

Shining a light on doctoral reading: Implications for doctoral identity (0034)

Context:

Reading and writing are inextricably linked to the very nature and fabric of Science. (Norris and Phillips, 2003, 226)

This view is a common one among those researching academic literacies. From this perspective, learning to make sense of disciplinary 'talk' and being able to communicate effectively is a developmental process that can take a number of years, particularly given the multiple forms of text that need to be mastered, e.g., dissertation, peer-reviewed paper, research report (Beaufort, 2000). Still, while reading and writing may conceptually be linked, writing has tended to be the focus of research into doctoral experience (van Pletzen, 2006) – perhaps because the production of a particular type of text, a thesis/ dissertation, is the principle requirement. As a result the powerful influence of reading remains largely invisible as does the intimate integration between reading and writing – though Kwan (2008, 2009) has recently begun to address this gap.

Aim: This paper draws on doctoral students' reports of their literacy practices to highlight the invisible but essential role of reading in the development of student thinking and academic identity.

Method: In two parallel research programs (Canada and the UK), two teams collected accounts of experience longitudinally from over 40 social science doctoral students. The intent was to gain greater insight into the day-to-day experience of doctoral work. Participants provided accounts of their experiences in three ways: a) through biographic and demographic questionnaires beginning and end of study, b) activity logs about once a month to capture the experiences and perceptions of a particular week, and near the study end, an interview to gain detailed understandings of issues arising from the other data.

As recounted elsewhere (McAlpine & Mckinnon, in press), these different student accounts formed the basis for researcher-constructed case narratives, short descriptive texts with minimal interpretation, for each of the participants in the project. These accounts were developed through successive re-reading of all data for each individual in order to capture a comprehensive, but reduced, narrative (Coulter & Smith, 2009). The case narratives enabled the researchers to become familiar with each individual case as well as to look across the cases for themes of interest to examine in more depth (Stake, 2006). In this way, while the focus on the individual was preserved it was still possible to look for commonalities, in this case related to literacy practices.

In the UK, four cases were chosen at random and the research team read all the logs and interviews of these four cases. Through this process, a number of literacy practice themes were agreed. Then, one team member continued analyzing the data from the remaining participants with another member of the team verifying samples of the coding. The analysis in Canada built on this process. Finally, the author verified the analysis in light of her knowledge of the data in both studies and the literature. While there was some difference in writing practices across the two contexts, no differences were noted as regards reading.

Results: Not surprisingly, given the focus on producing a thesis (and sometimes other genres), writing represented one-third of all reported activities. What was striking to us was that reading was reported as frequently as writing. Students noted the following kinds of reading challenges: not valuing reading as much as writing, not knowing what to read, and not finding the time. What was striking was that students did not appear to know how to read. The overall sense was that students were indiscriminately consuming, rather than approaching reading as a strategic activity. Like Kwan (2009), students reported that supervisors were not always able to provide guidance in their reading searches.

While students were generally not articulate about the role of reading, a couple nearly completed candidates verbalized quite sophisticated views, for instance, reading as an iterative process of seeking and locating oneself with others historically and contemporaneously; they had come to understand the reading task as finding an intellectual home through building networks of like-minded ideas-thinkers. One of these students also expressed an awareness of the integrative nature of personal reading and writing strategies, for instance, how different personally-generated textual responses to reading over time (e.g. concept maps) contributed to thinking-writing the inquiry-thesis.

Despite most students not articulating such insights, students still experienced epiphanies when they found like-minded thinkers. These epiphanies could be characterized as: immediate influence of an author on the student's thinking, long-term influence of reading in creating a sense of mastery of the discourse, and finally over time developing an intellectual network of like-minded scholars. Lastly, what was striking was that the challenges of learning could lead to questioning one's expertise, knowledge and identity, while epiphanies could enhance one's knowledge and identity.

Significance: What meaning can we take from this analysis for the development of academic identity? In our broader longitudinal study of early career academics, we have developed the concept of identity-trajectory (McAlpine et al, 2010). Key elements are distinct strands intertwined in any individual's experience, varying through time. The networking strand as we originally saw it was about scholarly exchanges and collaborations since students appeared to have complex and extended local, national and international networks of relationships that they drew on. However, in light of this analysis we would extend that notion to include the historical, epistemological, and methodological networks that are constructed through reading. The second strand, intellectual, represents the past and continuing contributions to one's specialism or field represented in a trail of artifacts, e.g., publications, citations, papers. While the networking and intellectual are reciprocal the networking strand is the starting point, the basis, for the intellectual. This analysis suggests that attention to reading and writing as inter-woven but discrete elements of identity-trajectory (McAlpine et al, 2010) can effectively foreground reading. Hopefully, shining this light on the networking strand will lead to greater attention both pedagogical and empirical on this critical feature of academic development.

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