Chapter 8

Practice as Research:
Developing the Workplace Project

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ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights the potential for live pieces of work, rather than specifically designed research projects, to be used as the basis for the outputs of professionally-oriented doctorates. Drawing on some examples from a transdisciplinary ‘practitioner’ doctorate in an English university, it discusses how work that is designed to result in change or development can, if approached with sufficient methodological consideration, provide an intellectually robust basis for developing new knowledge that not only has application in practice but can also be worthy of academic dissemination. A case is made for what is here termed ‘practice as research’ being regarded as an archetypal model for the practitioner or ‘Type 3’ doctorate.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘professional doctorate’, a term that encompasses a wide variety of programme types and aims, is now well-established if not entirely uncontested in most English-speaking countries. Following Maxwell (2003), it is possible to identify a progression in the way that research is conceptualised in these doctorates that moves from traditional modes of researching as an impartial and detached observer to enquiry that is closely bound up with the doctoral candidate’s practice. The logical conclusion of this progression is that practice itself becomes treated as a form of research, and valid, valuable and potentially generalizable or at least transferrable knowledge is captured through approaching and interpreting practice in a research-minded and methodologically considered manner. This practice-as-research approach is consistent with the idea of the practitioner, work-based or third-generation doctorate that has been posited by several authors, and it also provides a good fit with the motivation of many doctoral candidates to develop or confirm themselves as leading and scholarly practitioners rather than to become researchers. Analogous to practice in the arts, some of these more evolved doctorates accept outputs that are principally instances of practice rather than research projects in the conventional sense.

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Practice-as-research nevertheless pulls against the current academic orthodoxy of doctorates being based on discrete research activity. It is probably also fair to say that within institutions, expertise in applying appropriate methodological considerations directly to practice is limited, so that while there is now extensive guidance available for conducting ‘practitioner’ and ‘insider’ research, there is less that is geared to applying methodological conceptualisations and research-mindedness to practice activity. Despite evidence of its validity, practice-as-research in the context of professional doctorates can therefore still be regarded as to some extent experimental and contested.

This chapter examines the idea of the practitioner or ‘Type 3’ doctorate, explores knowledge-production through practice via consideration of projects from one of the first such doctorates in the United Kingdom, and continues by discussing methodological considerations and doctoral outputs. It concludes with a discussion of tensions between practice-as-research as an approach and conventional expectations of doctoral programmes.

The Practitioner Doctorate

The emergence, growth and to an extent normalization of professional doctorates has been discussed by among others Bourner, Bowden and Laing (2001), Maxwell and Shanahan (2001), Scott, Brown, Lunt and Thorne (2004), Fell, Flint and Haines (2011) and Kot and Hendel (2012). However, the term ‘professional doctorate’ itself masks a wide range of doctoral forms and programmes, united by little more than a purpose that is other than to prepare future academics or recognise the scholarship of university staff. Within this broad arena are included full-time programmes intended to prepare students for specialist professional careers, for instance in clinical psychology or as research engineers; part-time programmes designed to support existing practitioners to undertake research connected with their practice; and more recent transdisciplinary programmes that draw on action research, action learning or negotiated work-based learning traditions. These doctorates may use one of a growing number of fieldspecific titles (e.g. EngD, DBA, EdD), the conventional Doctor of Philosophy, or (particularly for the third group) a generic professional title such as DProf (Doctor of Professional Studies or Professional Practice). Despite the tendency in the literature to compare professional doctorates and PhDs as if they were explicitly different, there is no clear binary line between the two whether in terms of programme structure, methodological approach, type of output, or (as indicated above) title, and the comparison can assume a relatively traditional PhD model as might be found in the natural sciences or the more nomothetic end of the social sciences and humanities.

By the turn of the century, a distinction began to be drawn between ‘first-generation’ professional doctorates concerned with conventional research (though often into matters defined by a professional rather than an academic field) and sometimes characterised as consisting of coursework followed by a shortened thesis, and ‘second-generation’ ones which had emerged from the 1990s onwards and were designed to support practitioners to address issues in their own practice contexts (e.g. Lee, Brennan, & Green, 2000; Seddon, 2001; and most notably Maxwell, 2003). Bourner et al. (2001) comment that while the first have a similar ethos to doctorates designed for professional researchers (even if most of their candidates are, and remain as, practitioners), the second are geared to ‘researching professionals’ (ibid.). Particularly in the last decade, a third generation of practitioner or work-based doctorates has been posited that could be described as oriented towards experienced and leading professionals as practitioners (e.g. Stephenson, Malloch, & Cairns, 2006), and these can have more affinity with the notion of the ‘scholarly professional’ (Gregory, 1997) that with Bourner’s ‘researching professional’. Wellington
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