

382 Reading Time. A phenomenological exploration of reading habits, rhythms and practices in doctoral education in the UK.

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In contemporary doctoral education, much less attention is devoted to understanding how students engage with higher level readings, than it is to supporting the development of their academic writing skills. Reading is generally approached instrumentally for research and equated with an extractive process to retrieve, survey or review the information needed for writing.

This paper examines the under-researched area of reading habits, rhythms and practices among doctoral students in the UK, using vignettes to explore how a diverse group of doctoral students relates to, makes sense of, and engages with reading as a research practice in its own right. Through the innovative use of a rhythm-analytical-phenomenological methodology centred on the students' lived experience, the paper takes a closer look at the spatio-temporal, material, cognitive and affective dimensions of reading and draws pedagogical and philosophical implications for doctoral education and supervision whilst foregrounding mutual learning from cultural difference.

Full paper

The increasing exposure of higher education sectors worldwide to market mechanisms (e.g. privatisation in and of higher education, platformisation and assetization) generates market-making pressures, technologies and relations that are changing university missions and academic practices in both research and teaching, altering not only forms of knowledge production but also academic identities (Lewis and Robertson, 2022). These corporate, competitive systems operate in and through regimes of time acceleration and compression (Rosa, 2013; Wajcman & Dodd eds. 2017) that enable capitalist accumulation via a proliferation of calculative practices and surveillance techniques driven by instrumental logics.

In this context, this paper begins by acknowledging the tensions that pit institutional time-scarcity/pressure against the individual irrational times, practices and rhythms that characterise the craft of intellectual work. More specifically, it focuses on doctoral education, considered both as a liminal space-time of profound transformation for students and as the rite of passage through which doctoral candidates enter the academic community.

Doctoral students in the modern accelerated academy experience mounting institutional pressures to complete their research projects within tight timeframes punctuated by developmental milestones. At the same time, they are increasingly encouraged to publish and participate in externally funded projects before completing their course of studies, to position themselves more favourably in a hyper-competitive, yet precarious job market.

Comparatively, much less attention is devoted to reading as an autonomous practice in relation to educational research. Reading is generally approached instrumentally for research and mostly equated with a strategic, extractive process whereby academics retrieve, survey or review the information needed for writing to maximise efficiency (Fulford and Hodgson eds. 2016; Walker 2017). Doctoral students are taught to tackle the volume of readings by deploying selective, skim and speed-reading techniques that 'teach' them a practical method to 'fillet' publications (Silverman 2010:323) or 'gut(ting) an article or book for the material you need' (Thomas 2013:67). The author argues instead that reading should be approached as research, that is a philosophical orientation whose intimate relation with thinking and writing constitutes a conjuncture with transformative potential for both the reader and the text (Hoveid&Hoveid 2013; Dakka and Wade 2019).

Against this backdrop, the paper builds substantially on two contributions in the cognate fields of philosophy, pedagogy and ethics of education that underpin its theoretical and methodological choices. Firstly, Aldridge (2019) explores the association between reading, higher education and educational engagement through the phenomenological literary theorisations of Rita Felski (2015) and Marielle Macé (2013). Reading here is considered as a phenomenological 'orientation' with ontological character: the entanglement of body, thought and sense makes reading an 'embodied mode of attentiveness' with 'rhythms of rapprochement and distancing, relaxation and suspense, movement and hesitation' (Felski 2015: 176). Secondly, Boulos Walker (2017) introduces the concept of 'slow reading', or reading philosophically against the institution. This practice stands in opposition to the institutional time, efficiency, and productivity pressures which prevent the intense, contemplative attitude toward research typical of active educational engagement. The author calls therefore for slow reading, careful reading, re-reading as antidotes against institutional contexts dominated by speed and the cult of efficiency.

Hence the paper aims to shine a light on the under-researched area of reading habits, rhythms and practices among doctoral students in the UK through the use of vignettes and a combination of hermeneutic phenomenology and rhythmanalysis. Through such exploration the author intends to examine pedagogical and philosophical implications for learning in doctoral education (educational engagement and intellectual flourishing), for the practice of doctoral supervision as teaching and mentoring, and, by extension, for higher education as the nurturing, enabling ground of teachers and learners.

Methodologically, Rhythmanalysis enables a closer look at the students' reading habits, rhythms and practices in relation to their doctoral studies. The emphasis on spatio-temporality and (auto-)ethnographic observations makes it possible to register and grasp the tensions that derive from clashes between meso institutional constraints and demands (e.g. set timeframes for completion; developmental milestones), micro individual responses and circumstances (e.g. different modes of study, private and/or professional commitments) and macro societal context (e.g. extractive capitalism, cultural expectations).

The phenomenologically/hermeneutical aspect draws instead on the hermeneutic, existential, and ontological dimensions found in Gadamer's and Heidegger's philosophy, which are concerned with grasping the lived experiential meanings and understanding human lifeworld and its phenomena.

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