

## Exploring reading habits, rhythms and practices of doctoral students in the UK: slow reading as a pedagogy of refusal?

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### Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### Abstract

In 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 shares and discusses preliminary findings from a BA/Leverhulme funded project that examines reading habits, rhythms and practices among doctoral students in the UK and Norway. Focusing on the UK case study, it reports on how a diverse group of doctoral students makes sense of, and engages with reading as a research practice in its own right.

Through the original use of a methodology centred on the students' lived experience, the project takes a closer look at the material, cognitive and affective dimensions of reading. It draws pedagogical and philosophical implications for doctoral education and supervision.

### Full paper

The increasing exposure of higher education sectors worldwide to market mechanisms (e.g. privatisation *in* and *of* higher education, platformisation and assetization) is generating 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 essence, the timescapes of the 'accelerated academy' (Vostal 2016) have come to be not just dominated but defined by the linear rhythms of knowledge production, accumulation, consumption, and distribution.

Doctoral students in the modern accelerated academy experience mounting institutional pressures to complete their research projects within tight timeframes punctuated by developmental milestones (e.g. research proposal, upgrade, annual progress assessment, ethical approval, data collection, writing-up, Viva voce etc.). At the same time, they are increasingly encouraged - if not required - 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). Furthermore, there is an implicit assumption that reading for research will be predominantly confined to the initial stages of the research project, in support of, or preparation for, data collection.

Against this backdrop, and building on the author's extensive work on Rhythmanalysis, academic writing and supervisory practice (Dakka, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023; Dakka and Wade, 2018), the paper reports on early findings from a recently awarded BA/Leverhulme project (2024-25).

At last year's SRHE Conference, the presentation focused on the theoretical and methodological foundations of the project. This year, the paper will share findings from the UK case study, critically discussing how English doctoral students experience and engage with high level readings.

The paper will then assess and debate the effectiveness of the methodological combination of Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Heidegger 2023; Gadamer 2004, 2008) and Rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004) to gain insight into the lived experiences, the embodied and cognitive processes of meaning-making and the spatio-temporal (rhythmic) dimensions of reading among doctoral students.

It will explore the affordance of Rhythmanalysis as a method and orientation that foregrounds spatio-temporality and (auto-)ethnographic observations to grasp the tensions deriving 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. cognitive, extractive capitalism). It will then acknowledge the phenomenological-hermeneutical dimension which is concerned with grasping the lived experiential meanings and understanding human lifeworld and its phenomena.

In conclusion, based on initial findings, the paper will attempt an early theorisation of Slow Academia as a praxis of refusal, resistance and appropriation. Exploring and critiquing students' reading practices through the prism of Rhythmanalysis and Phenomenology, it will offer experiential and speculative suggestions to try and revive a utopian horizon, where universities and academic identities and practices are enacted and lived differently.

## References

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