

Narratives of transformation: towards a deconstructive reading of the changing identities of those involved in professional doctorate programme. (0205)

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In some of the identities that could unfold in a professional doctorate programme – *knowledge, profession, student* – there is always a danger of appearing to render such characterisations in their fullness and perfection.

This paper questions any possible rendering of such identities in this way. It attempts to open further debate concerning the on-going temporal unfolding of identity, understood here in terms of Derrida's 'play of *différance*' (1973, 142–3; 2001{1978}; Flint, 2009a). His work provides a helpful context for our readings of the experiences of professional doctorate students, who are here understood to occupy the 'liminal space' (Clughen and Flint, 2010) produced for research by one PDP.

The term 'liminality' derives from anthropology. In the field of 'performance studies', for Turner (1990: 11-12) it occupies 'a no-man's land betwixt and between'. It is located here in what might be regarded as that unfolding space between beginning and completing a PDP. 'Liminality' is understood as 'fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities' (Turner, 1990: 11-12).

It is important to distinguish between concepts of liminality *per se*, and the space produced for such liminality in the performance of being students on the PDP in question (Lefebvre, 1991). From our earlier studies (Flint et al., 2009 b,c,d) it was clear that in some cases any possible space for liminality had been completely crushed. As Alma Arnold, who is a principal lecturer at George Lake, noted:

'My study was in intense bursts followed by long periods when the day job took over... We all work in an environment which requires full concentration and it is difficult to manage this level of study (for the professional doctorate) in that'

It appears that each individual is presented with the challenge of thinking their own way in and through the liminal space produced by the programme.

Pedagogically, the dialogical approach used with the students has its roots in philosophical discourse (Kögler 1996 {1992}) and literacy theory (Bhaktin, 1981; Lillis, 2006). Rather than being didactic, the pedagogy is being developed to encourage student interest, where they are among beings: *inter esse*.

But, how was such *inter-esse* uncovered? It was made plain by listening¹ to the experiences of PD students at George Lake. They were each asked to reflect on their experiences of the programme. Listening carefully to their responses, and in so doing listening to how the other envisions and constructs their own truthful accounts of their own world, made concrete an attempt to respect 'these differences' (Irigaray, 2008: 232). As one of the participants, Martha Stevens² reflected:

"I think my perception of the professional doctorate (before I had started) was that it was more of a taught or guided programme than it turned out to be. I had a sort of vision of a Masters Plus with... students as more passive receivers of information. The reality was much better and the degree of independent study was challenging in a good way."

Martha has identified herself, at this early stage in her research for the professional doctorate, not as a student *per se*, but as one who could think given a 'degree of independent study'.

In contrast, one of her peers on the programme, Elisha Platt, sees things entirely differently. She identifies strongly with her own professionalism. From one angle her anxieties regarding engagement in the programme mediate her own 'preunderstandings'³ of an instrumental sense of performativity derived from her professional work as a lecturer, following her early successes in the first two official documents for the programme:

"It is more stressful as the programme progresses. It brings with it the desire to produce better and better pieces of high-level academic writing. Each paper seems to stretch you individually beyond what you deem your capabilities to be."

This level of engagement for Elisha brings with it other anxieties: "my personal life has been on hold... I can barely watch TV, go out socialising, have real holidays or even read a trashy novel." But, following this disclosure, Elisha quickly returns to her original theme of instrumental performativity derived from her own professional work as a lecturer:

In terms of my professional work, the benefits have been enormous. I can now lecture on my subject with far more knowledge...deep knowledge...and hence answer students' questions with more clarity.

1 As Irigaray (2008: 231) has argued, such listening is undertaken to break the continual transmission of an inherited culture which the teacher had made their own world.

2 The names of all participants in the professional doctorate programme have been fictionalised to ensure their anonymity and to protect the confidentiality of the data in accord with standard ethical protocols for research (BERA, 2004).

3 The term 'preunderstanding' is borrowed from Kögler's (1996) reading of Heidegger and Gadamer. In Kögler's (1996:105) account an analysis of 'preunderstandings' can be fruitfully undertaken with the aid of his concepts of 'power practices' and 'symbolic order' mediating the world of the professional doctorate student.

For Elisha, after two years, the experience has been a source of regeneration. "I feel a sense of re-engagement with my profession of origin and that feels good."

In the liminal space which the pedagogy of the programme attempts to reflect, already there can be seen quite different identities unfolding from the work of participants.

In listening to Geoff Dean, in his first year, with a 'background in cognitive education', his identity continues to unfold as a 'thinker'. Not one engaged in some form of luxurious activity reserved only for an élite, but rather, as one who appreciates thinking as an everyday task. In Geoff's words:

"The days spent at George Lake presented what one might call a 'modifying environment'. I have come up against entirely new concepts and have struggled... to connect them up with my existing knowledge and thereby invest them with meaning."

Geoff is here making sense of the liminal space 'betwixt and between' the secure reality constituted as a professional discourse of cognitive education, and the ontology opened up through the programme. For Geoff this meant:

"I have been, dare I say, modified by the process. This has, I think, happened at a structural level. I am aware of my thinking, my *way* of thinking and the *level* at which I am thinking. The Professional Doctorate has, in a sense, been a psychological tool for modifying me!" (Geoff Dean)

Structurally, making sense of his own world anew reflects, perhaps, his experience of thinking as a way of being, rather than a consumer of knowledge.

On reflection the study underlines the possibilities of thinking as an everyday activity generated through the PDP. Rather than the perfected notion of student, the participants variously identified themselves as thinkers.

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