

How might involvement in the process of critically examining doctoral level professional work change you?(0112)

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Abstract

This paper reports on issues related to the meaning, identity and transformation of candidates and other stakeholders involved in a professional doctorate by public works. The programme is a 'third generation' doctorate that acknowledges the importance of situated, work based knowledge and prior learning and is a sister qualification to the PhD by published works. A small scale qualitative study into the experiences of 14 participants was undertaken as the first part of a larger evaluation study presently underway. Semi-structured telephone interviews were arranged with all external stakeholders, namely candidates, external examiners and one consultant. Subsequently, a focus group was conducted among internal stakeholders, the internal examiners, advisers, consultants and chairs involved in the programme. The results indicated that involvement in the programme contributed to a widened understanding of knowledge claims to further embrace professional and public impact, and enabled individual candidates' to reconstruct their experience and examine their professional identity.

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Background

The Doctorate in Professional Studies by Public Works (DProfPW) programme focuses on work based and professional knowledge and learning that has been in the public domain, rather than the traditional evidence of published articles and books used in the PhD Published Works route (Armsby, 2005; 2006a; Davis and Chisholm, 2005). Candidates present a range of their public works e.g. policy documents, software, around a self-selected theme, write a 15,000-30,000 word context statement and undertake a presentation and viva voce. The DProfPW is a professional doctorate, predicated on the central tenets of work based learning outlined by Boud and Solomon (2001) that focus on practitioner's knowledge and practitioner-led enquiry.

Scott et al (2004) suggest that the practice based knowledge emanating from professional doctorates may be at odds with the dominant, disciplinary knowledge provided by and accredited at Universities. Gibbons et al (1994) typology of knowledge outlines:

- Mode 1 knowledge- as linear, causal, cumulative, a closed system, rooted in disciplinary authority, and
- Mode 2 knowledge, multi-variant, unsystematic, an open system where the users are creative users rather than passive beneficiaries, trans/multi disciplinary, produced in a wide social context.

Mode 1 fits most comfortably with the PhD, whereas mode 2 explains more closely how knowledge in professional doctorates is constructed. This is not a clear dichotomy, because as Boud and Lee (2009) point out, there are changing practices in the whole of doctoral education. But, there is recognition that professional doctorates are likely to have a different epistemological perspective than, for example, a 'traditional' PhD.

As a 'third generation' doctorate that acknowledges the importance of situated, work based knowledge and prior learning (Lester, 2006), the programme provides a route that has not previously been available for recognising and accrediting individuals' extensive, high level professional learning. The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), developed from the experiential education and learning approaches of such theorists as John Dewey (1938/1998) and David Kolb (1984), has been a feature of HE for a number of years, although, numerous reports e.g. Garnett et al, (2004) attest to its limited use. It would appear that APEL at doctoral level is well

imbedded in Universities with the familiar PhD by published works route (Davis and Chisholm, 2005), however, accrediting the prior experiential learning of practitioners mode 2 knowledge may provide an extra challenge for some HE practitioners, steeped in disciplinary practices.

The programme legitimises work place transdisciplinary knowledge and aims to aid the integration of theory and practice (Armsby, 2006b; Armsby et al, 2006). Individuals achieve a credential, their organisations benefit from the systematisation of their knowledge claims and the University increases access and connects learning with industry's needs (Armsby and Costley, 2009). Using experiential education as a cornerstone or even experiential learning as a foundation (Costley and Stephenson, 2009) to doctoral level learning is not new, but enabling a whole award through mode 2 knowledge is a further development, and hence of potential concern for HE practitioners.

It was thought that the above mentioned facets of the programme provided the opportunity for all participants to explore their perspective on how knowledge is constructed, legitimised and positioned in relation to their identity (Barnacle, 2005; Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007).

The research project set out to evaluate the programme, to:

- Assess the programme's perceived strengths and weaknesses;
- Examine the teaching, learning and assessment process in recognising and accrediting a experiential learning;
- Explore issues of parity with the PhD.

Methodology

A small scale qualitative study into the experiences of 14 participants involved in the case of three completed candidates was undertaken by an independent researcher. Semi-structured telephone interviews were arranged with all external stakeholders, namely candidates (3), external examiners (5) and one consultant. Subsequently, a focus group was conducted among internal stakeholders, the internal examiners (2), advisers (1), consultants(1) and chairs (2). The external examiners' reports on the work submitted were also scrutinised.

All the interviews and focus group were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim and the transcripts analysed for emergent themes. The external examiners' reports were also analysed qualitatively for issues arising. The following summarises the main themes that pertain to meaning, identity and transformation of the three candidates and other stakeholders involved in the process.

Results

The DProfPW was perceived as a welcome innovation and supported by all involved. It bridged the gap between the wider public and academic institutions and is in this sense wholly within the ethos of work based learning. Through synthesising professional knowledge with academic models it offered the scope to develop new epistemologies and this was perceived to be of great value to HE.

It struck me as an eminently sensible idea to try and reward the.... protracted contribution of individuals to public life, (External examiner)

I think that (the award) has the potential for providing new bodies of knowledge – very strong.'
(External Examiner)

Participants felt they were helping to push forward the frontiers of knowledge. By fusing professional practice with academic models, new perspectives were created.

Studying for this award was described as fostering the development of confidence and self esteem; it confirmed the ability to write, act and think analytically and critically at the highest level and provided an opportunity to be reflexive. The benefits of the programme are thus intrinsic and perceived as being developmental for candidates rather than summative (Barnacle, 2005; Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007).

Examiners and consultants described themselves as beneficiaries through engaging with senior level practitioners work at the leading edge of professional practice.

Conclusion

Involvement in the process appeared to provide a stimulus for redefining what constitutes significant knowledge. For the candidates, critically examining their professional contribution and impact offered an opportunity to reconstruct the meaning of their experiences and examine their professional identity. Candidates described this personal transformation as positive, and most other participants reported that taking part in the critical examination of doctoral level professional work offered a new perspective on how high level study can promote personal transformation. Further data is currently being collected to test these tentative conclusions.

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Biography

Pauline has managed and developed a generic professional doctorate programme for distance provision internationally and with collaborative partners. Recent research projects managed focused on developing and evaluating doctoral level provision.

Her research interests are in work-based learning and professional doctorates, and their epistemologies and methodologies. Much used pedagogic devices in work-based learning programmes such as the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), learning agreements and research and development projects are also interests, as is the use of elearning to facilitate work-based learners, and coaching and mentoring in the process of facilitating high level learning.

Pauline is contributing to an Interactive Work-Based Learning Environments project funded by JISC 2009-2011. She is presently on the UK Council for Graduate Education/Middlesex University, Second International Professional Doctorates Conference committee 2011.

Pauline has recently undertaken consultancy in relation to work-based learning and professional doctorates through the Higher Education Academy and in Sweden and Turkey.