

Decentering and Decolonizing Doctoral Pedagogies

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This paper aims to trouble the traditional relationship between a doctoral candidate and ‘supervisor’ in terms of its power differential, often characterised as an asymmetric expert/novice dyad. I consider how to rethink and disrupt dominant conceptions of doctoral pedagogy, to build more collaborative, collegial ‘decentred’ approaches to supervisory work.

Doctoral pedagogies should aim to develop repertoires of successful members of the discourse community – mirroring professional ways of being and doing research work. A PGR’s doctoral repertoire will be indexical and biographical, grounded in the plethora of networks, communities and resources they learn through, and forming a distributed patchwork of competencies, dispositions and values.

The paper discusses recommendations and implications such decentring orientations have for decolonizing doctoral pedagogies. It traces how doctoral practices emerge from the historic colonial project and the potential impacts this has specifically on International, indigenous and refugee PGR’s, alongside some possibilities for mitigating these colonial impacts.

Full paper

Traditionally, the relationship between a doctoral supervisor and their students has been characterised in terms of its power differential, as an asymmetric expert/novice dyad. The supervisor has been constructed as an authoritative figure dispensing factual information and advice (Janks and Ivanič 1992). In this paper, we aim to trouble the conception that doctoral pedagogies are vehicles for training and the transmission of expert knowledge from supervisor to student. Instead, we contend that doctoral pedagogies should be viewed as productive spaces, which provide opportunities to challenge pre-existing assumptions and consider alternatives, with the intention of transformation of understandings within the field. We approach this by offering our theorisations of a proposed shift in the pedagogic relationships of doctoral ‘supervision’ (or arguably more appropriately reframed as ‘alliance’). We see doctoral pedagogies as a route to an agentic, relational and reflexive induction into an academic discourse community. Our approach to a decentred doctoral pedagogy is thus named for its intention to diffuse the power from the central authority of the supervisor out to the student community. Pedagogically, the supervisor is seen as someone whose job is not merely to ‘skill up’ learners but to

support them to develop the (doctoral) repertoire of a successful member of the academic or professional discourse community.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This work is grounded in a range of transdisciplinary theoretical framings, namely:

- Repertoire – sociology (Swindler 1986), organizational management/ethnographies (Howard-Grenville et al. 2011), sociolinguistics (Blommaert & Backus 2011)
- Liminality/Communitas – cultural anthropology (Turner 1967)
- Productive Pedagogies (Lingard et al. 2001)
- Culturally Responsive Pedagogies (Ladson-Billings 1992)

Pedagogical Implications

The conceptualisations above encourage us to consider how to translate these into a range of pedagogical mechanisms for doctoral pedagogy work.

Pedagogical avenues that could be explored include:

- Creation of student-determined spaces for authentic dialogue – decentred workshops (Hyatt 2013), debates, panels, symposia,
- Discursive/dialogic approaches to teaching
- Repeated presentation and ‘defence’ of work
- Supervisors sharing draft work with supervisees
- Collaborative Ethical Writing / Co-publication
- Video vignettes on theory, methodology, concepts – PGRs as active contributors
- PGRs reflect on what new understandings they have constructed not what they have been *taught* by supervisors
- Reflect on personal threshold concepts that have changed the way PGRs think and consider dialogically, with peers, concepts they still find troublesome
- Reflect on the, often hidden, psycho-emotional labour undertaken by PGRs
- Questioning the discourse – should we be supervisors or advisors (or mentors)? PGRs not PGR students?
- Critical mentoring/induction into contemporary higher education culture
- Decolonizing the Doctorate Experience

Despite a trans-national history of institutions dating back nearly 3000 year focussed on the core of higher education as being the cultural formation of persons (Marginson 2024), the imperial and colonial past (*of universities in the western/northern metropole*) and its ongoing legacy is both material and cultural—and decolonization requires that both be addressed (Enslin & Hedge 2023: 12).

A decentering approach is relevant for all doctoral students, but might have particular meaning for 'international' students – code for 'non-Western/non-Northern'. Their experience is imbued with not only these pedagogic power relations but with the legacy of a colonial past still visible in our universities everyday in:

- language/discourses,
- in attitudes to student's language use as deficit
- in the literature / theoretical frames and methodologies students are directed towards
- in epistemic orientations to knowledge and pedagogy
- in the names of our buildings and institutions
- internal power structures that privilege 'whiteness' (Secret Lives of International PGRs project)

Approaches to Decolonising Doctoral Pedagogies (a start not a manifesto!)

These could include:

- Destabilizing traditional models of academic knowledge production that have been shaped by power dynamics that perpetuate systemic inequalities, marginalization, and erasure of indigenous knowledge and epistemologies.
- Engaging with non-colonial epistemologies and approaches to pedagogies and research
- Raising awareness of decolonising education work in various global/local contexts
- Re-narrating institutional histories and institutional presents
- Being reflexive as to the impact of supervisor/advisor's biography/history/repertoire
- Employing decentred/culturally responsive pedagogic practices
- Respectfully learning (not appropriating) from pedagogic practices in non-western contexts
- According epistemologies of the South equality of opportunity with dominant Northern scientific knowledge

Conclusion

A decentred pedagogy is one in which learners are invited to re-appropriate and take back ownership of their learning and to develop their academic repertoire. The doctoral process then becomes an invitation to critical inclusion in, and reimagining of, the academic discourse community. Decentred doctoral pedagogies could provide a safe or even resistant space for students to push back at the colonial/Eurocentric legacy of epistemic injustice (the dominance of Western epistemologies and the marginalization of other forms of knowledge)

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