

Reading Time & Place in Doctoral Education: lessons learned from an international project.

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In contemporary doctoral education, significantly less attention is paid to understanding how students engage with higher-level readings compared to supporting the development of their academic writing skills. Reading is generally treated instrumentally for research and is equated with an extractive process to retrieve, survey, or review the information needed for writing. Bridging cultural sociology and the philosophy of education, a two-year study funded by BA/Leverhulme proposed an original methodological combination of Hermeneutics and Phenomenology, with particular reference to the works of Ricoeur (1984), Schutz (1972), and Rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004) to gain insight into the lived experiences, embodied and cognitive processes of meaning-making, and the spatiotemporal dimensions of reading among two groups of doctoral students in England and Norway. This paper reflects on key project findings and draws pedagogical, philosophical and ethical implications for doctoral learning and supervisory practice.

Full paper

This paper reports findings from a recently concluded two-year British Academy/Leverhulme-funded project that examined the under-researched area of reading habits, rhythms, and practices among doctoral students in the UK and Norway. The project explored how a diverse group of doctoral students related to, made sense of, and engaged with reading as a research practice in its own right and was guided by a primary research question and two interrelated sub-questions:

How do English and Norwegian doctoral students relate to, make sense of, and engage with reading as a practice, cognitively and emotionally? What do different reading practices reveal about various cultural reading and schooling traditions? How do different languages and socio-political contexts shape reading as a socio-cultural practice, and what can be mutually learned from the Norwegian and English contexts?

This presentation will begin with the seemingly commonsensical observation that reading takes time. Engaging with a text with the aim of interpreting and understanding is time-consuming, a point made by most of our respondents in this project. Reading appears to foster an experience of oneself as a slow reader, followed by feelings of guilt for merely "just" reading. The paper will address these issues and illuminate the commonalities and differences in the findings among respondents in the Norwegian and English case studies. Given the rich data produced, the author will not cover all aspects of what the research team found in the two case studies but will select the most salient points to stimulate meaningful debate with the audience.

With that in mind, the paper will focus on experienced time in relation to reading. Interestingly, clock time and phenomenological time seem to juxtapose in the reading process, creating conflicts and tensions for the majority of the PhD students involved in the project. The notion that reading can and should be done quickly and targeted to provide the project under study with the "right" information looms over many students, suggesting that efficiency and a goal-oriented practice are expected in their doctoral work. A deeper reading of texts opposes this notion, creating various challenges and demanding coping mechanisms and strategies from the students. The project further confirmed that reading practices in doctoral education are rarely addressed as a direct 'supervisory matter,' meaning that reading is expected to be managed by the students individually.

Against this backdrop, the team asked participants to pause and reflect on their reading practices and engage in deep and slow reading to illuminate individual and collective processes of interpretation, the development of the doctoral voice, and the value of community building. This paper will present and reflect on the rich, in-depth accounts of the students' engagement with reading in their doctoral studies, critically examining the current practices and predicaments faced by the doctoral community, hoping to enable better support for their intellectual and personal development. This, in turn, should create positive ripple effects on their ability to write, fully participate in the academic epistemic community, complete their studies, and alleviate mental health and well-being issues that are currently prevalent in doctoral education (Dakka 2019).

In this regard, findings are expected to lead to pedagogical innovations in supervisory teaching and mentoring practices in Norway and the UK, with a specific focus on embedding hermeneutic phenomenological reading exercises in doctoral training programs alongside academic writing support. Acknowledging that reading practices are not neutral but socio-culturally and geographically embedded, the study's dual site promotes cultural exchange and values difference as a source of mutual learning for English and Norwegian higher education cultures and practices.

Finally, the project's findings will inform plans for a scaled-up, comparative, longitudinal project to examine cross-cultural variations in doctoral reading engagement in social

sciences and humanities and explore the affordances of digital reading techniques for slow reading practices and deep learning.