affecting African American students, Latin/o/a/x, Muslim or LGBTQ+ students). This participant's comments, as well as

others, challenge both conference officials and course designers to promote more interdisciplinary interaction. The next section examines this and other practical implications.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

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Each participant's journey through the experiential conference course led them to contexts that influenced their understanding of educational leadership research and the development of their own dissertation topics. The professional growth of the scholars did not only occur as a result of exposure to the research available at the conference but also as a result of sense-making through reflection and personal interaction. The opportunities to reflect, discuss, and ask questions in sessions and with each other allowed participants to develop a degree of understanding that may not have occurred otherwise. Moreover, building relationships within and beyond the institution supports participants' scholarly learning and creates "dynamic learning environments where people engage in ongoing reflective and critical self-inquiry as a prelude to action" (See Appendix A).

The study describes participant experiences throughout a travel conference course as seen through the lens of adult learning theory. It highlights the importance of embedded structures that promote intrinsic motivation and autonomy when guiding instruction. The design of the course supports learning, especially with the inclusion of participant diary or record of session attendance (See Appendix B) and goal setting. The course ensured a degree of personal choice in session attendance. The course goals were to acquire skills that would be constructive when conducting research and enhance scholarly development. Presentation attendance was necessary but not always a sufficient precondition for learning. Participants wrote specifically of the value of reflection in the learning process. As a result of this deeper learning, many included suggestions that future classes and conferences enhance the integration of reflection. In addition to breakouts during conference days, recommendations for future conferences also included more creative and engaging presentations and formats.

Participants as a whole attended a variety of different presentations, and the opportunities to come together to share promoted learning and positive relations. The participants in this study credit much success of the conference to the accessibility of experts and peer support. Contexts for conversations often occurred during informal settings. Informal opportunities like the class coordinated dinner, showcased in one participant's presentation, provided a collegial space to discuss and reflect on research topics with peers and with established researchers as honorary guests. Participants' experiences support the idea that learning occurred through a combination of formal and informal activities like panel discussions and group meals. The cohort format and informal activities promoted learning and the building of personal relationships with students, faculty, and other experts. The informal settings provided participants bonding time with their peers and professors in a way that might not exist in the formal classroom or professional setting. A debriefing meeting following conference travel provided an opportunity for reflection and to give and receive group feedback. The data suggest that course design permitted students to become more familiar with their evolving role as scholars.

As with previous work (Coryell & Murray, 2014), the participants of this study noted financial barriers to conference travel. This provides some implications for institutions and conference planners to examine processes for incentivizing graduate student participation. The present study bolsters support for experiential learning in doctoral coursework and extends group learning into areas of conference attendance. The paper informs future work by highlighting the experiences of students engaging in a conference as coursework, however, much remains to be done. Future courses may want to have students describe a rationale for presentation selection and challenge them to also attend presentations that may be opposite or somewhat tangential to their pre-selected topics in order to create more opportunities for disjuncture. Requiring attendance at sessions that cover topics different than students' convictions might instigate discussion and promote more reflective learning. For some participants in this study, learning did occur often as a result of disjuncture. Participant re-

sponses expressed multiple aspects of Jarvis' (2006) process of asking questions and evaluating the content. As the data show, even if the questions and answers seemed contentious during sessions this is what often prompted reflection. The research raises questions as to the ways the writing activities may have spurred reflection during the conference, as a number of participants either anticipated the final project or worked on the activity in parallel to attendance. Future studies might consider measuring variables of social and emotional learning or group dynamics including cohesion and interpersonal communication.

## CONCLUSION

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National education leadership conferences can be costly endeavors that provide students with the allure of group membership and potential for career development, but there remains some question as to an association's ability to leverage conference activities for doctoral student learning. There is not enough research regarding conference participants' learning and overall experiences when attending educational leadership conferences. This study examined doctoral student learning within the context of a conference course. It utilized both learning theory and teaching and learning principles to explain the complexity of learning within a professional educational leadership conference. When describing doctoral learning experience at the conference, learning ranged from incidental to reflective. The principles of relative autonomy, the incorporation of reflection, and embedded opportunities for group and social interaction within the conference course enhanced contexts for learning and influenced student development. While the findings do show some convergence with research (Coryell & Murray, 2014), it is in the belief of the authors that more research may be done to further understand the types of experiential learning opportunities within doctoral conference courses. Conference participants certainly give insight into the individual motivation for attendance and a perspective on whether the benefit of learning outweighs the financial cost for attendance.

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## Students' Reflections on a Conference Course

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## APPENDIX A – EDA 7905 SYLLABUS

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EDA 7905 – Directed Conference /

COURSE NUMBER: EDA 7905

COURSE TITLE: UCEA Directed Conference

COURSE INSTRUCTOR:

CATALOG DESCRIPTION: 3 semester hours. This course is a part of the Directed Independent Study courses.

ABOUT THIS COURSE: There are no prerequisites for this course. This course is designed for doctoral students in the later stages of their coursework who are ready to start writing and preparing research papers for presentation at conferences or are engaged in developing their concept paper and/or literature review and looking to see what the most current research and thinking is in their area of interest.

COURSE CONNECTION TO CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: Educational researchers are informed reflective decision-makers who have the skills and dispositions to discover and develop knowledge needed for the profession through research and interaction with the leading scholars of today and tomorrow. Attending and participating in - including presenting at - research conferences provides them with the modeling and exposure to ethical research techniques and the most recent findings of academics and practitioner-researchers that will enhance their global perspective of their areas of scholarly interest.

COURSE CONTENT, OBJECTIVES, EXPECTATIONS AND GUIDELINES: The 2017 31st annual Convention will be held November 2017 at the Sheraton Downtown Hotel.. As stated on their website, the convention theme, *Echando Pa'lante: School Leaders (Up)rising as Advocates and (Up)lifting Student Voices*, is intended to encourage opportunities for reflective dialogue regarding the educational contexts that students, teachers, principals, and superintendents will be facing within a changing national climate and its impact on educational policy.

The conference's official website is located at <http://www.ucea.org/conference/ucea-convention-2017/>. Students should go on-line and thoroughly familiarize themselves with the website. In order for students to do their conference pre-registration it is important to remember that our university is a UCEA Member Institute and therefore costs will be in line with those described for member students and scholars.

Costs of flight, hotel, board, and conference registration are the responsibility of the student. There are, at times, some funds available for graduate students attending conferences through the Graduate College. Students should investigate these resources. It is the responsibility of each student to make sure to go on-line and properly register for the convention including signing up for all required events.

Students are required to familiarize themselves with the "Graduate Students" section of the website and make sure that they read and digest the column and blog, as well as investigate any and every opportunity offered through the conference website to them as graduate students.

The conference offers a Graduate Student Summit. This is designed for students to engage in authentic dialogue about their work. Students in this course should read and access the Graduate Student Home page and student-specific resources, sign up for the Graduate Student Listserv. The summit takes place the morning before the conference begins (Wednesday the 16th), and attending would be a goal for you.

Students are required to attend the required sessions and events listed in the course requirements section below and others of their choosing that are determined and agreed upon with the instructor previous to the beginning of the conference.

Students are required to write a reflection paper linked to their dissertation topic and/or research questions or linked to their current draft of their concept paper. Students may also determine a certain theme of interest/research that they are specifically setting out to explore and use that as the foundation for their reflective paper. The paper will reflect upon the student's knowledge gained, research models examined, presentation formats and their effectiveness, and how speaker/sessions created new thinking or perspectives about their area of study.

## Students' Reflections on a Conference Course

In addition to the paper, students are required to meet with the instructor at least once before the conference to present and gain approval for the conference participation plan, once during the conference to reflect on and make any changes to the following of the plan, and one meeting to debrief after conference (day, time, and venue to be decided depending on group size and individual needs).

**SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR COURSE CREDIT** This section specifies the requirements of the course. All of this is subject to change and discussion to allow for student-generated learning goals and course curricular development promoted by the learners. These requirements will be determined and finalized at the first meeting of the course.

There is a scheduling function provided through the website. Students will go through the sessions and select those sessions that are tied to their investigatory agenda for this conference. The application is found when one is logged in and searching the schedule. Once the sessions are all selected, then the student will transfer the information they have saved in their personal schedule on-line to the table found in Appendix A and send it, along with the first sections of the paper described in section 5 below, to the instructor prior to their pre-conference meeting. Once the schedule is agreed to by both instructor and student, this will be the conference schedule.

1. Attend the pre-conference meeting on Monday September 18th 2017, at 5:30 pm. (5%)
2. Preconference Paper. This section will be handed in with Part I of the table in Appendix completed. (5%)
  - i. Purpose Statement. Write a purpose statement for research you would conduct in the field of educational leadership, or the purpose statement of your dissertation study, or a purpose statement for the area of research you wish to concentrate on for this conference.
  - ii. Research Questions. Write the primary and sub research questions that you would like answered for the study you would like to conduct.
3. Attend the entire conference: Wednesday, November 15, 2017 evening and Thursday the Graduate Student Summit (to be ready to continue conference attendance at 7:30 am Friday - Sunday, November 19, 2017 (final event will end late Sunday evening). Students will be **REQUIRED** to attend sessions that will be provided once the final program is published as well as attend a minimum of **EIGHT** additional sessions of your own choosing. (50%)

### Sessions Required:

099. General Session I: Social Justice Speaker Special Session Thursday November 16 - 6:00 to 7:30 pm Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel: Floor I.M. PEI Tower - Second Level - Grand Ballroom I (More details will be available in program)
  100. Convention Opening Reception in Honor of Past President Reception Thursday November 16 - 7:30 to 9:00 pm Hard Rock Cafe: Full Buyout (More details will be available in program)
  226. General Session II: Presidential Address Special Session Date: Saturday November 18 - 9:20 to 10:50 am Location: Sheraton Hotel: Floor I.M. PEI Tower - Second Level - Grand Ballroom I (More details will be available in program)
  196. General Session III: Mitstifer Lectur Special Session Friday November 17 - 5:30 to 6:50 pm Sheraton Hotel: Floor I.M. PEI Tower - Second Level - Grand Ballroom I (More details will be available in program)
  297. General Session V: Echando Pa'lante: Let's Keep the Momentum Going! Special Session Date: Friday November 17 - 5:30 to 6:20 pm Location: Sheraton Hotel: Floor I.M. PEI Tower - Majestic Level - Majestic Ballroom (More details will be available in program)
- FAU Annual UCEA Dinner Date: Friday, November 17, 2017 - 6:30 PM - 10:00 PM Location: TBD
298. Annual Banquet Reception Date: Saturday November 18 - 7:00 to 10:00 pm History Center: Anschutz Hamilton Hall The 31st Annual Banquet will have a 1980s theme featuring dueling pianos and will be located at History Center (1200 Broadway). Tickets and information available at registration

4. Post Conference Formal Paper. (APA6, double-spaced, with title and reference pages not included in page count). (25%)



- i. Purpose Statement. Include the purpose statement for research you would conduct in the field of educational leadership, or the purpose statement of your dissertation study, or a purpose statement for the area of research you wish to concentrate on for this conference.
  - ii. Research Questions. Include the primary and sub research questions that you would like answered for the study you would like to conduct.
  - iii. Completed Conference Table. Present the table including the completed Part II columns.
  - iv. Reflection on the Conference in Relationship to your Dissertation Research: This section will need to be supported with authors and related literature. It should use citations to support the work and work on synthesizing the various sessions attended by comparing the speakers and paper sessions to the dissertation or research topic.
  - v. Significant Learning Moments or New Knowledge Creation: In this section, reflection should be on any events, sessions, speakers, or any experiences during or after the conference that were not only significant to the scholar, but also to the student as practitioner and should discuss how this experience or experiences shifted the student's thinking related to praxis (praxis is the point in which practice and theory come together).
  - vi. Conclusion: In this section, the student should reflect generally on the conference experience, including a critical analysis of what was experienced, and include recommendations for future conference courses.
5. Debriefing Meeting: Shortly after the conference, and after the instructor has had a chance to assess student assignments, the class will be meeting as a group to discuss the conference. Possible Prezi or other types of presentations by students will be held at this conference. (15%)

Please note: As outlined in the Grading Policy for all students:

Passing grades: The grades of "A" through "C," and "S," are passing grades. Note: The grades of "B-," "C+" and "C," while considered passing for undergraduate students, are indicative of unsatisfactory work for graduate students and may not be accepted for some courses.

For this course such a grading system will be upheld when considering the status of a student's grade. Therefore, be aware that any grade less than a B (this includes a grade of a B-) will be considered a failing grade for this course.

#### MISSION STATEMENT:

University is a public research university with multiple campuses along the southeast coast serving a uniquely diverse community. It promotes academic and personal development, discovery, and lifelong learning. University fulfills its mission through excellence and innovation in teaching, outstanding research and creative activities, public engagement and distinctive scientific and cultural alliances, all within an environment that fosters inclusiveness.

#### COLLEGE OF EDUCATION MISSION STATEMENT:

The mission of the College of Education is to serve the community of University by providing effective leadership in areas of research, service and teaching at the local, state, national and international levels, through the initial and advanced preparation of informed, capable, ethical and reflective decision making professionals. Our faculty and students seek to promote and sustain authentic change, excellence and equity in their respective fields, and in the organizations and systems with which they are associated. The College's programs reflect changing societal needs and incorporate web-supported delivery systems, current methodologies and research, which bring faculty and students together to improve the quality of education for all in an increasingly diverse, technological, inclusive and global society.

#### COLLEGE OF EDUCATION CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

Informed reflective decision-makers have mastered the subject matter needed for the profession and understand the need for lifelong learning in order to continue to be a viable professional. Ethical reflective decision-makers understand why they are given discretion in their roles and use that ability only for the student's or stakeholder's benefit. Capable reflective decision-makers have the means to teach students or service stakeholders effectively and understand the responsibilities involved in the role. Graduates of pro-

## Students' Reflections on a Conference Course

grams in the College of Education at University are informed, ethical, and capable reflective decision-makers.

### DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND METHODOLOGY STATEMENT:

#### Our Mission

The Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology is a community of scholars focusing on the preparation and support of leaders and researchers in Florida, the nation, and the international community.

#### Our Values

Our values represent what we collectively stand for and reflect how we aspire to execute our responsibilities on a daily basis. These values provide guidance with regard to the practices that will assist us in moving toward our individual and collective visions.

#### Leadership

As educational leaders, we believe that leaders who possess a world view make a significant difference in their own performance and that of their organizations when that view is applied locally to shape policy, programs, and practice. We will strive to prepare and support educational leaders who: (a) create dynamic learning environments where people engage in ongoing reflective and critical self-inquiry as a prelude to action; (b) recognize that educational leadership is a transformative and political process to bring about positive change; (c) create high-performing, results-oriented organizations; and (d) engage their organizations and communities in the pursuit of a better world.

#### Research and Scholarship

As a community of scholars, we value the discovery, investigation and application of research methodologies, traditional and innovative. We support student and faculty inquiry: rigorous interdisciplinary research leading to theory-building and enhancement of teaching, learning, and the practice of leadership. We will foster engagement with schools, colleges and universities, governmental and community organizations, public and private.

#### Social Responsibility

As ethical and informed leaders, we value leadership that is socially responsible, upholds high ethical standards, and embraces diversity of ideas and individuals. We believe in creating a collegial community where all members are expected to treat each individual with civility, empathy, respect, fairness, and forthrightness. We believe that our purpose is to prepare aspiring leaders to create a healthy, sustainable and regenerative society for present and future generations.

#### Learning Community

As a community of learners, we believe that lifelong learning for faculty and students is the basic foundation for and the essential outcome of our Educational Leadership program. We will strive to preserve and strengthen an equitable, stimulating, and productive learning community in which faculty and students collaboratively engage in active learning and inquiry and invest in one another's growth and development. We will seek to prepare educational leaders who are skilled in developing vigorous learning communities in their workplaces.

### AUDIO/VISUAL TECHNOLOGY:

All students will be expected to have stable and steady access to a computer and to an Internet Service Provider (ISP). Only the [fau.edu](mailto:fau.edu) email addresses will be used by the instructor. If a student uses another ISP, he or she will have to set up the email system to receive [fau.edu](mailto:fau.edu) mail.

MS Office 2007 or newer - PowerPoint, and Word will be used during the semester for completion of course work and for receiving or viewing documents from the instructor. Adobe Acrobat Reader. Reader is available to download for free from the Acrobat web page, This software will allow you to read and print pdf files. <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>.

Disclaimer: Although every effort will be made to follow the syllabus, the instructor reserves the right to make changes in response to unforeseen circumstances and to student needs.





**Francine Baugh** has been an educator since 1998 and has served as a high school teacher, adjunct professor, and assistant principal. Currently, she is a high school principal and doctoral candidate at Florida Atlantic University through the Educational Leadership and Methodology Department. Her primary research interests are teacher retention, educational equity, high-poverty schools, and black students. Francine's ultimate goal is to research factors that impede black students from low socio-economic households from attaining a quality education. Through this research, she plans to participate and engage in activities to change local and national educational policies that promote inequity



**Dustin Pappas** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology at Florida Atlantic University. His research interests include leadership and educational policy for social change. His publications have covered topics of school safety, transformational learning, and international work around the education of Syrian newcomers in Canada and Germany. He is a lifelong educator, experienced juvenile justice education leader, and former school district accountability manager that advocates for school policies and practices that enhance social and emotional learning.



**Leila H. Shatara** is currently a Ph.D. candidate and graduate research assistant in the Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology at Florida Atlantic University. Her dissertation title is "Muslim Women Leading Islamic Schools: Their Story." She has presented at AERA, UCEA and FERA on Islamic education, Muslim student school choice, Cultural Competence of school leaders, leadership attributes of leadership nominees and high school students enrolled in research methodology courses. Ms. Shatara also served as a teacher and school leader in public and private schools for over 20 years. She was named a national David L. Clark Scholar in 2018.



**Mary Wilson** has served as an assistant principal at Forest Hill Community High School since 2012, and is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology at Florida Atlantic University. She has twenty-five years of experience in Title I schools and has worked at the district level as a K-12 Literacy supervisor. Her research interests include leading necessary educational policy shifts, measuring school effectiveness, and quantifying the effects of poverty on school-age children.