

Doctoral level feedback and reflection for academic writing in Mode 2 knowledge contexts: A study of candidate development within a DBA professional doctorate programme

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Aims and objectives

A cornerstone in practitioner research is associated reflective practice. There is evidence that a notion of doctoral level reflection is definable and assessable (Sparrow, 2006). Reflective processes can be applied to a number of different activities. There is evidence of progressive development of doctoral student *academic* writing, and student perceptions concerning the value of distinct facets of feedback. Feedback upon editing, punctuation, grammar, syntax, and organisation aspects of writing often appears necessary but is somewhat ‘resented’, whilst there is a more positive attitude towards feedback about the clarity of writing, especially regarding the language and conventions used in a specific discipline (Eyres et al., 2001). Problems with conceptualisation relate to theory bases, assumptions, and implications; and feedback regarding conceptualisation has previously been found to be the most helpful for participants (Page-Adams, 1995).

Professional doctorates are frequently oriented towards Mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al, 1994). “‘Mode 2’ knowledge is generated within a context of application. This is different from the process of application by which ‘pure’ science, generated in theoretical/experimental environments, is ‘applied’; any technology is ‘transferred’; and knowledge is subsequently ‘managed’. The context of application, in contrast, describes the total environment in which scientific problems arise, methodologies are developed, outcomes are disseminated, and uses are defined.” (Nowotny et al, 2003: 186). Doctoral level articulation in this context potentially raises additional considerations.

Bruun et al (2005) note that in Mode 2, the efforts of knowledge production are organised around some identified problem, or ‘application context’. Furthermore, creativity is no longer seen to reside solely in individuals, but to be a product of collective processes, demanding cognitive and social skills. The contextualised integration of action and research increases complexity and has implications for epistemology, methodology and explication. Yee (2009) contrasts the epistemologies of positivism (the observations of a natural scientist to measure observable facts), interpretivism (social science exploration of subjective meaning of social action) and ‘toolism’ (applied scientist use of tools for solving practical problems). Gill and Hoppe (2009: 37) note the need for “different strategies for researching/analyzing the practice needs of a particular academic or professional community”. Gibbons (1997, p. 10) describes the production of contextualised knowledge as ‘always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation’. An action research methodology is frequently adopted. Reason and Marshall (2001, p. 413) believe that action research is a personal, political and social

process and that it is important to help students with the emergent process of inquiry as much as with the content, literature and methodology. Zuber-Skerrit and Fletcher (2007) assemble a list of desirable features of action research theses. Normally, action researchers have no difficulty in facilitating a process that leads to practical improvement, innovation, positive change or development; but they often find it difficult to facilitate the participants' and their own reflection on and in action, which leads to conceptual, theoretical knowledge. The research and writing tasks are dissimilar in nature. "Thesis writing must be clear and concise, with a logical and cogent argument that weaves a "thread" through the thesis. Importantly for producing a focused study with a tight argument, the writing must exclude what is not essential for developing the argument. In contrast, action research activities are not linear and are seldom logical. Research involves lots of exploration, experimenting, and trying out ideas – keeping some and rejecting others." (p 427). Zuber-Skerritt (2007) argues that explication requires candidates to reflect on their management practice and conceptualize their professional achievements, innovations and leadership in their organisations, and that adopting a critical (Mesirow, 1998) and self-critical attitude is necessary for personal and organisational change to become truly *transformational*.

The current study seeks to identify some of the considerations of Mode 2 knowledge production that professional doctorate students encounter within their studies. Doctoral research education has been studied in its own right. Weidman and Stein (2003) for example, studied the socialisation of doctoral students to the traditional academic norms of research and scholarship. Malfroy and Yates (2003) explored how doctoral programmes can align academic and practice considerations. Bruun et al (2005) have considered how university departments may need to reorient their doctoral training programmes to prepare students for Mode 2 knowledge production. Whilst as noted above, there are studies of desirable features of professional doctorate theses, there are no studies detailing the progression of students in seeking to write about their experiences in Mode 2 knowledge generation.

Methodology

The Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) programme at Birmingham City University at the time in question, centred around feedback and reflective practice processes to enable candidates to achieve, personal, organisational and academic learning. As part of the final portfolio, candidates were required to produce a series of three academic articles of publishable standard. Each 'article' was subject to a blind reviewing process by uniquely assigned sub-panels of two members of a standing external review panel of experienced academic or practitioner editorial board members and journal editors. Candidates were given feedback upon the papers, and where necessary, invited to revise/resubmit.

The data from the reviewers' comments were analysed using constructivist grounded analysis. Grounded analysis emanates from work on grounded theory which was developed initially by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and then elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The process is inductive and involves a comparing and contrasting

process to construct representations of salient differences within the data. Charmaz (2000) is the first researcher to describe her work explicitly as ‘constructivist grounded theory’ (Mills et al, 2006) arguing that in their development of “analytic questions, hypotheses [relational statements], and methodological applications” (p. 513), that much of the grounded theorising following the processes advocated by Strauss and others assumes the existence of an external reality. “Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). Constructivist grounded analysis views the researcher therefore, not as an objective independent viewer of the observed world but as an interpreter of the views of the studied participants (Charmaz, 2006).

A constructivist grounded textual analysis of the referee comments for three papers for each of seven DBA candidates was undertaken. The feedback relating to the set of first articles is contrasted with that associated with that for later articles. The interpretations reflect the author’s role as the creator of that version of the DBA programme at Birmingham City University and one-time course director.

Analysis and Findings

The grounded analysis sensed qualitative differences between characteristics of early and later writings of the doctoral students in many facets of Mode 2 knowledge generation. Table 1 presents the facets that suggested differences between the initial and later work of the students.

Table 1: Facets of Mode 2 knowledge progression apparent in contrasting feedback upon early and later DBA student papers

Mode 2 consideration	Early writing	Later writing
Practical application sought	<i>Immediate problem solving</i>	<i>Capacity building</i>
Context	<i>Broadly but unspecifically and descriptively sensed</i>	<i>As a dynamic</i>
Understanding of role	<i>Privileged perspective</i>	<i>Reflexive</i>
Plurality	<i>Basic elaborative quotes</i>	<i>Strong participant voices</i>
Own philosophy	<i>Denied</i>	<i>Acknowledged</i>
Concepts	<i>Voluminous but shallow. Reified</i>	<i>Selected. Acknowledged as potentially valuable interpretative frames</i>
Previous literature	<i>Uncritical acceptance</i> <i>Chronological</i> <i>Lack of integration</i>	<i>Not given higher status than own work</i> <i>Thematic</i> <i>Coherent</i>
Complexity	<i>As handicap</i>	<i>Incorporated</i>
Methodology	<i>Lack of rigour</i>	<i>Pragmatic but rigorous</i>
Action	<i>More 'formal' cycles</i>	<i>As way of knowing</i>
Professional practice	<i>Minor modifications</i>	<i>Transformational change</i>
Abstraction	<i>Low</i>	<i>Higher</i>
Golden thread	<i>Not sensed</i>	<i>Identified and theorised</i>
Critical perspective	<i>Low</i>	<i>Greater</i>
Generalisation	<i>Over-generalisation then under-generalisation</i>	<i>Wider implications understood</i>
Impact	<i>Introduces some academic concepts to practice</i>	<i>Raises new organisational possibilities</i>
Organisation of work	<i>Loosely coupled</i>	<i>Coherent and integrated</i>
Communicating context	<i>Descriptive</i>	<i>Marshalled. Highlighting contingency</i>
Referencing	<i>Citation etiquette issues. Extensive technical errors in referencing</i>	<i>Minor technical errors</i>
Spelling, grammar, punctuation etc.	<i>Not concise. Poorer grammar</i>	<i>Focused and professional communication</i>
Skills developed	<i>Negotiation</i> <i>Risk-taking</i> <i>Experimentation</i> <i>Conceptualisation</i> <i>Academic referencing</i>	<i>Reflexivity</i> <i>Facilitation</i> <i>Project management</i> <i>Strategic perspective</i> <i>Opportunity spotting</i> <i>Communicating to multiple audiences</i>

The DBA article referees faced challenges of their own in seeking to comment upon DBA 'journal' articles as opposed to pure academic papers. Referees were experienced academic or practitioner editorial board members or journal editors. Some differences between referees seemingly seeking traditional academic practices and those seeking Mode 2 knowledge practices were identified. Table 2 presents a summary of the aspects of comment upon which referees differed.

Table 2: Differences in the nature of comment between referees with an ‘academic knowledge’ emphasis and those with a ‘Mode 2 knowledge’ emphasis.

Consideration	Academic knowledge emphasis	Mode 2 knowledge emphasis
Context	<i>As setting</i>	<i>As frame</i>
Aims	<i>Conceptual</i>	<i>Change</i>
Analytical framework or research question	<i>Required from offset</i>	<i>Emergent</i>
Multiple concepts	<i>To be minimised</i>	<i>To be utilised singly or integratively</i>
Role of researcher	<i>Bias. Value statements</i>	<i>Reflexive practitioner</i>
Voice of researcher	<i>To be minimised. Use third person</i>	<i>More accepting</i>
Practice/academic	<i>Wary of work being “too practical”</i>	<i>Important to capture wider academic issues</i>
Implementation	<i>Incidental</i>	<i>As key learning opportunity</i>
Evaluation	<i>Organisational practices lack theoretical validity</i>	<i>Informs practical evaluation</i>
Recommendations	<i>Not a priority. Based solely in research findings</i>	<i>Valuable to context</i>

Implications of the study

The study suggests distinct Mode 2 challenges for professional doctorate students, and assessors/examiners. It identifies some of the practices and skills that students may require and provides focus for discussion amongst those supporting doctoral education. Students were supported with some workshops beyond research methodologies/skills. Students in the main however, developed their competencies experientially in interaction with their supervisors, fellow DBA students and in their work contexts. A separate study of the reflective logs of the students (an additional element in the DBA portfolio at that time) may reveal more of the journey of developing their capabilities. Doctoral Mode 2 knowledge generation is a key consideration in professional doctorate study.

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