

## Keynote 5

Tuesday 10th November, 10.15 - 10.45

### 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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Professor John Sparrow is Professor of Occupational Psychology at Birmingham City University. He is the Associate Dean (Research) at Birmingham City Business School and developed the initial DBA research degree in 1998.

He has conducted work on behalf of UK Research Councils, EU and UK Government, industry federations, the community and voluntary sector, large businesses and small and medium sized enterprises.

He has written extensively upon managerial and organisational cognition, knowledge management, creativity and innovation, emotion and reflective practice issues. He has a particular interest in the role of emotion in creativity, decision-making and learning and the contribution that coaching can make.

#### 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 journal editorial board members and journal editors. Candidates were given feedback upon the papers, and where necessary, invited to revise/resubmit.

A grounded textual analysis of the referee comments for three papers for each of seven DBA candidates is undertaken. The feedback relating to the set of first articles is contrasted with that associated with that for later articles.

#### Analysis and Findings

The grounded textual analysis identified qualitative differences between characteristics of early and later writings of the doctoral students in twenty-one facets of Mode 2 knowledge generation. These were the students' approaches towards: Practical application sought, Context, Understanding of role, Plurality, Own philosophy, Concepts, Previous literature, Complexity, Methodology, Action, Professional practice, Abstraction, the Golden Thread, Critical perspective,

Generalisation, Impact, Organisation of work, Communicating context, Referencing, Spelling, grammar, punctuation etc., and the Skills developed.

Some differences between referees seemingly seeking traditional academic practices and those seeking Mode 2 knowledge practices were also identified.

#### Implications of the study

The study highlights 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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