Colloquium Series on *The Practice of Educational Research*
Sponsored by the Spencer Research Training Grant Program

A Panel Discussion on

"Doing a Dissertation That Makes a Difference"

Panelists:
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David Labaree: This is the first of a series of colloquia sponsored by the Spencer Foundation Research Training Grant Program. The program was funded last year by the Spencer foundation in a number of leading research-oriented education schools, and the idea is to promote high quality educational research among doctoral students. To provide ways of figuring out how we can best prepare people to not simply become researchers but to become first-rate researchers. And what we're doing this year is to take a somewhat different angle -- learning from our experience from last year, which is the whole point with a program like this, and focusing in a particular on the task of trying to conceptualize and carry out research that's worth doing. That's both a focus on the intellectual work of doing research (not the sort of narrow technical issues but the broader intellectual task of doing research) and the task of doing research about issues that matter, doing research that has significance and not just competence behind it. Another aim that is closely related to this, and that is central to the whole Spencer program, is to introduce these kinds of issues in to the larger discourse of the college. There's a group at the moment of 12 fellows who are going through the Spencer program and are having an intensive mentoring experience as part of that program. However the idea here is not simply to help a few people get advanced training in doing research, but to find some way of introducing ideas and techniques into the preparation we do more generally at the college in getting people ready to do research.

This colloquium series is aimed at trying to raise these kinds of issues at the college level. The series is called "The Practice of Educational Research." We have a lot of a colloquia here at the College, and the typical colloquium necessarily and logically focuses on the products of educational research. So we end up talking about the product, and we usually don't talk about the process very much. Maybe authors prefer to make it look as though answers emerge magically from their research, but the idea here is to remove some of the magic. To look

underneath the process and focus on the way in which people actually do research, and, in particular, the way in which people do good research. And a good way to start, we thought, is to look at the problem of doing dissertations -- something every doctoral student faces, everyone approaches with fear and trepidation. The idea is let's look at the issue of what it takes to write a dissertation that's really worth doing, that really makes a difference. And what better way to start in thinking about that issue than by looking at a few people who did just that. So we've picked three dissertations that came from this college over the past decade, written by our own students, each of which won the college award for dissertation of the year. The idea is to try to learn something from cases right here close to home about what made these dissertations special, what made them work, how it is that they made a difference, what it is you and we can learn from cases like this that may help us as students produce better work and as faculty members to guide people in the direction that will allow them to do this kind of work themselves.

Why these particular dissertations? There's a general level of agreement here at the College that these are very good pieces, since they won the College award. Another selection criterion is that these are attainable models. They were not done by super humans; they were done by people that look very much like people here, and they were done under ordinary conditions. Nobody had some special intervention that made it possible, and none of these are cases where somebody spent 25 years producing a kind of magnum opus. These are dissertations that were done by regular students in a timely fashion who graduated on schedule and moved on. These are dissertations that are doable, not unattainable ideals. And these are dissertations that are also very much in the mainstream of what we do here in this College. They aren't things that are way off at the margins: all three are studies of problems of professional practice. That's mostly what we do here. As you hear about them, if you haven't already run into these dissertations, you'll be hearing themes and issues and looking at types of research that are very familiar. These are the kinds of things, the kinds of issues, the kinds of data-gathering that people here do.

Why these panelists? Well one reason of course is that they were available. This is always a good criterion: they were willing to do this at the last minute, which I was very grateful for. These are people who know these dissertations or at least some of them. However none of us was instrumental in making any of these dissertations happen. We don't have a big vested interest here. None of us was the advisor or dissertation director for these students. So we're approaching them as consumers of educational research, not as nervous sponsors who are trying to put the best face on our students' work. And note also that none of us is an expert in the field that's covered in the dissertation that we are going to be focusing on in particular. Each of us is going to focus on one of the three dissertations, and in no case is it something in our field. For example Suzanne Wilson is talking about Tim Lensmire's dissertation. She's not a literacy person. She's not an expert on writing work shop. These are issues that are dealt with in

the dissertation but this is not her field. I'm going to be talking about Sarah Theule-Lubienski's dissertation, which is a math ed curriculum-oriented dissertation. I'm not a math ed person; this is not a field where I have great expertise. Michael Sedlak is going to be talking about the dissertation done by Sharon Gizara. It is a dissertation in counseling psychology. He's an historian of education who does work in educational policy, so there are no strong links here either. So what's the message here? Well I think maybe it's one of the first messages you should get about good work. And that is that good work speaks to people outside some narrow niche. Good work speaks to big issues. Good work speaks to issues that resonate widely in a field, that should be consumable, understandable, meaningful to people outside of some narrow specialty.

One last point before we start. There is going to be a series of colloquia like this. The first one focuses on dissertations in particular, but we have some other ideas for topics. If you have ideas of the kind of issue you would like to have us deal with and maybe a format for doing so in these colloquia, let me know. Again, the issue is the doing of education research, the practice of it. Another point I want to make here is that we are going to produce a transcript of this colloquium and post it on the Spencer web site. I'm hoping that it helps in this larger dissemination effort.

Ok, enough introductory stuff. What we are going to do is this. Each of us will make a brief summary of one of the dissertations, to give you a general idea of what this thing was about and what central issues were emerged from it, just to get a sense of the context. Then we want to move as quickly as possible into a conversation initially among the three of us about what is interesting about these studies. What makes them different. Why are they provocative. What's the line that the person crossed between a competent, adequate dissertation and one that's really significant and meaningful and interesting. We'll be trying to tease out some of the characteristics that they have in common, some of the lessons we can learn form looking at good work. And to try to get a sense about how good work gets done and how you might get a chance to do that kind of good work yourself. Once we get into that conversation we hope you will feel free to jump in. The idea is to have a general discussion about these issues, and in this room we have a lot of people who have a lot of experience with and knowledge about and questions about he issues we will be discussing; so we'd like to have the participation as broad as possible. We'll proceed through these chronologically. The first dissertation is by Tim Lensmire, who graduated in 1991, called "Intention, Risk, and Writing in a Third Grade Writing Workshop." Suzanne Wilson will tell us a little bit about this study.

Suzanne Wilson: Tim was an English teacher who arrived at Michigan State in the doctoral program in the Department of Teacher Education just around the time that the college was making a serious commitment to the development of professional development schools and to the work of university faculty in those schools. Tim's words are more eloquent than mine about what he had in mind. So

if you will bear with me, I'll read you the first couple of lines of his book (these were also the first couple of lines of his dissertation):

> I thought my story would be a different one. I would teach writing for a year in a third grade public school classroom, struggling a little at first to get a writing workshop running with children who had only exercised their pens filling in worksheet blanks. I would research my own teaching and students' learning. But the workshop would run, and I would focus my attention on what I took to be its heart: talking with individual children in relatively isolated, intimate conversations about their writing -- what they were doing, what they were trying to do, what help they needed. Occasionally, I would have to engage children's texts in a sort of ideological critique, pointing to traces of classism, sexism, racism, fighting society's impress on their meanings and values. In the freedom of the workshop children, would choose their topics and purposes for writing, develop their ways of developing texts, and write. They would go to each other, they would come to me, for help. My third grade students would write themselves on the page, move, be heard, in a place that habitually constrained their bodies and voices to teachers' questions, to desks. Our workshops would be a little Emersonian democracy; Dewey's embryonic community.

Well, Tim did, indeed, teach writer's workshop, but it didn't go the way that he planned and it didn't go the way that he planned in ways that surprised him. I think for our discussion today that "surprise" is one of the themes that runs across these dissertations There are a couple of things that were striking about Tim's dissertation. The first is that this wasn't the kind of surprise where you giggle and tee-hee and say "how nice." This was the kind of surprise that shook him in the marrow of his bones in a kind of unsettling – "but-these-are-my dreams-my-hopes-slipping-away" -- kind of "surprise.' And one of the things that made it a very interesting piece of scholarship is that he didn't turn away from that surprise and its attendant dis-ease. Instead he faced it and then tried to understand it, instead of avoiding it.

Another feature of his dissertation was looking at practice, at classrooms, with big ideas in mind. Ideas about equality and democracy and voice and the compromises inherent in building democratic communities are issues that go well beyond education. When he discovered that children are not romantic ideals, sweet and innocent beings who can do no wrong, his "discovery" had serious implications for his beliefs in the power of writers workshop to overturn oppressive practices. Children bring lots of baggage that make classrooms complicated places. The rhetoric of the reforms in writing workshop pay a lot of attention to the possibilities and potential of children, but that same writing often does not attend to the underbelly of classrooms. As David mentioned, the third thing that was really striking about this dissertation was that is started as a problem of practice, and remained inside of and close to practice. So you can

read the dissertation both as a work about ideas, but you can also read the dissertation as a practical document about a teacher trying to figure out how to teach better. As a result, he ends up being able to produce something that's rich with ideas and thoughts and tied to big themes both in American culture and American education, but is also a useful text for teaching.

Labaree: I'll go next and talk a little bit about the second dissertation, which is by Sarah Theule-Lubienski, who graduated in 1996. The title is "Mathematics for All? Examining Issues of Class in Mathematics Teaching and Learning." This is a study that arose from Sarah's work with the Connected Math Project, a project that's been going on here on campus for a while headed by Glenda Lappan. It's an effort to create curriculum materials that capture the spirit and the central thrust of the new math teaching standards and to field test those curriculum materials. Originally this study was designed as a field test for materials in a 7th grade class. Sarah spent a year as a teacher using these materials on a daily basis in a seventh grade class, and the idea was to do basically a curriculum implementation study. The normative starting point for this study was that she and her project both were very committed to the idea that people would be better off, and learning would be they go a higher level, if in fact the NCTM standards were adopted and if curriculum materials could translate them into practice. What happened is that in the process of doing this study she discovered a very powerful social-class interaction effect -- interaction with student performance that varied drastically by social class. She found in part that lower class and working class kids in this classroom did markedly worse in the mathematics performance in her study using these new materials than did the middle class and upper middle class kids. And that was true even of those working class kids and lower class kids who had been doing quite well under the traditional math but suddenly found themselves operating at a deficit in this new curriculum.

That was not the focus of her study originally but it also was not a complete surprise for her since this is an issue she was sensitive to. She talks in the dissertation about how she herself arose from a working class family. For her, math was a very important element. It was the part of education she did best in. It was the mechanism she used to get ahead to get into college and to pursue her career. So she was sensitive to and was shocked to find that this curriculum she so wanted to work was working in ways that were disadvantaging the exact group she was hoping it would help the most. So how does she go about explaining that? A couple of ways. She talks about a status difference problem that influenced what went on in these class rooms. The middle class and upper middle class kids were more comfortable doing a lot of the stuff that the new math standards call for in classrooms. Things like talking openly about issues. Having discussions about math rather then cranking through problems. Trying out answers, trying out solutions to problems without knowing if they're going to work or not, making mistakes in public. Explaining your reasoning rather then simply coming up with the right answers. These kids simply felt more comfortable because they were less insecure in public and because their social

status gave them an advantage in that regard. Meanwhile working class kids felt, were, at a disadvantage in many ways, because things were shifting to a zone of interaction that was not familiar in math class and not one that they were comfortable with. An interesting sign of that was the fact that the middle class kids thought that they were doing well even if they were doing lousy. Their level of self confidence was quite high. The interactions did nothing to reduce this whereas the working class kids thought they were doing worse then they really were in class.

Another issue that she raises here is a cultural capital issue. The new math approach that is embodied in this curriculum ended up stressing the kind of discursive skills that are ones that are particularly important elements in cultural capital. Skills that kids growing up in middle class families often have a head start on before going to school. The working class kids found themselves at a disadvantage when the math curriculum started shifting in a direction that was more discursive and began to feel more like an English class or history class than a math class -- rewarding discursive ability and oral reasoning over effort, hard work, and native smarts.

That's enough for now. Let's turn to the third dissertation by Sharon Gizara, who graduated in 1997. The title "Supervisor's Construction of Intern Impairment and Incompetence at APA Accredited Internship Sites". Michael Sedlak is going to talk about that.

Michael Sedlak: As David indicated at the beginning, I am an historian. I'd never ever imagined I would have picked up a dissertation from counseling psychology. But one piece of the assignment that I have in the College is to run the competition that makes this award, and as part of that task I read all the dissertations. In all honesty I probably would not have run across this or learned of its value except for that kind of an assignment, so it's one of maybe very few occasions when my assignment privileges me to do something like this, and after I finished reading this dissertation it became clear that it really was a privilege. There's a kind of perspective and goal that flows throughout Sharon's piece that I certainly would have never expected from the subject matter. I really found it to be a kind of bold, sensitive, thoughtful essay on much more then intern impairment in counseling psychology sites.

There are a couple main qualities that I want to briefly note, because this is one I think like the others where some of the real accomplishments will come out as we talk about findings in more depth. It was a study that in large part found momentum in an intimate event in Sharon's life. And this characterizes all of these dissertations, this kind of a personal attachment or connection to their subjects. She was doing an observation of a counseling session run by a counseling psychology intern, that is, someone undergoing an internship experience preparing to become a therapist. She was sitting in the room as a therapy session was going on. Over the course of it she became troubled and

pretty quickly came to the conclusion that the therapist was actually causing the client harm. But she didn't do anything about it. She was quiet. She talks about her own silence in this moment which she witnessed and participated in.

Therapist impairment and incompetence is emerging as a serious issue in the field, and this dissertation exposes and attempts to explain the seriousness of this problem in the various counseling and psychology domains. She was able to build on that sort of uneasiness like both Tim and Sarah had. She was able to build on that, in shaping the approach to the question -- it's almost an evaluative question -- about the practice of training through internships in counseling psychology. She was able to keep pushing deeper and deeper into ways of thinking about how to explain the appearance of impairment and incompetence – through a powerful catalytic moment in her own life, expressed in a form of guilt -- in an effort to try to understand why she was silent in the face of something that, even at the time, she sensed was this harmful. She was faced with questions about herself: why was the notion of intervening in the session so inconceivable to her? Why was she so willing to remain silent about the experience? Was there something in her own education that contributed to this silence? Was her professional socialization designed to reinforce values and assumptions that ultimately were proving to undermine her ability to deal appropriately and effectively with evidence of impairment?

As a result, she spent the bulk of the project looking at about 10 internship training sites across the country. They were highly regarded ones. Placement records are great, they're not on any sort of academic or professional probation or anything like that, and she spent most of the time interviewing the trainers and the interns themselves. Trying to understand why the people who were becoming therapists behaved the way they did. She had some ideas in the beginning that were coming out of the literature, but the key is where she went with that after she started working though her own personal feelings about it and what she was encountering in interviews that was -- from her point of view -- surprising, unfamiliar, unpredictable. But ultimately, and this is the reason that I am so pleased to have a chance to have read the study, the problems she explores are universal across professional preparation in a dozen human services or helping services fields. She didn't let this go until she could play all of this stuff out -- for her own sense of maturity and ethics as well as to help us see these problems and understand their origins. She never backed off from that kind of task and as a result did a dissertation that, although at first it doesn't look like it would appeal or be directed to a person like me, after reading it I can understand its place in a considerably larger set of debates about problems of professional preparation and practice.

Let me just mention how Sharon's dissertation came to speak to discussions across a half-dozen academic and professional fields. Her project led her to reconstruct the influences of a variety of forces, institutions, and aspirations on the preparation of clinical therapists. The array of explanations that seem to me

most imaginative, however, expose the unintended consequences of a form of professional education and socialization that has the potential for subverting efforts to define and address impairment or incompetence in clinical practice. More specifically, she sustains a willingness to address a powerfully constructed question: why had the field inadvertently not placed clients' rights to be protected from harm above the trainee's rights to learn to practice psychology?

Because she would not let this issue fade, Sharon probed with considerable sensitivity into the substantive academic and professional characteristics and values imbedded in internship training and supervision, including an insightful examination of moral and ethical behavior and development. She found that the field celebrated values and behaviors that often proved to be anti-evaluative: the desire to be non-judgmental, for example; the universal appeal of supportive, comfortable, non-confrontational sessions; the ideal of empathy and accepting of individual differences; the inclination to give interns the benefit of every doubt; supervisors feeling themselves incapable of judging practice, or feeling vulnerable about their own perspective and competence; and, more obviously, the fear of being the bad guy, the destroyer of dreams, the gatekeeper, the fear of consequences such as law suits or of having one's program and faculty humiliated because of intern dismissals.

Finally, although she was not fully aware of all of the implications associated with her dissertation, Sharon's persistence in unraveling this question can be seen in a larger context of an escalating critique of professional education across domains in education and social welfare practice, as well as in the psychological fields. A number of scholars have begun raising questions about passivity in these fields: where an ethos of neutrality has inhibited professional judgement to such an extent that clients (school children, students in guidance and counseling sessions, at-risk adolescents, unwed mothers, all sorts of human service clients) are too often allowed to be ignorant of the consequences of their actions, to make completely uninformed decisions, to abandon clients and permit if not encourage them to make disastrous decisions that too often worsen their circumstances and even harm the opportunities of those around them. So, I found Sharon's essay to speak to this disturbing trend in many fields of practice in a rich and thoughtful fashion.

Wilson: The three of us met before this gathering to see whether or not we could find anything that went across these three pieces, because we hadn't all three read all three. In that conversation, we noticed several themes. One had to do with encountering something disturbing. In these dissertations, the disturbance has two qualities. One, you care about it. You care about it so much that even though it's disturbing and you'd rather just step to the side and not go through the disturbance. But the disturbance also has another feature of being attached to something important to understand. It's not just disturbing but it's got some intellectual substance. When Sarah encountered issues related to class in her math teaching, it was a very disturbing to her for personal reasons. She had

thought long and hard about how math had helped her have new experiences and how everyone else in her family had an understanding of mathematics that she felt disadvantaged them as consumers. At one point, she didn't want to deal with class in her dissertation, because she didn't think of herself very much as a scholar, and facing issues of class meant reading a scholarship that – in some ways – felt beyond her. But there was something about her personal investment and the issue's substantive value that made it an important thing to do and made it possible to do in the face.

Sedlak: There is a parallel with Sharon's situation, in the fact that she could keep this disturbing feeling alive though the whole thing. When the three of us were talking about this, I mentioned that I had worked on sponsored research projects where encountering a situation that was troubling in interpretation or one that was just disturbing and raised questions, it wasn't uncommon for project leaders to say "Let's just delete that section or that paragraph.". The way to solve the problem was just to forget it was a problem: don't keep it alive, just kill it off as a problem; that's not work that needs to be done; we have to press forward and can't be distracted by unease in this way. I don't want to characterize all sponsored research that way, but there's a tradition out there of doing that. These three dissertation writers are willing -- for one reason or another and under some cases very painful personal circumstances -- to keep entertaining and wondering about disturbing issues in a kind of personal, private, intimate way.

Labaree: There's this issue, as Michael says, of keeping the disturbance alive. You can treat the disturbance as noise a problem, something that's in your way. The situation Michael described is not uncommon for doctoral students to confront in writing a dissertation either, because they want it to end. Just like project leaders want to get the contract done and get paid and move on to the next one, doctoral students want to turn in the dissertation, go off and get a job and get paid. I mean this is rational behavior. The disturbance is sitting there and so the temptation is in many ways is to step around it. And it's maybe even easier to do so because pursuing it is uncomfortable in some ways as well as something that forces you into a detour where you don't know where it's going to go eventually, where you don't know what is in this new literature. Sarah had to jump into the sociology of education literature, reading about cultural capital, about social class cultures, and the relationship to school cultures. I mean this was not what she was intending to do; this was not her field, and so the easier task would have been to say, "I'm just focusing on curriculum implementation and so we'll continue on looking at how it worked and didn't work and not pursue that root causes. But in all three of these cases, the problem became the focus. The problem was the opportunity. The problem was what suddenly turned this into something much more interesting then it originally was.

Wilson: When I was in graduate school I took a lot of statistics classes and one of the things that those professors would say was always "Don't dismiss the outliers." When you display the data, there's a big push -- especially in qualitative work --

to find the patterns. But statisticians look at the distribution and at the outliers; those unusual cases are sometimes full of information that help you understand the distribution. Maybe some of the disturbance occurs around outliers.

A related issue concerns having to reorganize one's framework. Tim had to reorganize his intellectual universe. Tim had this idea that he was going to implement a new social vision in a classroom: Children, through learning to be writers, would become better democratic citizens. And teachers could have a powerful moral and political effect on them and, subsequently, on society. Tim had to reorganize the way that he thought about teaching and schools and kids when he discovered that students were, in part, agents of their own forms of prejudice and disrespect, authors – if you will – of their own classroom experiences. Children were not just being affected by society but they were creating society. This meant that Tim had to reorganize the way he thought about what he was doing as a teacher and as a researcher. Sarah had to do the same thing. And, in both cases, it required a kind of intellectual resilience or flexibility to do that.

Labaree: Confidence.

Wilson: I don't know. Sometimes you don't have confidence, you just don't have anything else you can do. Maybe he was confident. Most of the time, I'm not confident, I just say ok, I give up, I have to reorganize.

Sedlak: Another way to look at this, the equivalent across the dissertations is, I think, that the three of us -- from what we've read and what we've heard about these studies -- have come to appreciate the level of personal courage that's involved and that characterizes these dissertations. I never went to Sarah's defense, but the folklore coming out of Sarah's dissertation is among the most remarkable ever in the College, about the level of emotional challenge that had to occur in the defense, particularly when Glenda Lappan -- the Connected Math Project leader and national leader figure in math standards -- is on the committee. Sarah had to know that this would arise in the defense. She had to know that this was at the end of the road given where the dissertation was going. In Sharon's dissertation, there's an effort to push for an answer to the question of why this silence about incompetence and impairment existed, which forced her to look at the kind of program she was in. And the kind of job that she was being trained to do. It's a delicate matter to write about something that is almost your own home program, almost your own home faculty mentors. In the end, she wrote one of the most sensitive, elegant conclusions to a dissertation that I have ever seen, which doesn't simply reconstruct what the content of her study. Instead she looks at herself and says, how did my relationship to this issue possibly address or affect how I dealt with this issue? And she ends with this ironic statement to the effect that while she was doing this, she was becoming fearful about giving the results to all the people she was acknowledging as being central to it. This a problem that many researchers have to deal with every time they go into a school. She worried

that she would either be easier on the people she was observing and interviewing or she would be in a sense too hard on them in trying to avoid the appearance of being too easy. She was worried about this effect this would have on her ability to write anything that she could share with anybody else. That's another expression of the kind of courage that it takes to do this kind of dissertation, one that has powerful emotional consequences for people. When they're closer to you, the more intense and intimidating the situations are.

Labaree: With both the interns and the faculty, because this was a two-level impairment she was writing about: the impairment of the interns but also the impairment of the supervisors. The faculty were not doing a good job of intervening for the same reasons she had trouble intervening herself. That's a very difficult kind of issue to raise when you're right in the middle of it. Let me just jump another issue.

Wilson: But before you get into another issue. Just a note that it's not just about courage but it is actually something that might be inherent in good research products, that some good products are disturbing in what they teach us. All research can't end up being a celebration of that which we do right. If you're actually going to produce something that might move a field forward, one possibility entails questioning our deepest beliefs and most ingrained practices. . .

Labaree: Yeah, I mean that's actually the direction I wanted to go.

Wilson: I'm sorry

Labaree: No, that's good. I mean all of these in some way are studies of failure, and they raise very interesting questions that we talked about a little bit amongst the three of us about the connection between the normative and the analytical when you are doing research, particularly in a field like education. This is an extremely normatively bound and guided field that we're in. We're not doing abstract analysis about things and seeing what happens. We are invested in improving education; we're invested in making teaching more effective and making learning more possible. We have outcomes we want to see happen from things, and that becomes a problem often in educational research because the research often turns into a wish fulfillment: I really want this curriculum to work. I really want this new reform to work. I really want this reform to happen and I really want my dissertation to be a thing that moves it along in that direction. The last thing in the world I want to do is to raise questions or be a stumbling block because that would impair the improvement of education for the kids. Now what's interesting here is that these cases are showing how, for one thing, a normative failure is an analytical opportunity. It creates something to be explored. And yet these are not examples of people that basically said: ah, I don't care what happens here; I'm just going to be I'm just a researcher; I'm just going to focus on planning out these ideas and the subjects, and what happens to them are not meaningful to me. Not at all. They never abandoned their commitments to these things. Tim never

abandoned his commitment to writing workshop and a lot of the principles behind it. Sarah never abandoned her commitment to a richer and more nuanced understanding of math. Sharon Gizara never abandoned her commitment to the notion that this kind of training is potentially helpful and fruitful. But what they ended up doing is saying, the point of my dissertation is not to prove that this works to affirm the norm that I'm seeking to accomplish here. The purpose is an analytical one. It's to try to understand what happened, to try to make sense out of the failure, to try to explore that, even if the failure is involving me as an actor. In fact I tried using Tim's book in classes where students would say -- this is a master's class – and the teachers would say, why did he write it up like this? Why didn't he wait until he got it right and then write it up? That response reflects the notion that the aims are normative. My argument is that the uses of research are normative, the aims are not. The aim is to make sense of something. The aim is to look at a problem and instead of saying, oops, cover it up, to say, this is my dissertation. I just bumped into it. This is it. It may be very uncomfortable, it may be awkward, and it may take me in directions I didn't really want to go initially; but this is an angle into something that I never would have seen otherwise and a chance to try to explore this process in a way I never could have otherwise. From that greater understanding then maybe we can design programs and do teaching in ways that produce the kind of normative outcomes we want. You get that I mean. There's a kind of issue we all kind saw here, which was this very interesting ability to handle both the normative and analytical and not let one wipe out the other. Feel free to jump in anytime now. David.

David Pearson: Has there ever been a dissertation that took the normative perspective, that sort of rose to the top of the pile in terms of dissertation of the year, or have they mainly been in the critical and analytical tradition? Just curious.

Wilson: What do you mean?

Pearson: Some sort of characterization of why and how something works.

Wilson: Speaking outside of this range of dissertations, I've read dissertations like that. I've never read a dissertation like that, however, that didn't have some variation within it. For instance if it was about something that worked well, the understanding of the thing that worked well arose from seeing it in contrast with things within the same case that didn't work well.

Labaree: That's it. David, the case's you're getting at, which you would call a normative dissertation, I'd call an analytical dissertation that's focusing on something that works. What makes it work is as interesting as what makes it not work. The point of it is not to affirm the desired outcome but to understand why the desired out come happened this time and -- by implication, as Suzanne said -- not other times, so I still see that as an analytical task. It's not wish fulfillment; it's trying to understand what works. And that's an analytical issue. David.

David Wong: If I was a doctoral student I don't know how I would be feeling right now. You seem to be saying that as a dissertation writer you have to be courageous, you have to stick with it and you have to stare it right in eye and you have to be a changed person through this whole process. I think this works and certainly is dramatic and makes for a dissertation that's probably fairly interesting to read. But I'm really searching hard for another, a second alternative, where there might be some major shift in ideas, might be courage and all that as well, yet it doesn't involve a breakdown right in the middle of it. I think most people do try to document the shift in ideas. I think it's more the shift in there thinking as compared to where the thinking has been its more a shift in the community, so its not so much encapsulated in them as an individual. So the story is one not so much of them changing as an individual, which makes for a good story -- the character changes from the beginning, and that's a good story. But maybe for the perfect story, they talk about the shift of scholars moving in thought. This is then just a kind of step moving back a crisis, not so much their own personal story .

Wilson: Well, I'll caricature my position on this. For fun, for good sport. I'd say actually one of the ways in which I think about what makes a dissertation different than another piece of intellectual work is that a feature of it is that you are transformed, that your intellect has been transformed in the process, and that the kind of learning that I -- and I'm not saying everybody has to think about dissertations in this way -- but the kind of learning that I associate with the dissertation, as opposed to a masters degree or another kind of degree, is that it is learning that is deeply, personally transformative. And I assume, because I've never had an experience where this has not been the case, that this kind of learning comes with pain. And is very difficult. Learning is just really, really hard, and when you're learning something that really matters, it is especially hard. Thus, I conceptualize a doctoral dissertation is that it is a piece of work that requires this kind of deep intellectual transformation, and if that didn't happen then it isn't there, it's not done yet. That's a caricature but that's not too much of one.

Sedlak: I just want to say one thing. It's not as though that those emotional watershed moments constitute the dissertation. It's in part what that sort of internal response to this moment did for intellectual maturity and crystallizing a problem and doing the analytical work. It's clear there's something inspired, motivated, shaped by these more internal private experiences. Transformed is a very nice way to think about it. But that's really not the subject of all this; the issue is the way that helps the researcher to do what's worth doing for an intellectual piece of work. That's what characterizes all of these studies. It's their willingness to delve into stuff that remained uncomfortable, but it was the value of the stuff they went after and into that justifies the work and the personal, private discomfort.

David Pimm: There seems to be something about, there's an I-voice and there's a We-voice that's around. The We being the area of the community of literature that's being written about, and I think anytime I read a dissertation one of the things I'm

looking out for is what's the relation between the I-voice and the We-voice. I've been in England for a number of years. My biggest nightmare actually is a serious institution that is producing students only with a We-voice. It's like they were looking at this thing and they weren't in this room, but in the next room, you know, a light year away from what they were actually talking about, and it was all this very articulate distanced academic prose. And then there's the antithesis of that, which is simply a personal experience that is equally unpleasant to encounter as a dissertation. I think one of those things that seems to be common in these three dissertations is the tension between the I and the We. That's part of what's being offered, but also I don't get the impression you're saying this is the way to do it. It's one of the dangers of doing this kind of comparison. The three of you found something in common that might seem to be a nice thing, but it also gives the impression that that's the thing to do.

Wilson: None of these people actually set out to do this.

Cleo Cherryholmes: A hypothesis, or another way to interrupt what the three of you have been describing, is that what started out as the research question, as the researcher started to tell the story, became decentered and the intellectual maturity resulted from the ability to let the initial focus move to the margin and substitute something else. If that's the case and since this is all occurring in the social and political context of a dissertation committee, could you speak to the particular characteristics of the community that allows this to happen. Because I can imagine more cases than not where a committee could easily stifle this kind of work.

Labaree: Let me speak to that. I think that's a nice way of looking at it -- allowing the original question to slide off to the side and focusing on something that emerged from that. It requires from the researchers a degree of flexibility, and since a dissertation is not something you're doing entirely on your own, it requires a dissertation committee, particularly a dissertation director, willing to encourage that and not stifle it. I would say there's an interesting problem that we don't talk about that much. A lot of the calculation that faculty do is based on some sense about what's possible in this case. Sometimes faculty end up saying, you're straying into a lot of stuff that's going to make it hard to figure this out. You have to maintain a focus here, so go on and do this later. This is often the advice you get from dissertation directors about things. I've given it myself, and that's very much a judgment call. But one judgment that is involved in that is that we often, like all teachers, necessarily spend time working with students who are having trouble rising to the standard of producing a good dissertation, of producing an adequate dissertation. In a case like that, adding too much complexity to it and straying from the straight plan is potentially derailing and counterproductive. And it may not happen if you push too far in that direction. Also part of this is an issue of building in students the capacity to be able to handle decentering the original question. To be able to handle conceptually the possibility of shifting direction without starting over again. And to be able to handle the challenge of

moving into an arena outside of their comfort zone and that may not be at the very center of what they define as their arena of expertise. And yet to have a sufficient degree of confidence and enough of a track record and enough support from your committee to suggest that you can get over that hurdle and you can accomplish that and you can make that shift and do something that's not only doable but it's actually much more worth doing then what you were originally planning to do. I think that's a complicated issue.

Cherryholmes: I can image another dissertation committee saying we don't do those things.

Labaree: Absolutely.

Cherryholmes: Allow deviation from the original question.

Labaree: There's a huge amount of variation in students and in faculty views about that, so we are speaking for ourselves on what constitutes good work and what constitutes a good dissertation. That's very much of an open question, about which there would be disagreement.

Pearson: I want to go back to the normative vs. critical analysis issue. I think that one of the things you learn from the critical analytical approach is what isn't working and maybe some explanations why, but it still leaves open the question of who does the normative research in a perfect world, going to inform the kinds of policy that we as a society and profession support.

Wilson: Can I ask you a question about how you are using those terms?

Pearson: I was trying to work within what I took to be David's framework.

Labaree: We're using the word normative differently here, I think. You're talking about something that works and that you hope will work and studying that. Great. But I'm talking about a normative purpose: my aim is that I'm invested in the success of this program and that it has to work right, this reform has to work right, in order for this dissertation to be successful. And what I'm suggesting is that what you're always doing in good research is that you analyze what actually happened. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. In both cases that's an analytical purpose.

Wilson: I don't like David's characterization of these stories as cases of failure, because I think that characterization exaggerates the dissertations. Both Sarah's and Tim's analyses enable our understandings about normative views. Each started with a normative view, translated it into a practice, and tested that practice. The lessons they learned were hard ones that shook the roots of their normative views. All research on practice has to establish some kind of standard by which to look at that practice -- whether it's a view of good practice, a view of common practice,

or minimal criteria -- but it has to have something. In both Sarah's and Tim's there is strong normative guidance. So I don't see the distinction as one of normative vs. analytical. I see it as analysis around normative issues that informed those normative issues, where sometimes the thing that helps inform you is something really wonderful. And that sometimes happens is you find something deeply disturbing. I wasn't thinking about David's language as being normative versus analytical but that research has got to be analysis -- not evaluations of, or proof that, the normative view is right but something that engages in a set of ideas.

Labaree: David Pimm was talking about the I vs. We voice. I think that this an important issue here and one of the things you look at that these people have in common and maybe that good work has in common. One way of putting it is these studies show a certain level of ambition. Personal ambition, professional ambition, intellectual ambition. Not wanting to simply confirm what everybody knows, not simply being one more voice that gets lost in a large chorus of voices, but to actually having something to say. I think each of these studies -- I think good work in general -- tends to assert itself at one level and say, I have something to say, listen up, this is worth it. Writing in itself in many ways is an act of arrogance. It's not a humble thing to put something down on paper and expect other people to spend the time to read it. You better have something to say and you better think it's worth saying. All of these are cases where people really did that. All too much research, all to many dissertations, are constructed around the principle of having absolutely nothing personal to say. They are basically constructed through the use of citations to say that actually lots of smart people said this before I did, so don't blame me for it. To use the data to produce a level of empirical generalization that is so obvious that you can say, any idiot would have seen this, I didn't have to be there, and suggest there were was no value added by having me do this.

I mean there are 30,000 dissertations produced in the U.S every year, and I just characterized at least 25,000 of them. But the issue is that to have the dissertation writer move beyond that approach, to say, so what is it that I am saying? There's a topic here, but what's my angle? What is it that I am contributing? What's my value added to this discourse, and what is it that maybe someone else wouldn't have seen that I did? And to be able to say, let me put it out front. I'm not going to mask it under a lot of citations. I'm going to say it and I'm going to make it clear. And maybe in part I'm gong to make it clear because I want to be recognized for that. I don't want to be par for the course. I mean there is an act of assertion that's involved in writing good work. It means being willing to put yourself out there, to get shot at but also to get credit.

Pimm: The tension between assent and assert. I'm remembering teaching first year algebra at the university, where I was suddenly faced with teaching 250 students mathematics. I recalled listening to the same lecture at the same university about 15 years previously, and pictured myself up there assenting to what was going on.

Very low energy. I lost 10 pounds in 10 weeks asserting the same materials. It was a terrific dietary move. And somehow the shift -- in particular in mathematics -- I think that the professional style is you're left with nothing but asserting.

Labaree: It all works, trust me. That's what's nice about education. We don't know if anything works, so all assertion is able to be challenged. So you don't have to worry about nodding as everybody tells you something. You can easily randomly dissent. Cleo.

Cherryholmes: I have another hypothesis. There might be a methodological angle on the three dissertations, at least two of them are fairly qualitative. Was the math study qualitative? Ok, one of the first rules of qualitative research is not to prejudge the situation. So if you're consistent and you don't let the research question prejudge the outcome for your analysis, then perhaps methodologically you're more open to the kinds of the results recorded than if you had a rigorously designed quantitative hypothesis.

Labaree: I would disagree. I think it's just the opposite, actually . In a quantitative study you have clear decision rules about failure or success.

Cherryholmes: But not what to do after you get to failure.

Labaree: But with qualitative research there's a huge temptation to find what you're looking for, to affirm the thing the wish you seek to fulfill though your research. That's a very difficult thing. One of the issues maybe we should be talking about in later colloquia is, in a qualitative research environment, how is it that you establish some kind of rigorous methods for trying to support some assertions over others.

Wilson: I would have to say I don't think that it's a qualitative versus quantitative issue. I think it's a quality and rigor difference. If you have high quality work that aims for some kind of rigor, you have to engage in certain practices. You need to look for disconfirming evidence. It's a principle of qualitative work and it's a principle of quantitative work, and if you don't do it in either it's a sign of a lack of commitment to a rigorous research agenda. I don't see it as an issue of the kind of method that you use but the quality and rigor that you use.

Dara Sandow: One of the characteristics that you mentioned about these works is they spoke to a broad audience, and I'm wondering how much came from their initial design, or whether it came from an attempt to make sense of this disturbance that was unanticipated, or whether it was a matter of having social interactions play a strong role and that allowed it to broaden.

Sedlak: For example, Sharon's piece was never really self-conscious about that potential for itself, even when it was finished. There was nothing that you could get from

reading the dissertation that led you to believe that she appreciated its potential contribution to a lot of other discussions and patterns and trends that have been going on. There is no reason to expect someone coming up though counseling psych to be aware of social welfare policy, adolescent pregnancy counseling, remedial courses in school, and all these kinds of things, so it's really not in there. She did a colloquium like all of the dissertation award winners. We had a good time in Sharon's colloquium -- just as we did in the discussion of her dissertation in the award competition itself -- talking about the way that her effort to understand the professional induction experience or professional education experience was significant, was a symbol of something much broader spanning a broad array of professional fields, as they moved from an ethos that was non-judgmental. This was one of the core reasons that she found her people unable to recognize or to act on impairment, as they're basically prepared to respect such a variety of practice, to refuse to judge anyone. This is a whole professional ethos, which I would argue exists in education as well. Now writing in the social services and related areas focus on that, and we are starting to look at it in the area of curriculum itself. In her study she really wasn't aware that she could contribute an emblematic effort to understand the transformation from this very passive, neutral, nonjudgmental ethos of practice to one that took much more seriously the training level, the responsibility for the institution and its representatives, the faculty members, to grapple with potential impairment or incompetence by getting beyond the way they themselves were trained and those in many other fields were trained. But Sharon's was, I think, the most timid of the three in this one respect. It doesn't pose a problem for it that she wasn't aggressive at the beginning; but after the colloquium and other discussions, she was starting to realize that she had tapped into a very broad movement or transformation underway in professional education in all kinds of fields.

Labaree: Part of what's interesting about that, I think, is that it is an example that should be reassuring to students. A dissertation is the first major piece of original research you do, and you don't have to master all the implications and all of the possible connections and significance of that research. For research in general, the significance of it is very largely established in a community. Other people see it, other people make connections, and you don't have to see it all for yourself. What she did and the others did is they aimed at something that was big and seemed important in that context. They didn't necessarily have to establish the broader implications of that for other fields and be aware of that other stuff that may come later. That's ok. So some of the significance we are attributing to these studies is what we see that wasn't necessary made explicit in the text itself. That's ok . You don't write your magnum opus with the first thing you do in your career, and that's not a problem.

Wilson: Lee Shulman said to me, if it is your magnum opus then you're in trouble because what are you going to do with the rest of you life?

Labaree: It's down hill from there on.

Wilson: So it better not be the best thing you ever do.

Labaree: It's 3:00, people are leaving, and it's probably time for us to wrap this up. Thank you very much for coming. If you have ideas for future colloquia around the issue of the practice of educational research, let me know. We're going to continue the series and we'd like to hear what things you'd like to explore. Thank you again for coming.