

Problems of Practice for an Organizational Improvement Plan

Significance of the Problem of Practice in Doctor of Education programs

Scholarly Practitioners blend practical wisdom with professional skills and knowledge to name, frame, and solve **problems of practice**. They use practical research and applied theories as tools for change because they understand the importance of equity and social justice. They disseminate their work in multiple ways, and they have an obligation to resolve problems of practice by collaborating with key stakeholders, including the university, the educational institution, the community, and individuals. – Design Concept Definitions, Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), 2016 <http://www.cpedinitiative.org/design-concept-definitions>

A Problem of Practice is a situation that exists in one’s place of work, such as a school, college, or non-profit organization. It revolves around a specific workplace problem. The issue is a problem because values/goals are not, or might not be entirely, met. In other words, there is a gap between the goal state and the current state of the organization. According to CPED (2016), a POP is “as a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes.”

The problem is not usually based on individual cases but involves a group of people or a particular population. It may initially have been identified through interactions with one person, but must relate to more than just one person or an individual relationship with a person. Organizational problems of practice tend to be complex and are therefore related to many overlapping problems.

A problem of practice and the cause of the problem are not the same thing. Often, an issue is considered a problem of practice when the actual problem and the causes of it are not well understood. Failing to understand the essence of the problem and the underlying causes can lead to well-meaning solutions that do not address the issue and, in some cases, may exacerbate it or cause additional problems or complications. Actual problems of practice can be difficult to understand, but the signs of a problem can sometimes be relatively easy to see.

In professional learning programs that utilize problems of practice, participants are encouraged to determine a problem of practice that they have some control over and can be improved upon within the field of practice (school, school board, etc.). This problem is meant to be actionable or within one’s control or the control of colleagues, school board, ministry of education, etc. For example, if this problem were acted upon you would be able to make a significant difference for an educational community, not just one individual. These problems generally surround opportunities to increase student achievement (broadly defined). For example, you might have groups of students in your school who are not as engaged as others and do not perform as well as others in certain subjects or in general. Upon further investigation, you determine some of the possible causes for the lack of engagement, and then utilize research, literature, tacit knowledge or action research to consider possible solutions such as making greater linkages between the students’ families and the school through creating a homework club that includes parents and establishing some community outreach activities.

Introductory Video: <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/problem-of-practice>

Some Criteria: A Problems of Practice must be

- Familiar to the student;
- Issue-based;
- Connected to leadership;
- Connected to the workplace;
- Practical, and observable in some way;
- Solve a problem that closes a gap between current and future state;
- A fully developed problem statement that must be framed using theory and literature;
- Politically/strategically viable to address;
- Manageable to address in one OIP;
- Actionable/can be implemented (and measured);
- Reasonable to address given the student's own position, sphere of influence, etc.;
- Applicable to more than one or a few people; and,
- Without a clear single solution/answer.

How is a problem of practice generally identified?

Problems of practice are generally identified through reflection on practice, dialogue with colleagues, and looking at the quantitative and qualitative-based research literature on the topic (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Tietel, 2009; Osterman, & Kottkamp, 2004). Sometimes problems are suggested to practitioners by their colleagues or friends; other times practitioners uncover problems through their own practice. Regardless of how the problems are uncovered, they are accompanied with a desire or motivation for change.

Guiding Questions to determine a Problem of Practice

- What is happening here?
- What do we know about this?
- Who says that this is the way things should be?
- What overall purposes are being served?
- Whose vision is it?
- Whose interests are being served?
- Whose needs are being met?
- Whose voices are being silenced, excluded, or denied?
- How do we know?

Smyth, J. (1996). The socially just alternative to the “self-managing school,” in K. Leithwood, J. Chapman, D. Corson, P. Hallinger, & A. Hart (eds.), *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1097-1131.

Problems of Practice and the Organizational Improvement Plan (OIP)

The problem of practice is a specific statement or question that guides the OIP as the capstone project of the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. POPs are the cornerstone to successful OIPs.

The OIP is a practical yet theory- and research-informed plan that aims to address and find solutions for a particular problem of practice through leading change within in the organization. Grounded in the values espoused by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), the OIP is a scholarly research capstone paper that provides evidence-based pathways to address organizational problems and, more broadly, serve the public and/or social good. As a form of quality improvement, the OIP is a systematic approach to making changes that lead to better outcomes, stronger system performance, and enhanced professional development. Organizational improvement, particularly from an educational leadership perspective, aims to advance social outcomes through measuring change. However, the OIP is also a persuasive document that aims to benefit the organization and surrounding community.

By the completion of the OIP, students should be able to:

- Outline a significant and relevant leadership problem of practice (POP) within that organizational context;
- Address the POP using relevant theories of organizational development and research literature and other evidence;
- Apply relevant theory, models, and frameworks to a POP;
- Demonstrate appropriate use of data collection methods and analysis techniques to address the OIP’s POP;
- Explain complex issues underlying an organizational POP;
- Develop multiple solutions to a POP through the systematic application of theory, research, and reason;
- Identify the causes and effects of POPs;
- Describe readiness for organizational change using appropriate models/tools; and,
- Communicate the plan organizational and community stakeholders.