

A Walk Around Walden Pond

Reflections on the Educational Technology PhD Specialization, Walden University

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Preparing educational technologists for professional positions in the twenty-first century requires a reevaluation of the way learners are engaged in the process of education in a digital age. At Walden University, the educational technology PhD specialization provides cutting-edge e-learning in a fully online program of studies for adult learn-

ers. The newly redesigned program integrates technologies learners are using outside of the classroom into their learning experiences inside the classroom. Not only is the delivery of content accomplished digitally, learners demonstrate their learning through digital projects.

Like most online universities, Walden provides all the benefits of distance education including *anytime-anywhere* learning for diverse, adult learners around the globe. What makes Walden unique is our mission of social change. Lisa Rodriguez, a PhD student in educational technology, wrote, "one can feel a current of commitment to making this world a better place running through Walden's curriculum, residencies, publications, and conferences. Social change is not just a phrase used as a slogan, but a guiding force for Walden's students and faculty." Our goal is that our graduates transform and change the social conditions in their part of the world.

Imagine Henry David Thoreau (1995) walking around Walden Pond over 150 years ago, observing nature and finding valuable lessons of social change in his surroundings. The founders of Walden University began our university 38 years ago so learners could share their vision for effecting positive social change inspired by the life of Thoreau. This remains the mis-



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sion of our university, and is reflected in the educational technology specialization.

The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership is the home of 10 PhD specializations, three EdD programs, 13 master's programs, and a postbaccalaureate teacher education program with an master of arts in teaching option. All are fully accredited, online distance education programs. A constant challenge for Walden has been its phenomenal growth. *U.S. News and World Report* ranked Walden as the largest online graduate university for educators. Since its inception, over 28,000 educators have completed masters' and doctoral programs. Distance education and educational technology programs today require continual and ongoing updating to reflect the technological revolution in society.

THE COMMITMENT: COLLABORATION

Online learners may not naturally know how to connect with each other or with faculty when they begin an online program. Isolation and fear may result, preventing learners from gleaning the best from their doctoral programs. We believe that helping to build online communities where students engage not only with faculty, but with each other, is essential to success.

Our commitment is to provide a rich blend of content and technology in a collaborative environment. Faculty and learners struggle together as we reflect about solutions to authentic problems in class discussions that facilitate the development of scholar-practitioners. Our graduates become technological leaders and decision makers in education, business, or the corporate world because they have used emerging tools in their education that they may propose for adoption in their industries.

Strong faculty-student interactions, along with engaging student-to-student connections, permeate the classroom envi-

ronment. The technological tools learners use with their friends and family are brought into classroom learning experiences. Collaboration using wikis, Google docs, and social networking tools are a regular part of our classes. Communication is enhanced beyond the classroom discussions and chats in eCollege, through the use of technologies like blogs, Skype, and Twitter, as deliberations evolve beyond the class content. Connecting with a network of learners is the norm, and something our students take from their doctoral experience.

Marvin Fuller, a PhD student in educational technology, stated "Walden is the only on-line university I've attended. I thought I would be less connected to students and faculty than in my previous graduate degrees but that is not the experience I've had. I feel more connected to my classmates as we interact on a deeper level. I feel the level of interaction also encourages the instructors to become more involved in each of our ideas."

Collaborative projects are included in most of our nine educational technology courses. For students to build learning communities, they must share ideas and reflect on the contributions of others. As they build projects, they learn to be members of a team in which their ideas are valued and integrated into a larger product.

Our goal is that student projects are uniquely stronger because of the collaborative process than they could have been had individual students developed them on their own. Learners are taught the skills of collaboration and the responsibilities of group membership to maximize success. Rose Arnell reflected that "what makes Walden's program different is that despite the fact that its cohorts are hundreds of miles apart, the level of discussion and feedback we receive from each other makes the learning real."

In face-to-face programs, doctoral students often complain about group projects because of the time constraints in their

lives—balancing work, family, and school. Because they save specific time for classes, having to set aside other meeting times for physical meetings with classmates can be difficult. Given these constraints, projects are often a cooperative product of dividing the task into smaller parts, and then simply putting them together.

This is less a problem in online courses, because students are familiar with and are already using the technological tools necessary for successful collaboration. One of the strengths of e-learning is the tools that allow students to collaborate *anywhere-anytime*. Using asynchronous tools like wikis, students can share and edit ideas, maintaining a record of their interactions. They share and edit work products from the convenience of their homes. Using synchronous online tools, learners view documents and discuss their work as needed. With easy-to-use, open source tools, students collaborate across time zones and from any location to develop projects that require teamwork.

THE COMMITMENT: SCHOLARSHIP

A rigorous curriculum based on research and theory is foundational in our program, however we go further. Our graduates are “scholar-practitioners.” We expect them to effect positive social change and make a difference in their world during their program, and afterward. This happens because they are asked to reflect and analyze authentic problems in all aspects of their program of studies. Lisa Rodriguez said it best. “Walden students are expected not only to gain knowledge and skills, but to contribute knowledge to their fields and to apply what they learn in authentic ways. This makes Walden’s program more relevant and meaningful to students than programs that focus on theory without balancing it with practice.” The application of knowledge based on research and theory grounds our students, and prepares them for life after the PhD.

Our commitment is to help learners think like researchers and scholars with the ability to apply theory and research to authentic situations. The outcomes of our program are a careful blend of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008) technology standards from the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), and the critical components of our mission, including teaching and life-long learning, research and reflective analytical thought, leadership and communication, diversity, and collaborative social change.

The motto of Walden, “A Higher Degree, A Higher Purpose,” centers our faculty and students on social change. We expect our graduates to be leaders, problem solvers, and decision makers in technology so they can guide their organizations into the next wave of technological innovations. We expect them to make a difference. Many work full time and are able to apply learning to their workplace immediately. LaMar Brown, a PhD student in educational technology, stated, “The structure of Walden University allows professionals to further educate themselves without interrupting their lives and daily routines. The professors are caring and passionate about helping to produce social practitioners of the future.”

THE COMMITMENT: THE FUTURE

In many PhD programs, learners become experts in one aspect of their field, becoming more specialized as they move through their program. In areas like history or British literature, this might not be a problem, since the fields of history and literature may not make dramatic changes during a 3-year period of time. In educational technology, this could be disastrous, since educational technology has both a content and skill component.

Learners find quickly that PhD work differs from that of their master’s programs. The emphasis on theory and

research requires a new mental discipline and exploration. Without a systematic determination to engage learners in emerging and future technologies, it would be easy for technological skills to wane as students focus on theory and research. Karl Fisch, in his video *Did You Know* (2008), profoundly stated the dilemma of our field: "We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented yet, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet."

Because of this, we are committed to engaging learners in the use of technological tools as they explore course content. We are also committed to requiring learners to demonstrate their learning using technology, along with scholarly papers. Learners blend the content of educational technology, social change, and technology with emerging and future technologies throughout their program. They create timelines, vodcasts, podcasts, interactive PowerPoints, among others, to demonstrate learning.

Designing relevant courses is the challenge of our course designers and content experts so learners receive the most up-to-date program we are able to deliver. Walden University is a member of the Laureate International University network (Laureate Education, Inc.), where there is a strong commitment to this vision. In each of our technology courses, streaming media, including videos, are included that can be viewed online or downloaded for later use. Written course materials are also digitally provided so students can download the podcasts using iTunes to listen at convenient times and locations. This cutting-edge delivery of content using multiple formats helps learners engage in the course content using their preferred learning styles. The use of e-books and online resources are included as much as possible.

Using Skype, educational technology students were asked what they considered to be the most attractive aspects of the

Walden program. The quotes included in this paper were gleaned from the postings over a 2-hour period of time. Rose Arnell referenced

Walden's dedication to crafting the tool to meet the specific needs of its learners.... Walden's specialty is surveying for suggestions and then implementing changes based on best practices. I have only been in the program a little over 2 years but have found each year to be better than the one before. Certainly, there are minor things I would change, but there are many more things I am impressed with when it comes to educating thousands of adult learners from different continents, socio-economic brackets, walks of life, and motivations for learning.

PROGRAM OF STUDY

When students complete a PhD in educational technology from Walden University, they are ready to advance their professional career as a change agent and put into action their educational experiences. Graduates pursue careers in many areas of instructional technology, including becoming corporate trainers, K-12 technologists, faculty in higher education, and educational consultants. Five key program components help us meet our commitment to our students: technology courses, research courses, knowledge area modules, residencies, and the dissertation. If you are interested in more information on these elements than is provided below, you will find more detail online at www.waldenu.edu/Schools/Schools_5994.htm

Knowledge area modules (KAMs) are the hallmark of all Walden PhD specializations and provide a distinctive and unique approach to doctoral study. These innovative KAMs prepare students as scholar practitioners and for the dissertation process in a unique manner. Our students write three KAMs while they are taking their technology and research courses.

Each KAM has a particular theme related to the specific specialization: KAM 1 Social Change, KAM 2 Human Development, and KAM 3 Organizational and Social Systems. Three parts make up each KAM: Breadth, Depth, and Application. In the Breadth, students critically analyze several theories related to the topic of the KAM; in the Depth, students read current research on a theme, and write a review of research identifying gaps in the field. The culmination of each KAM is an Application project in which they identify an authentic problem with a technological solution in the workplace. Students translate theory and research into practice as they experience social change in person.

After the first quarter in our program, learners are given a faculty mentor who works closely with them throughout their program, directing two of the KAMs, interacting in a mentor course each quarter, and often chairing the dissertation. One of the most thrilling experiences for a faculty member is to hood students at graduation after working with them from the beginning of their program. As Rose Arnell noted, "The value of having someone vested in your success makes the program feel personalized." The mentor-mentee relationship is one of the central elements that gives our program such a positive student-centered focus.

Nine courses provide variety in content and technological integration throughout the program. The evolution of education technology provides a historical and theoretical framework for the program. Courses developing leadership skills include diffusion of technological innovation, leading and managing technology, and learning theory. Courses oriented toward instructional design include two courses on distance education, multimedia, and emerging and future technologies. A final course explores current issues in educational research and prepares students for their dissertations.

This program is highly focused on research, with a traditional dissertation being the capstone experience for all. Throughout the program, students take four research courses in research methodology and design, along with quantitative and qualitative research. Students are given online tools and rubrics to assist them throughout the dissertation process, along with access to our writing center and online resources through our library. To ensure that our students are being mentored well, faculty participate in a dissertation training course to become familiar with the Walden approach to dissertation research prior to serving on or chairing committees.

Four face-to-face residencies for a total of 20 days are required of all students, with one residency a year being the preferred mode. Residencies are organized around milestones in the program, with intensive workshops to assist students through their present phase. For example, the first milestone focuses on the KAM process, while the second and third milestones focus on dissertation research. The final milestone focuses on professionalism following the completion of the PhD. Students indicate that the face-to-face mentoring with faculty members, and their collaboration and socialization with peers is refreshing. Residencies serve as a time of connecting and extending personal networks beyond the classroom.

FUTURE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY AT WALDEN

Our students inspire us to greater heights at Walden. They are a forward-thinking group of leaders who bring remarkable diversity to the learning process. Coming from diverse cultures, ages, genders, experiences, and with diverse technological abilities, learning is always moving to higher levels. They inspire and learn from each other with their insightful reflections and questions, and raise the

level of scholarship for all. At Walden, the global community is a reality.

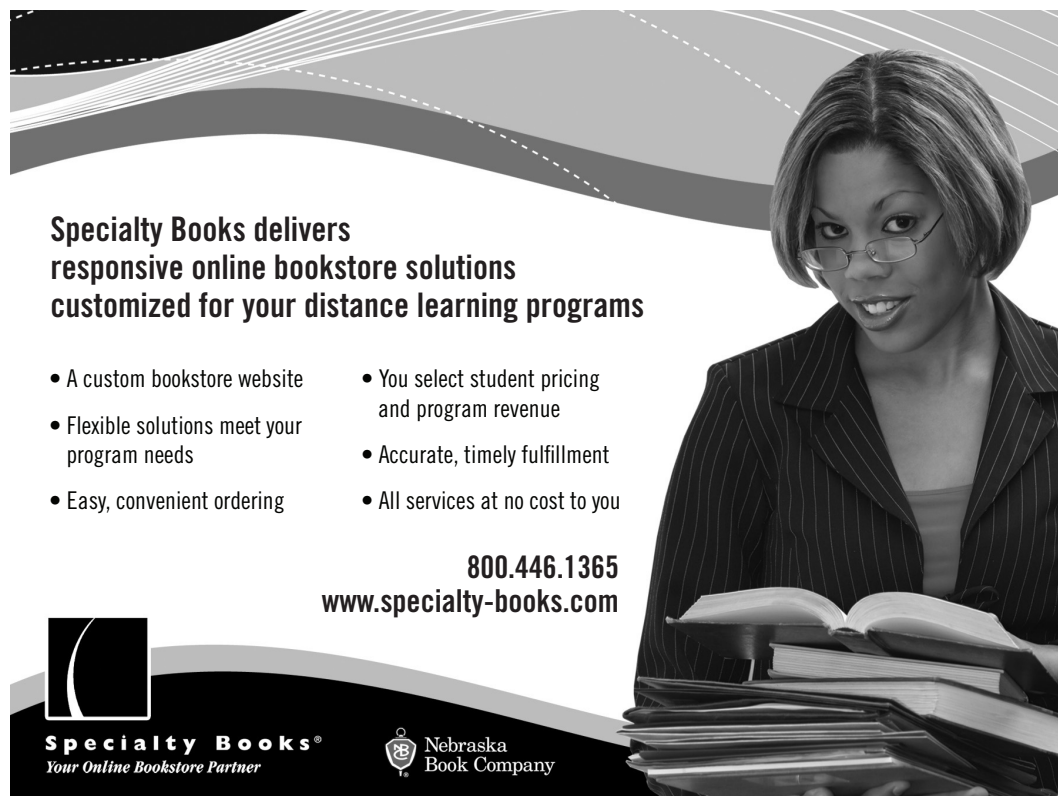
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