

Bridging practice and theory for business doctoral education in Thailand: evaluating the theory-practice scaffold (TPS) framework

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how a structured theory-practice scaffold (TPS) framework supports practitioner-doctoral students in a Thai business school context to transform executive experience into theoretically grounded and contextually situated research questions.

Design/methodology/approach – The TPS framework was implemented across two consecutive cohorts in an entry doctoral coursework within a Ph.D. in Business Administration program. The first cohort completed iterative reflective assignments without the TPS reflection form, while the second cohort used the structured TPS form as a design intervention. The analysis draws on a single dataset the qualitative analysis of student reflections and rubric-based assessment of the same assignments. Quantitative scoring is used descriptively to support qualitative interpretation.

Findings – Students in the redesigned course demonstrated richer conceptual framing and more theory-anchored and transferable research questions. Qualitative evidence of cognitive development is the primary basis for the findings, with descriptive data from coursework-based assessments providing corroborating support (with average rubric scores increasing by approximately 0.6 points on a 0-2 rubric scale). The framework provides a structured and adaptable model for work-applied doctoral education settings. Findings provide actionable insights for educators designing practitioner-oriented doctoral programs.

Practical implications – Structured reflection combined with formative dialog enables practitioner-students to internalize abductive reasoning and develop dissertation-ready thinking early in their doctoral study.

Originality/value – The paper advances a design-based approach for bridging practice and theory in doctoral education. It illustrates how abductive reflection scaffolds cultivate scholarly inquiry within work-applied education by enhancing contextual insight and relatability and offering broader implications transferable to similar professional doctorate contexts.

Keywords Theory-practice scaffold (TPS) framework, Doctoral pedagogy, Practitioner-candidates, Experiential learning, Abductive reasoning, Mode 2 knowledge production

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction: the conceptual challenge of the practitioner-candidate

In Thailand, business doctoral education has expanded significantly over the past decade, particularly through professional and hybrid doctoral formats that attract senior practitioners. Both Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) and Ph.D. programs in business administration have grown in prevalence, with both increasingly requiring research outputs that meet international publication standards. This shared expectation of practical relevance and scholarly rigor creates a distinctive pedagogical challenge, particularly for practitioner-candidates transitioning from managerial problem-solving to theory-driven research.

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The integration of seasoned business leaders into academic doctoral programs sits at the heart of this challenge. The practitioner-candidate (hereafter “student”), whose expertise lies in effective problem-solving, operates from a mindset that frequently clashes with the fundamental academic requirement of theory generation (Hawkes and Yerrabati, 2018; Kunda, 1987; Latham, 2014). Problem-solving is inherently action-oriented, seeking the most efficient solution to a specific, contextual issue. Theory generation, by contrast, is knowledge-oriented: it requires the researcher to abstract a specific issue into concepts and variables to establish a generalizable explanation for a class of phenomena. This essential conflict, seeking a specific fix versus generating abstract knowledge, produces what we term “experience bias.” Bias is most damaging at the conceptual framing stage of the research process, particularly in developing a robust research problem and a precise theoretical framework. The primary difficulty is helping students transcend familiar organizational anecdotes and identify the generalizable knowledge gap (Fenge, 2009; Lester, 2004). This challenge aligns closely with the broader literature on work-applied learning and practitioner doctorates in management (Banerjee and Morley, 2013; Costley *et al.*, 2010), which emphasize reflexivity and contextual knowledge creation.

The institutional context of the present study is King Mongkut’s Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (KMUTL) Business School, Bangkok, Thailand, a research-active university whose Ph.D. in Business Administration program is structured to support practitioner-candidates in navigating the transition from executive practice to scholarly research. While both DBA and Ph.D. in Business Administration programs in Thailand require research outputs including scholarly publication (CHES, 2022), the Ph.D. in Business Administration program at KMUTL Business School adopts a student-led/learning-pathway model that places particular emphasis on student ownership of research topic development. This stands in contrast to supervisor-led/project-driven programs, where topics are pre-defined upon entry and often tied to faculty projects or grants (Ramrathan *et al.*, 2023). The learning-pathway model acknowledges the value of the practitioner-candidate’s executive experience and allows students to explore a range of relevant, timely topics, including the option to pivot from their enrollment subject, before formally committing to an approved dissertation proposal. This design places greater responsibility on each student’s capacity to develop theoretically grounded, self-directed inquiry, and it is precisely this responsibility that makes the experience-bias problem both visible and consequential (Zackariasson and Magnusson, 2024).

At KMUTL Business School, this challenge is addressed early in the doctoral curriculum through Advanced Business Administration, the program’s entry coursework. The course is deliberately designed to integrate broad business knowledge across disciplines, facilitate stakeholder analysis and support assessment of strategic directions against organizational risks, cultivating the practical process improvement thinking that underpins a strong and internationally publishable dissertation. Crucially, it prioritizes exploration before formal dissertation commitment: students attend executive sessions spanning policy, technology, finance, people and culture, sustainability and other domains, and each session becomes the stimulus for a reflective assignment designed to translate practice insight into a researchable idea.

In the preceding academic year, however, the course relied on general guidelines alone, revealing that the inherent freedom of the learning-pathway model still required a structured process to ensure theoretical rigor. To address this, the course was re-engineered around the theory-practice scaffold (TPS) framework, operationalized through the TPS reflection form (Appendix A), which guides students through this transition systematically.

This study evaluates how the TPS reflection form, as a structured reflective instrument, enhances doctoral students’ capability to develop theoretically grounded problem statements and research questions. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

How does the implementation of a structured TPS reflection form within an entry-level doctoral course influence students’ ability to develop theoretically grounded problem statements and research questions?

A secondary, descriptive question asks:

How do other rubric dimensions (key-point extraction, theory identification and reflection) change under the revised pacing and feedback design?

These questions situate the study within the broader literature on work-applied doctoral education, emphasizing the link between reflective design and early-stage research competence. While this study foregrounds conceptual development, it recognizes that doctoral-level contribution can also take the form of richly situated understanding rather than broad generalization (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Lester, 2004; Yin, 2018). Accordingly, the TPS framework is designed to support both: it generalizes its form as a replicable pedagogical instrument while grounding each reflective cycle in the student's own practice context.

2. Theoretical foundations of the theory-practice scaffold (TPS) framework

This section summarizes the theoretical principles that underpin the TPS framework, providing background for its later empirical evaluation. The TPS framework draws explicitly from three established theories that underpin work-applied learning: Kolb's experiential learning, abductive reasoning in theory building and Mode 2 knowledge production for relevance and context sensitivity. TPS's design is deliberately specialized, focusing entirely on structuring the students' thinking to successfully produce the conceptual and theoretical foundations of their research.

The conceptual basis of the TPS Framework aligns with the broader scholarship on professional doctorates that emphasizes the integration of professional and academic knowledge. The seminal work of Scott *et al.* (2004) conceptualizes the professional doctorate as a hybrid knowledge domain where propositional, procedural and experiential knowing intersect. This integration provides the epistemic rationale for TPS: it structures reflection so that practitioners can articulate the interplay between workplace experience and academic theory.

Complementing this, David Boud's sustained contributions on reflective practice and professional learning (Boud, 2006; Boud and Tennant, 2006; Molloy and Boud, 2014) clarify how guided reflection and formative assessment transform experiential insight into scholarly understanding, principles that are operationalized within the TPS rubric and feedback cycles.

Further guidance for supervision and doctoral capability building can be drawn from the European-funded project on the Supervision of Professional Doctorates, presented in the Studies in Higher Education special issue on professional doctorate supervision (Kearney and Lincoln, 2018). The collection of papers underscores the importance of structured dialog, relational supervision and iterative reflection, which are central mechanisms embedded in the TPS Framework.

Collectively, this literature justifies the theoretical inclusions underpinning TPS, emphasizing iterative reflection, feedback and abductive reasoning.

2.1 The operationalization of experiential learning theory (ELT)

TPS's mandatory and iterative use across seven to ten executive sessions establishes a new academic heuristic by requiring repeated engagement with the full experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984; Reynolds and Vince, 2017). It also aligns with the reflective cycles suggested by Raelin (2007, 2017), reinforcing the value of continual reflection in professional learning. Table 1 presents how each TPS element developed, reflecting from the corresponding experiential learning theory (ELT) stage and indicating its pedagogical function. The continuous submission and feedback loop inherent in TPS is the mechanism through which students progress from concrete experience toward abstract conceptualization (AC).

Kolb's cycle clarifies why spacing and feedback are essential: reflection (reflective observation (RO)) and AC require both time and iterative testing. TPS therefore intentionally spaces executive inputs and embeds formative feedback so that students can move

Table 1. Mapping ELT stage to TPS elements and pedagogical functions

ELT stage	TPS element	Pedagogical function
Concrete experience (CE)	Executive Lecture and <i>Part I</i> (Insights)	The high-quality, external executive stimulus ensures the research starts from a non-biased, high-fidelity problem source
Reflective observation (RO)	<i>Part I</i> (Unresolved problems) and <i>Part II</i> (Problem statement)	Students filter the executive discourse to identify anomalies and knowledge gaps, directly serving as the basis for the problem statement in Chapter 1
Abstract conceptualization (AC)	<i>Part IV</i> (Theoretical connections)	This is the direct input for Chapter 2 (theoretical framework), requiring the student to link the practical issue to formal frameworks, thereby demonstrating theoretical acuity
Active experimentation (AE)	<i>Part III</i> (Research questions) and <i>Part V</i> (Reflective summary)	Part III formulates the testable plan (the theory-generating hypothesis), and Part V closes the learning loop by assessing the idea's practical relevance and contribution
Source(s): By author		

systematically from practical experience to theoretical insight. Schön’s (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner complements this view by emphasizing professional practitioners’ need to engage in reflection-on-action to convert tacit knowledge into explicit concepts. TPS operationalizes this conversion through its structured prompts and iterative feedback process, ensuring that experiential insights become the foundation for academic reasoning.

2.2 Enforcing rigor through abductive reasoning

TPS ensures that the research question is theory-driven, the necessary prerequisite for a strong introductory section. The structure in Part II codifies the process of abductive reasoning (Dubois and Gadde, 2014; Peirce, 1934; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021), which is essential for hypothesis formulation:

- (1) The explicit structure (known fact → anomaly → research gap) ensures that the problem statement (Part II) provides the necessary intellectual justification for the study.
- (2) The resulting primary research question (Part III) is designed to be a theory-generating hypothesis, the testable explanation for the observed anomaly.

This structured process ensures that the introduction is a sophisticated argument for the necessity of new theoretical knowledge to explain a phenomenon applicable to any field of study. Where abduction provides the logic of discovery, Mode 2 knowledge production ensures that discovery remains contextually grounded and socially relevant (Nowotny et al., 2003).

2.3 Assuring relevance via Mode 2 knowledge production

The final reflective criteria in Part V ensure that theoretical framing retains real-world significance. By adhering to Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2003), the TPS Framework mandates that both the research problem and its conceptual solution are academically sound while remaining strategically relevant to the practical context.

The study follows the principles of Mode 2 knowledge production, in which knowledge emerges through context-driven, transdisciplinary and application-oriented collaboration between practitioners and academics. This perspective aligns with the ethos of work-applied learning and reflective doctoral education (Banerjee and Morley, 2013; Costley et al., 2010), which emphasize work-based inquiry as a mode of knowledge creation bridging professional

and academic logic. While later extensions such as Mode 3 (Carayannis and Ziemnowicz, 2007) emphasize innovation ecosystems and multi-helix collaboration, the current study operates primarily within a Mode 2 environment, focusing on contextual knowledge creation at the level of practitioner learning. In doing so, TPS sustains the essential balance between theoretical rigor and professional relevance that defines contemporary professional doctorates.

These foundations guided both the creation of the TPS Framework and the present evaluation of its learning impact.

3. Implementation of the TPS reflection form in the advanced business administration course

This section describes the design intervention within the case study, aligning the TPS framework implementation with the study's focus on how structured reflection supports the transition from managerial insight to researchable theory.

In this study, the term "TPS framework" denotes the pedagogical model (theory + process) designed to scaffold the move from executive insight to academic framing. The TPS reflection form is the course instrument that operationalizes the framework as a weekly assignment. In this paper, the framework is treated as the conceptual design and the form as the implementation tool used by students. The TPS reflection form guides students through five dimensions: key-point extraction, problem-statement development, research-question formulation, theory identification and reflection. The TPS framework was operationalized through two components: a structured sequence of executive sessions providing the empirical stimulus (Section 3.1) and a rubric-based feedback mechanism ensuring iterative scholarly development (Section 3.2). Throughout this paper, "framework" refers to the pedagogical model as a whole, while "TPS reflection form" refers to the weekly course instrument through which the framework was applied.

3.1 The critical role of the external stimulus (business context)

The TPS reflection form operationalizes the framework as a mandatory weekly assignment. The high quality of the executive input is a paramount success factor within the program's applied context. The students are trained to use part I to filter the discourse for innovation tensions or unresolved theoretical problems.

This study evaluates the implementation of TPS through a comparison of two consecutive cohorts enrolled in the same doctoral course. Cohort 1 completed the course prior to the introduction of the TPS reflection form, whereas Cohort 2 completed a redesigned version incorporating TPS-based reflective scaffolding. The two-cohort structure provides the basis for examining how the introduction of TPS influenced students' progression from managerial experience toward theoretically grounded inquiry.

The TPS was embedded in a work-applied learning environment, where weekly executive speakers provided authentic management contexts that served as catalysts for reflection and theory connection. In the second cohort, the TPS reflection form was applied directly to a sequence of seven high-level executive sessions. The stimuli were characterized by high seniority and complexity, including sessions delivered by executives holding roles, as shown in Table 2.

This collection of stimuli highlights the real-world complexity required to trigger the abductive reasoning process inherent in TPS. The series was intentionally constructed to expose students to diverse perspectives and broad contextual understanding, built around the timely theme of digital movement, starting from public policy toward every element of the business context and included pre-delivery discussions with each executive to craft the "Opening Question Guides," ensuring the stimulus directly supports the RO stage.

3.2 Scaffolding through the rubric

Appendix B presents a rubric designed as a continuous feedback loop, where the criteria for excellence serve as direct instructions for scholarly output. The weekly, iterative nature of the

Table 2. Examples of executive lecture topics (cohort 2)

Functional area	Selected executive speaker	Executive topic	Opening question guides
Public policy/ Governance	Executive Director of a government agency (digital economy and society)	Building digital trust: governance and policy in Thailand's tech economy	- How does digital trust shape the adoption of electronic transactions in emerging economies? - What roles do national digital policies play in enhancing consumer and investor confidence? - How can businesses align with evolving data protection frameworks?
Enterprise technology	Regional Head of a major global enterprise software vendor	Enterprise intelligence: integrating AI, applications and data for real-time decisions	- How can integrated enterprise applications enable real-time, data-driven decision-making? - What are the strategic and operational challenges of AI-enabled business ecosystems?
Technology/ Digital strategy	Country Manager of a multinational cloud and data provider	Harnessing AI, cloud and data for competitive advantage	- How are businesses transforming through AI and data platforms? - What risks must leaders manage when adopting generative AI at scale? - How should data strategies evolve to support secure and scalable AI?
Data and market insights	Country Site Leader of a multinational consumer intelligence agency	Unlocking market intelligence: navigating business through data and consumers	- How does market intelligence influence strategic decision-making in uncertain economies? - What tools and methodologies are used to extract predictive value from consumer behavior? - How are firms aligning branding, product, and pricing strategies with real-time market insights?
Sustainability/ Finance	CFO of a major diversified industrial conglomerate	Driving performance through ESG in innovation-led industries	- How do ESG priorities influence innovation investment decisions? - Can firms simultaneously pursue sustainability and profitability? - What metrics define ESG success in heavy industries?
Human capital/ Talent	Country manager of a leading global recruitment firm	Talent in transition: human capital in a digital future	- What skills define the workforce of the future? - How are digital platforms transforming recruitment and retention? - How can leaders build a resilient, adaptive talent pipeline?

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Functional area	Selected executive speaker	Executive topic	Opening question guides
Financial strategy	CFO of a large, multinational restaurant and retail group	Leading financial strategy in a complex, digital-driven market	- How do CFOs maintain financial resilience while managing diverse consumer brands with different risk profiles? - In what ways has the digital environment changed financial decision-making, forecasting, and performance tracking? - How can finance leaders balance long-term growth investments with short-term performance pressures in a rapidly changing consumer market?

Source(s): By author

assignment progressively draws students into internalizing the ELT cycle and abductive reasoning process over the course of the semester.

Serving as both instructor and researcher, the author used these tools alongside reflexive notes to capture design-learning interactions. This approach highlights that TPS is a deliberate learning process rather than a static template. To maintain objectivity, the study also incorporated partial independent reviews and grounding interpretations in observable student output rather than instructor perception alone.

4. Evaluation of TPS across two cohorts

Following the work-applied learning tradition, this evaluation of the designed learning process aims not only to measure improvement but also to understand how design modifications influence the reflective learning process in real-world doctoral contexts.

4.1 Course context

The TPS was implemented within advanced business administration, the program’s entry doctoral coursework described in the introduction. This evaluation draws on data from two successive cohorts to examine the effect of the TPS redesign.

Through a sequence of executive sessions spanning multiple domains, including public policy, technology end-to-end business operations, customer experience, finance, people and culture and sustainability, students are exposed to diverse management perspectives. Each session becomes a stimulus for reflection, enabling students to practice deriving researchable problems, formulating questions and connecting practice to theory. These reflective assignments were formative and assessed holistically to encourage learning rather than grading. It is important to note that in this program, doctoral coursework is assessed as a scholarly performance indicator rather than a graded qualification in its own right; the holistic rubric scores described below are formative measures of research readiness, separate from any credit-bearing grade.

4.2 Study design and data

The Advanced Business Administration course was delivered as a three-hour weekly class that combined executive engagement and reflective application.

The study employed a comparative, two-cohort design. The primary difference between the cohorts was the formal scaffolding used for reflective practice. Cohort 1 relied solely on brief weekly prompts and general reflective instructions. In contrast, Cohort 2 received the full TPS reflection form from the outset, which incorporated five layered reflection dimensions and explicit feedback cycles. The comparative design allows for examination of the effect of the formal scaffold and structured pacing.

Cohort 1 ($n = 7$; four completed all assignments) completed ten consecutive sessions. Each executive sharing session opened with a 30-min review of the previous assignment, followed by a 120–150-min presentation from an invited executive guest whose topic had been pre-set by the instructor. Students submitted an online reflection within three days after class, including (1) a brief session recap, (2) a problem statement, (3) related research questions and (4) potentially relevant theories.

Cohort 2 ($n = 13$; eleven completed all assignments) experienced a revised seven-session structure alternating executive sessions with feedback and integration sessions. Each executive sharing session began with a 30-min instructor introduction linking the speaker's topic to relevant theoretical themes. The executive guest, who received the topic and guiding questions in advance, delivered an interactive 120-min presentation that included open discussion and Q&A. At the close of each session, the instructor led a short debrief on conceptual takeaways. Between executive sharing sessions, feedback classes were held in which selected anonymized student submissions were shared for peer review and collective reflection. This pacing allowed students more cognitive space for sense-making and iterative refinement, key conditions for reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

4.2.1 Ethical considerations. The data used in this study consisted of anonymized student coursework submissions from the Advanced Business Administration doctoral course. The instructional design, including the TPS reflection form, was implemented for pedagogical purposes and did not affect formal assessment or introduce requirements beyond normal academic practice. The use of anonymized coursework data for research purposes was undertaken within the normal academic context of the institution. Students were subsequently informed about the study and invited to provide voluntary consent for the use of their work in anonymized form for research and publication (see Appendix C). Participation was voluntary and had no impact on academic evaluation, as all coursework assessments had been completed and graded prior to consent being obtained. All data were anonymized prior to analysis, with identifying information removed; findings are reported in aggregate form or through anonymized quotations. An anonymized sample of a TPS reflection form is included in the Appendix for illustrative purposes. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants, including voluntary participation and data confidentiality.

4.2.2 Limitations. This study is subject to limitations inherent to its case study design (Yin, 2018). The small cohort size precludes statistical inference; all quantitative comparisons are descriptive and intended to support, not replace, the qualitative interpretation. The findings offer contextual insight and transferability rather than broad generalization, a recognized and valued mode of contribution in case-based inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The single institutional setting and the instructor-as-researcher role, while appropriate for design-based research, may introduce interpretive bias; reflexive memos were maintained to document potential interpretative bias and decision rationale. Future studies extending the evaluation across multiple institutions and cohorts would strengthen the transferability of the findings.

4.2.3 Scoring and qualitative procedures. Each TPS reflection form was assessed using the five-dimensional rubric (Appendix B). The instructor assigned a holistic TPS score (0 = needs improvement; 1 = good; 2 = excellent) and qualitative feedback. Approximately one-fifth of submissions, sampled to represent varied performance levels, were double-read by a second assessor; differences were discussed and reconciled through consensus. Exemplary excerpts

used in this paper were purposively chosen from Cohort 2 for clarity and representativeness; all are anonymized and only lightly edited for grammar.

4.2.4 Trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation and iterative comparison across cohorts: repeated rubric-based submissions across multiple sessions, instructor observation notes from feedback discussions and independent review of a sample of scripts by other faculty members. Reflexive memos (Cunliffe, 2016) were kept throughout to record instructional adjustments and potential bias.

Findings are presented in two parts: first, a qualitative interpretation of student excerpts illustrating conceptual reframing, followed by descriptive score comparisons that contextualize the observed learning progression.

4.3 Findings

The findings integrate narrative and numeric evidence to show how the TPS redesign enhanced students' theoretical reasoning. Both analyses are grounded in the same reflective outputs: qualitative insights capture the depth of reflection, while quantitative rubric scores provide descriptive support. These scores do not constitute a separate dataset; rather, they serve as structured summaries that reinforce the overall interpretation.

The primary evidence for the TPS effect is qualitative, documenting a shift from descriptive, operational problem descriptions to theoretically anchored problem statements and research questions. Illustrative excerpts and interpretive analysis (Table 3) present how

Table 3. Representative cohort 2 samples of research framing

Executive topic	Student's derived theme from key-point extraction	Student excerpt (simplified problem statement and research question)	Relevant theory	Comment
Building digital trust: governance and policy in Thailand's tech economy	Digital trust and policy	<i>Why do some countries succeed in implementing digital-platform taxation while Thailand faces policy barriers?</i>	Stakeholder/ Institutional	Demonstrates comparative policy framing and theoretical anchoring
Harnessing AI, cloud and data for competitive advantage	AI and enterprise strategy	<i>What strategies can align CFO-CIO goals for sustainable growth?</i>	Dynamic capabilities/ Balanced scorecard	Integrates organizational and performance logic
Driving performance through ESG in innovation-led industries	ESG & SME Transition	<i>What factors influence small-business operators' intention to adopt carbon-reduction practices under Thailand's 2065 target?</i>	Technology-organization-environment framework and technology acceptance model (TOE/TAM)	Connects macro policy to micro behavioral intent
Talent in transition: human capital in a digital future	AI ethics in HR	<i>How can organizations responsibly implement AI in HR while addressing ethical, bias and governance gaps?</i>	Responsible Innovation/ Institutional	Integrates ethics with governance perspective
Leading financial strategy in a complex, digital-driven market	Data-driven finance	<i>To what extent does staff data-interpretation competency influence ROI and waste reduction in restaurants?</i>	RBV/Intelligent enterprise	Links operational capability to financial outcome

Source(s): By author (Student text lightly edited for grammar; all excerpts anonymized)

TPS prompts and pacing supported this abductive reframing. Following the qualitative discussion, descriptive score-level data (Tables 4 and 5) are presented as supporting evidence.

4.3.1 *Qualitative findings: how students reframed practice as research.* The following five excerpts in Table 3, shown below, were purposively selected from Cohort 2 to represent the clearest examples of theory-anchored reframing; they are not exhaustive of all student work.

The five illustrative excerpts were purposively selected because each shows a distinct trajectory from practical stimulus to researchable framing. Briefly:

- (1) *From policy to comparative research logic (digital taxation).* The student reframed a taxation implementation problem into a comparative institutional gap, which is amenable to cross-country analysis and theory testing (stakeholder/institutional lenses). This reframing signals a shift from locally troubleshooting to producing insights with wider managerial and policy relevance. For business doctoral work, this is critical because it reframes managerial puzzles as generalizable organizational or institutional phenomena that can yield scholarship and policy insight.

(2) *From organizational alignment to strategy and capabilities (chief financial officer - chief information officer (CFO-CIO)).* By linking a coordination problem to dynamic capabilities and balanced performance measures, the student demonstrates the capacity to translate operational friction into strategic hypotheses testable in organizational research. That reorientation is the core competency business doctoral programs seek to cultivate.

(3) *From policy to behavioral intent (environmental, social and governance (ESG) and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)).* Connecting national net-zero commitments to SME adoption intentions creates a multi-level research design (policy → firm strategy → managerial behavior), which is a strong pathway for doctoral research that is simultaneously policy-relevant and academically rigorous.

(4) *From technology ethics to governance framework (artificial intelligence (AI) in human resources (HR)).* The excerpt moves the question into governance and ethics, areas where management scholarship and practitioner action intersect. The AI-ethics excerpt demonstrates maturation in students’ problem framing: the issue is no longer merely a technology adoption problem but one that requires governance, ethical frameworks and institutional solutions, topics that align intrinsically with applied management scholarship.

(5) *From capability to performance (data competency drives return on investment (ROI)).* This demonstrates a resource-based logic linking human capability to measurable firm outcomes. The data competency example ties operational capability (staff analytics skill) to financial outcomes (ROI, waste reduction), connecting micro-level competencies to firm performance and a classic resource-based view (RBV) research trajectory valued in business research.

Table 4. Cohort comparison of rubric scores and assignment engagement

Metric	Cohort 1 (N = 7, 10 assignments)	Cohort 2 (N = 13, 7 assignments)	Observed difference
Mean submitted score ($\bar{x}$)*	0.78	1.40	0.62 points
Standard deviation (SD)*	0.80	0.58	0.22 difference
Median submitted score ($\bar{x}$)	0.50	1.29	0.79 points
Pass rate ($\bar{x} \geq 1.0$)	28.6% (2/7 students)	84.6% (11/13 students)	56.0% difference
Completion rate	88.6% (62/70 assignments)	94.5% (86/91 assignments)	5.9% difference
Note(s): *Scores based only on non-missing submissions (0 = Needs Improvement, 1 = Good, 2 = Excellent)			

Table 5. Learning trajectory analysis (gain and progression)

Metric	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Interpretation
Initial performance ($\bar{x}_{A1}$)	0.00	0.77	Baseline outcome (Missing = 0)
Final performance ($\bar{x}_{Last}$)	0.86 (A10)	1.54 (A7)	End-of-course outcome (Missing = 0)
Overall learning gain ($\bar{x}_{Last} - \bar{x}_{A1}$)	+ 0.86	+ 0.77	Measure of change in performance outcome
Maximum performance inflection	A8 ($\bar{x} = 1.14$)	A5 ($\bar{x} = 1.77$)	Assignment where the highest average was recorded
Assignment failure rate ($\bar{x}_k < 0.5$)	40.0% (4/10 assignments)	0% (0/7 assignments)	Proportion of tasks where the cohort largely failed

Collectively, these excerpts demonstrate how structured reflection facilitated abductive reframing: students moved from action-oriented descriptions to theoretically positioned inquiries, a cognitive leap central to doctoral competence. While these examples are demonstrative rather than statistically representative, they reflect the abductive reframing processes consistently evidenced across the cohort.

A blank version of the TPS reflection form is provided in [Appendix A.1](#), and an anonymized authentic completed example is shown in [Appendix A.2](#) to illustrate how students engaged with the reflective scaffold. The following section presents descriptive score data that complement the qualitative patterns.

4.3.2 Quantitative support. The qualitative pattern aligned with a descriptive improvement in holistic TPS scores, shown in [Table 4](#). Because of the small cohort sizes, cohort comparisons are presented descriptively to illustrate observable learning patterns and progression. They are not intended as inferential statistical tests or as a basis for statistical generalization. Rather, they are used to illuminate the direction and magnitude of observable change within the study context. Average rubric scores were compared across the two cohorts (0 = needs improvement, 1 = good, 2 = excellent), with scores derived from the TPS reflection form assignments described in [Section 4.1](#). [Tables 4](#) and [5](#) together present cohort-level patterns of score development; [Table 5](#) specifically includes the final assignment score as the most direct measure of end-of-course competence.

The overall performance analysis shows a substantial difference in average rubric scores between the two cohorts (Cohort 1 $\bar{x} = 0.78$ vs Cohort 2 $\bar{x} = 1.40$), representing an increase of approximately 0.6 points on the 0–2 rubric scale. The notably higher standard deviation (SD) in Cohort 1 ($SD = 0.80$) compared to Cohort 2 ($SD = 0.58$) indicates greater variation in performance in the earlier cohort, consistent with the absence of a standardized reflective scaffold. Cohort 2 conversely exhibits more consistent high performance. However, the more relevant measure for progressive learning is the score on the final assignment. From [Table 5](#), Cohort 2 maintained markedly higher average rubric scores on the final assignment ($\bar{x}_{A7} = 1.54$) than Cohort 1 ($\bar{x}_{A10} = 0.86$), suggesting that students in Cohort 2 demonstrated stronger attainment of the assessed competencies by the conclusion of the course.

The overall learning gain is not a contradiction but a reflection of different starting points. Cohort 1's high gain reflects a successful recovery from a state of near-zero performance at the start. With a standardized TPS reflection form provided from the outset, that is, from the first TPS reflection form assignment (Assignment 1 or A1), Cohort 2 returned their first assignments with better structure and extraction from the executive sharing session, resulting in a high baseline of 0.77. Therefore, Cohort 2 had far less room for improvement, demonstrating initial competency rather than large gains.

The most compelling quantitative evidence supporting the qualitative analysis lies in the learning curve trajectory: Cohort 1's steep initial failure followed by a slow, positive, but ultimately unsustainable gain. Their growth plateaued well below the "good" threshold,

confirming that the initial barriers were only marginally overcome. The 40% assignment failure rate was concentrated in earlier assignments, which reflects the absence of structured scaffolding at the course's outset yet marked overall challenges compared with Cohort 2's results.

Cohort 2 began near the target level and displayed a substantial, decisive positive inflection point at Assignment 5 ($\bar{x} = 1.77$). This assignment represents the point of maximal successful mastery, providing a quantifiable element (A5) that can be linked directly to successful teaching practices identified in the qualitative analysis. The subsequent slight performance drop is minor compared to the overall high level of performance maintained, which was partly attributable to unsubmitted assignments.

The quantitative analysis is consistent with the central progressive learning narrative. While Cohort 1 showed numerical improvement, its trajectory reflected gradual development that did not reach the same level of demonstrated competence observed in Cohort 2. Conversely, Cohort 2 exhibited a stronger and more sustained performance across the assessed competencies, aligning with the progressive learning patterns identified in the qualitative analysis. Given the broader pedagogical enhancements introduced alongside TPS, these patterns should be interpreted as reflecting the integrated course redesign rather than the TPS scaffold in isolation.

4.4 Instructor reflections

Interpreting the score gains through Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Schön (1983) concept of reflection-on-action helps explain the mechanism. The larger improvements in problem-statement and research-question scores suggest that the pacing and feedback allowed students to move from RO in AC while critically examining prior managerial assumptions, producing clearer theoretical framing rather than one-off managerial fixes.

From the instructor's perspective, the pacing adjustment encouraged students to revisit feedback and refine their reasoning before the next session. By mid-semester, Cohort 2 students were articulating research questions that already mirrored early-stage dissertation thinking. This shift demonstrates that structured reflection, even in the first semester of doctoral study, can accelerate the move from practitioner logic ("how to fix") to research logic ("why and under what conditions").

These observations align closely with Kolb's AC stage and Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner, reinforcing TPS as an effective pedagogical bridge between professional experience and scholarly inquiry.

5. Discussion

The central implication for business-school pedagogy is that structured reflection, iterative feedback and theory-practice scaffolding can rapidly elevate practitioner-student capability to construct researchable questions. Where traditional research-methods courses emphasize tools and statistics, TPS positions conceptualization itself as the first act of inquiry (Antonacopoulou, 2009; Hibbert, 2013). This suggests that pedagogical design, not student background alone, may be a significant enabling factor in developing students' capacity to frame researchable questions.

From an instructional perspective, executive doctoral candidates often struggle to detach from managerial logic, and the TPS structure appears to have provided a disciplined route from executive narrative to research logic. The improved performance in Cohort 2 is consistent with the view that learning design, not student background alone, contributes meaningfully to this transition.

At the same time, the observed improvements should be interpreted within the context of a broader course redesign. Although the TPS reflection form served as the focal intervention, Cohort 2 also benefited from revised pacing, structured debrief discussions, instructor-led conceptual framing, alternating integration sessions and enhanced preparation of executive stimuli. Consequently, the findings should not be viewed as evidence of the TPS scaffold

operating independently, but rather as demonstrating the value of TPS when embedded within a coherent pedagogical design that supports the transition from managerial experience to scholarly inquiry.

Viewed through the lens of Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994; Nowotny *et al.*, 2003), TPS situates doctoral learning within authentic business challenges while preserving academic rigor. This dual orientation ensures that the framework remains grounded in business relevance rather than drifting toward pure educational theory. Moreover, the design principles of rubric clarity, reflective pacing and feedback dialog are transferable to other professional doctorate and executive-education settings.

While the TPS framework clearly enhanced students' capacity for theory building, it also supported situated and relational contributions within professional doctorates. Evaluation criteria for doctoral knowledge must therefore encompass transferability and contextual insight alongside conceptual generalization, consistent with the situated understanding valued in case-based inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018). Moreover, given the global variation in doctoral formats, ranging from monographs to portfolios, the TPS framework requires appropriate adaptation to local program structures while retaining its core reflective-abductive mechanism. Taken together, these theoretical and practical considerations point toward a broader principle: structured engagement with the practice-to-theory transition is not a program-specific solution but a transferable design imperative for professional doctoral education.

6. Conclusion and future research

This study set out to evaluate how a structured TPS reflection form, embedded within the Advanced Business Administration doctoral course, can help practitioner-students bridge professional experience and academic research logic. Evidence from two successive cohorts shows that reflective pacing and iterative feedback improve student performance. Specifically, this approach helps students better articulate problem statements and research questions and, more importantly, strengthens their capacity to think theoretically about managerial issues.

The study thus extends our understanding of how structured reflection fosters both generalizable and contextually grounded forms of doctoral knowledge. The findings highlight that when doctoral learning in business is organized around authentic executive dialog and structured self-assessment, students begin to reason like management researchers rather than managers recounting experience. This transition echoes the capacity-building aims identified in the broader literature on business doctoral education (Antonacopoulou, 2009; Banerjee and Morley, 2013), where the development of critical, theoretically anchored reasoning is the hallmark of practitioner-research maturity. The outcome was not only improved coursework performance but also a visible cognitive shift, as students began framing managerial problems in theoretical language. This progression strengthens the doctoral pipeline by enhancing the early-stage capability for developing publishable, practice-anchored research.

For business-school educators, the TPS model offers a scalable method for transforming experiential insight into theoretical contribution. Its emphasis on reflective cycles, rubric clarity and feedback dialog aligns well with Mode 2 knowledge production, knowledge created in context and for application, while remaining grounded in rigorous scholarly standards.

Future work will extend the evaluation to subsequent cohorts, incorporate supervisor assessments of dissertation readiness and explore digital adaptations of the TPS form for blended delivery. Nonetheless, the present results already demonstrate that structured reflection, when systematically supported, can serve as a powerful pedagogical bridge between executive experience and doctoral-level research competence, advancing both the academic mission and the professional impact of business schools.

6.1 Practical implications

For business schools seeking to strengthen the research capability of practitioner students, the TPS reflection form provides a repeatable, low-cost intervention that integrates executive

learning with doctoral research development. The approach demonstrates how structured reflection, rubric-based feedback and pacing adjustments can move learners from describing business challenges to framing researchable questions grounded in theory. Other institutions can replicate the model by embedding reflective prompts in early doctoral coursework, hosting industry-linked sessions that generate authentic managerial cases and scheduling feedback cycles that expose students to peer reasoning. This pattern of structured exploration and collaborative critique may also transfer beyond the academy: in continued professional development (CPD) contexts, similar scaffolding could help workplace practitioners identify and formulate genuine research needs within business organizations. The process cultivates abductive thinking, improves dissertation readiness and ensures that professional doctorates in business yield knowledge that is both academically rigorous and organizationally relevant.

About the author

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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