

The Loneliness of the Doctoral Candidate: Problematifying identities, pedagogies and practices

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Developmental Paper

Word count: 2092

Abstract

Research on doctoral supervision has typically focused on what constitutes ‘good supervision’ in order to improve student experience and completion rates. In this paper we identify and seek to address a more fundamental problem with doctoral supervision, namely that it is overly informed by and weighted in favour of narrow concerns and practices of the Academy, and thus may be failing to sufficiently prepare doctoral candidates for professional practice of any kind. We draw on an identity perspective, and especially the concept of liminality to problematise existing models of doctoral supervision. Our intended contribution is to develop a pedagogy which, through reflecting the embeddedness of practice in scholarship, better prepares and supports candidates for using their acquired skills in scholarship within practice contexts, and which articulates and justifies the value of doctoral programmes beyond the mere production of more highly academically qualified individuals.

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Introduction

Much research on doctoral supervision has been motivated by widespread interest in articulating what constitutes ‘good supervision’ (Polkinghorne et al., 2023) to improve both student experience and completion rates (e.g. Ives & Rowley, 2005). In this paper we identify and seek to address a more fundamental problem with doctoral supervision, namely that it is overly informed by and weighted in favour of narrow concerns and practices of the Academy. As such, we argue that current supervisory practices may be failing doctoral candidates by neglecting to sufficiently prepare them for professional practice of any kind.

The nature of doctorateness and the scholar-practitioner

Our interest in doctoral supervision started with our longstanding involvement with Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programmes, as lecturers, supervisors and examiners. In common with much literature and programme providers, we see the DBA programme as designed to enable professional managers train to become *scholar-practitioners* (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Kirk et al, 2025; Spencer et al, 2022). The term scholar-practitioner has been variously defined, but Edgar Schein’s definition, reported by Wasserman and Kram (2009: 19-20) most closely reflects our own understanding as ‘a professional who knows how to abstract new knowledge from experiences in organizations; someone who is dedicated to generating new knowledge that is useful to practitioners’. Raelin (2007: 503) characterises such professionals as ‘experts in action’ who demonstrate Mastery. In contrast to apprentices or journeymen, Masters intuitively draw on both explicit and tacit knowledge to develop new ways of thinking about the task itself: ‘the master is thus able from time to time to make something that was never dreamed of rather than solving something that was already there’ (Raelin, 2007: 503).

What struck us is that the doctoral supervisor, although commonly positioned as the Master to the doctoral candidate’s Apprentice, is not a Master of the type of scholarly practice which the DBA candidate is being trained in. The doctoral supervisor is an expert in academic research and publishing who, at best, may also be interested in – but not wholly focused on – generating knowledge that is useful for practice. Moreover, much of the literature on the DBA and the scholar-practitioner, rather like DBA supervision, is primarily focused on the scholarship element rather than the practice one, with the result that scholarship of scholar-practitioners is narrowly considered in terms of researching, publishing and teaching activities (e.g. Carton & Ungureanu, 2018; Davies et al, 2019; Hay & Samah-Fredericks, 2016; Wasserman & Kram, 2009; Kram et al, 2012).

We see this as a problem not just for the supervision of DBA and professional doctorate candidates, but for doctoral candidates more generally. A majority of PhD graduates go into industry rather than academia (HESA, 2024), and those who do remain in academia will quickly discover that academia includes much more than research and publications for most

positions, including teaching and increasing amounts of administration and management. But we further identify more fundamental gaps arising from the case of the DBA. The first is a failure to recognise or engage with how else scholarship might operate outside of the Academy, and specifically how it might inform the daily professional practice of the scholar-practitioner. The second is a failure to engage with the nature of practice itself, by positioning it as something separate to academic scholarship, and further, as something automatically improved with the addition of scholarship i.e. the acquisition of a doctorate. And the third implies a failure of competence: how are we, as academics, competent to effectively and fully train candidates to become Masters in something that we are not ourselves Masters of?

The professional doctoral journey: an identity perspective

In seeking to problematise and address these gaps in common models of doctoral supervision, we draw on an identity perspective. We understand identity to be ‘the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves’ (Brown, 2015: 23) and that identity is multiple and contingent on social context and available discursive resources (Brown, 2015; Brown, 2022; Caza et al., 2018), requiring continual and active work on ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 262) a meaningful sense of self. Brown (2017; 2015; 2022) argues that ‘identity work’ has become an integrative concept, characterising ‘the mutually constitutive processes’ (Watson, 2008: 129) through which individuals both seek to shape their own notions of self and respond to social identities expected of them.

Identity is frequently leveraged for researching and understanding DBA programmes, with identity formation seen as at least as significant as knowledge acquisition and production for professional students (Green, 2005; Kirk et al., 2025). We see three streams within identity literature as especially generative. The first is identity transition, and the processes whereby individuals are able to acquire, develop and integrate new identities, for example through developing self-narratives (Black & Warhurst, 2019; Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), experimenting with and trying out new identities (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Simpson & Carroll, 2008), or joining communities of practice as novices with opportunities to increasingly contribute through practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This approach conceptualises the doctoral journey as a transition from one state (e.g. a practitioner) to another (e.g. a competent researcher, member of the Academy, a scholar-practitioner) and therefore focuses on processes of how the candidate learns what is required of their new or desired identity and gains assurances of their belonging (e.g. Hager et al., 2019; Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2016; Kirk et al., 2025).

A second stream focuses on how individuals manage multiple, and sometimes conflicting or incompatible identities. This stream draws attention to the nature of the scholar-practitioner, as an identity that spans two distinct domains. The scholar-practitioner has been variously conceptualised as a boundary-spanning role (Ellis & Ybema, 2010), where individuals reach across from one ‘home base’ to the other (Bartunek & Schein, 2011; Humphrey, 2007; Kram et al., 2012; Wasserman & Kram, 2009); as a hybrid role (Currie & Croft, 2015) in which the individual seeks to integrate elements of each (Carton & Ungureanu, 2018); or a hyphen

space (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013), in which the scholar-practitioner occupies a space uniquely between either domain (Vermaak & de Caluwé, 2017).

A third, potentially integrative stream is the concept of liminality (Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960). Within the literature connecting identity with liminality, two distinct applications have been noted (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2024; Ladge et al., 2012; Ybema et al., 2011): liminality as a (more-or-less) linear process of transition from an old identity to a new one, and liminality as a prolonged state of being in-between identities, or a liminoid state (Turner, 1969). Van Gennep's (1960) work emphasises liminality as a rite of passage, and identifies three stages of separation, transition and incorporation necessary to effect the change in social role and status. Some scholars have used the concept to examine how DBA students experience their doctoral journey, such as the necessary letting go of their former status as competent professional, and especially the challenges and opportunities of the transition phase where individuals lack any status or structures (Hay, 2022; Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2016). However, liminality has also been used to conceptualise the scholar-practitioner role. Here, the state of being 'betwixt and between' is emphasised, sometimes as a temporary position while the individual spans boundaries and cultures, and sometimes as a permanent lack of clear status, belonging to neither domain (Carton & Ungureanu, 2018; Stevens-Wood & Attfield, 2024).

Problematising the professional doctoral journey

We argue that liminality applies to the DBA candidate in both senses, but that neither sense has been fully examined or acknowledged, nor how they both implicate the candidate. DBA candidates undertake a doctorate seeking a new identity as a scholar-practitioner and this requires careful support and guidance through the process of transition. Yet, they are not seeking to 'separate' from a professional identity, but rather to *incorporate* a scholarly identity into their professional one. This suggests that while professional candidates may experience liminality as novice scholars, they nevertheless retain expertise as practitioners. Secondly, the identity promised to professional candidates, that of the scholar-practitioner, is itself understood as a liminal role and thus requiring ongoing identity work. Yet supervision models focus on ways in which candidates are able to become and sustain membership of the Academy. Equally, PhD candidates do not enter doctoral programmes as 'empty vessels': many have extensive professional histories and, as noted above, will continue to engage in practice after graduation.

We therefore argue that we need much more nuanced and theorised models of doctoral supervision which recognise the complex nature of scholarship and its variegated embeddedness in practice, and the complex nature of doctoral identity formation.

Existing models of doctoral supervision

The question of what constitutes 'good doctoral supervision' has motivated much research (Polkinghorne et al., 2023) in the hope of improving student experiences and increasing completion rates (e.g. Ives & Rowley, 2005). Whether this has embedded a shift in practice is questionable. Many empirical studies suggest that doctoral supervision is a deeply

institutionalised practice, that reproduces with every supervision. Supervisors supervise their students in a manner and style that they were supervised. The resulting privacy of individual cases risks, in the words of Johnson et al. (2000), *Supervision* becoming 'Super-vision' which they characterise as surveillance, or an 'invisible pedagogy'. A smaller stream of scholarship has emerged that questions the relevance of supervision itself as a root metaphor for a pedagogy of doctoral education.

This more critical stream has been further informed by the changing contexts of doctoral programmes away from the traditional PhD (Parker 2009). Anderson et al. (forthcoming) note that most empirical studies of doctoral supervision are in the context of PhD degrees rather than professional doctorates. On the basis of their own empirical research they conceptualise DBA supervision as a relational management education practice (Anderson et al., 2017) arguing for the need to create a space for the student to bring their practitioner insights into dialogue with academic research (cf MacIntosh et al. 2017; Press et al, 2019). Boud & Lee (2005) similarly argue that peer learning, which has become important for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, would also better frame the doctoral research process. Other alternative pedagogies include Communities of Practice (Wisker et al, 2007) where students organised in cohorts support each others' development in a process enabled by different types of supervisor; and community-based Scholarly Writing Groups (Parker, 2009).

While the foregoing research has led to institutional programmes in the training of supervisors and new practices of supervision, it has so far failed to gain significant traction in reconceptualising doctoral supervision. This also reflects the need for more robust theorising and more explicit framings of doctoral supervision as pedagogy (Shulman, 2005). Notably, attempts to (re)theorise doctoral pedagogies implicitly or explicitly often draw attention to identity work, both shaping and evolving of the doctoral identities of candidates (e.g. Barnacle and Mewburn, 2010; Peterson, 2007), and also, crucially, the identities of supervisors (e.g. Guerin et al, 2015; Halse & Malfoy, 2010). Boud and Lee (2005) propose an 'environment as pedagogy' involving overlapping communities of practice, and argue that the aim of a pedagogy for doctoral education should be a process of 'becoming peer through a participation in a community of research practice'. We argue that despite this problematisation of supervision practices and theorisation of supervision as a pedagogy, what remains insufficiently questioned is the purpose of the whole endeavour. The assumption endures that the aim of doctoral education is to create an independent scholar.

Paper development

Our aim is to develop a pedagogy of doctoral study which addresses three gaps we have identified as significant. First, a pedagogy of doctoral study needs to fully recognise and incorporate the role of practice for all doctoral researchers and especially the professional doctorate. Secondly, it must fully recognise and account for the complex nature of doctoral identity formation and identity work. Thirdly we seek to expand or supplement the root metaphors for supporting and facilitating doctoral candidates, beyond the notion of 'super-vision'. We will do so primarily by drawing on identity work theory and especially identity work in relation to liminality, and on existing models and theories of doctoral supervision. At Conference we will present our initial ideas based on the dual nature of liminality, outlined above, and its implications for both the doctoral candidate and the supervisor. Our intended

contribution is to develop a pedagogy which, through reflecting the embeddedness of practice in scholarship, better prepares and supports candidates for using their acquired skills in scholarship within practice contexts, and which articulates and justifies the value of doctoral programmes beyond the mere production of more highly academically qualified individuals.

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