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Re-imagining doctoral pedagogies and temporal practices in higher education

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Abstract:

What it is to be a PhD student and what it means to do a PhD is changing. Student numbers have increased and diversified, and there has been a flourishing of new routes of doctoral study. In this paper I discuss this changing context in order to rethink what we mean by doctoral education, what it might involve, what doctoral texts might look like, as well as thinking differently about researcher and supervisor identities. I employ two of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts: rhizome and becoming, to consider the value of attending to the messy becomings that researchers experience. Theory is put to work through drawing upon my own recent experiences as a doctoral researcher studying for a PhD by published works. However, I suggest that conceptualising doctoral study (and learning) as rhizomatic, with tentacular twists and turns, dead ends and red herrings, can offer value to all forms of doctorate.

Paper: In this conceptual paper I consider how we might reimagine doctoral pedagogies and temporal practices in higher education, in view of a rapidly changing sector and the need for new kinds of ways of thinking about learning and research. I consider the literature and guidance on doctoral education. This literature is rich with metaphors. Often, a doctorate is described as a pathway, journey or trajectory (e.g. Batchelor and Di Napoli [2006](#); Barnacle and Mewburn [2010](#); Prøitz and Wittek [2020](#)), a rite of passage (Kiley [2009](#); Humphrey and Simpson [2012](#)) or a liminal space (Wisker et al. [2010](#); Breier, Herman, and Towers [2020](#)). Doctoral students have also been conceptualised as undertaking a crossing or boundary zone (Prøitz and Wittek [2020](#)). And yet, what do spatial narratives do? What possibilities exist beyond those spaces?

In building on this literature and offering an alternative perspective, I engage with the work of theorists Deleuze and Guattari ([1987](#)), and in particular two concepts: rhizome and becoming, conceptual tools that offer rich potential for higher education researchers to think differently about areas of practice and about learning and change. I discuss how these concepts can be put to work to develop our understanding of the irregular, fluid, and messy experiences of doctoral study. I suggest that rather than a linear journey towards a fixed endpoint, doctoral students can be understood as experiencing multiple and ongoing becomings, evolving and changing throughout a doctorate and beyond.

Such a re-imagining of the doctoral journey becomes even more appropriate when considering the increasing prevalence of alternative forms of doctoral study, which can offer irruptions to traditional

conceptions of a linear doctoral journey, leading towards becoming an academic, and which can even disrupt the thesis genre itself. Changes within the doctoral landscape, such as an increasing variety of routes to achieving a doctorate, reflect the rapidly changing higher education landscape. Drawing upon illustrative examples from my own recent doctoral experiences (Gravett 2020), I suggest that such new approaches offer opportunities to question further the limits of linear narratives that perpetuate performative, competitive, discourses and practices.

I consider what such a re-imagining can do: I explore the openings that exist when doctoral journeys are disrupted, and the value of emergent, rhizomatic, micro-moments of research. During my doctorate, I found the idea of the rhizome useful in enabling me to reflect upon what connections could be drawn from the interweaving of a collection of publications through the doctoral thesis, and thinking about my own messy and nonlinear experience of learning. However, I suggest that the value of conceptualising doctoral study (and learning) as rhizomatic, with tentacular twists and turns, dead ends and red herrings, can offer value to all forms of the doctorate.

For supervisors, practical examples of such openings might include seeking opportunities to disrupt power hierarchies through learning together, collaboration and co-authorship. It might also include working with students towards reconceptualising what is understood by, and what is valued within, doctoral study through fostering opportunities for play and experimentation, through creating safe spaces for researchers to make mistakes, and through encouraging the use of creative methodologies and experiments with theory. It might include supervisors and examiners asking new questions of doctoral students which disrupt the normative rhythms of higher education: what has surprised you? What have you most enjoyed? What dead ends have you experienced, and how were these valuable to you?

A change in perspective may mean that what counts is not the smoothness of the path, or the speed in which students are able to 'complete' their learning, but the opportunities for connection and creativity along the way. Indeed, some researchers for example Guerin (2013) have argued that the implications of reconceptualising research culture as rhizomatic are that we can move towards developing the researcher identities most valued within contemporary academic environments, as well as creating opportunities to break the boundaries of normativities of textual practice.

Of course, researchers' experiences are political: durable systemic factors and constraints continue to shape individuals' experiences of research and work in the academy. And yet, there remains a need to unsettle taken-for-granted ways of thinking and working, creating openings (however small) for the relational, and for creativity, surprise, and emergence, within the fast-paced world of 'successful' outcomes and linear pathways.

This paper will close with a consideration of some key questions raised: how might we foster further spaces for doctoral students to play, experiment and make mistakes? What might be the value of different kinds of thesis genres becoming increasingly prevalent?

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