

Navigating Liminality: The Experience of Distance in Doctoral Education

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Abstract

This research explores the experiences of doctoral students who study at a distance and whose postgraduate activities involve passing through liminal or troublesome periods in understanding or experiencing elements of concepts or processes. These thresholds commonly involve ontological or epistemological shifts, resulting in transformed ways of seeing one's self and/or one's research. The challenges posed through using technology in such doctoral supervision are often not acknowledged. Twenty-three interdisciplinary doctoral researchers from around the world were interviewed, with narrative inquiry as informed by an actor-network approach used for the analysis. This research seeks to provide insights for tutors who engage in remote supervision.

Increase in Doctoral Studies

Even with the global recession at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, higher education institutions increasingly continue to award doctoral degrees.

American doctoral-granting institutions awarded 5.4% more doctoral degrees in 2009-2010 than they did in the previous year, with an average annual increase of 4.1% over the past decade (Bell, 2011, p. 65).

Doctoral Diversity

There is an increasing emphasis in doctoral study in many parts of the English-speaking world, with growing numbers of students enrolling in both research and professional doctorates to meet a variety of personal, academic, and professional needs (Lee & Kamler, 2008).

Doctoral programs have entered a period of such increasing diversity that the term has grown to include a plethora of variations that, in their extremes, bear little semblance to one another.

Research & Professional Doctoral Blurring

Increasing opportunities for doctoral study to benefit professional practice, outside academia (Neumann & Tan, 2011).

BUT, most professional doctorates are taught and mentored by PhD researchers (Dreher & Glasgow, 2011).

Research & Professional Doctoral Blurring

PhD and Professional doctorates are suggested as equal, but different; muddled with how best to equip the needs of a knowledge economy (Dreher & Glasgow, 2011).

Different countries, fields, and academic institutions are inconsistent in what they mean by professional (Chiteng Kot & Hendel, 2011).

Doctoral Studies & Distance

Engaging in doctoral studies from or at a distance, however, can mean different things to different people, institutions, and the researchers themselves (Andrew, 2012; Macauley & Cavanagh, 2001).

Doctoral Studies & Distance

Doctoral students do not always experience a strong sense of connection to a scholarly community beyond their supervisor and perhaps a small group of peers working in closely related areas.

Doctoral cohorts offer some support to students and also the development of supportive relationships and a sense of community (Winston & Fields, 2003).

Doctoral Studies & Distance

If current distance doctoral programs do not succeed in developing, then it will be important to find ways of promoting more of a sense of community amongst distance doctoral researchers (Albion & Erwee, 2011).

Staff development is needed to ensure tutors understand how to play a facilitating role at a distance (Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004).

Interdisciplinary Doctoral Experiences

While content itself may not appear to be readily transferable between disciplines (Parchoma & Keefer, 2012), another way to frame these semblances revolves around *shared experiences*, *concepts*, and *processes* that have been identified and reported by learners, tutors, and supervisors (Wisker et al., 2010).

Supervision

The role of doctoral supervision also plays an important element in the experience of many doctoral students, and while a great deal of the research of the postgraduate experience explores various elements of the interaction, much of the research in the area of doctoral studies and doctorateness involves either *traditional* students or some semblance of learner with an assumption that there is frequent *face-to-face contact* between supervisor and supervisee.

Doctoral Student Identity

Doctoral identity includes the feeling of becoming an academic (transition, journey, movement) and entering the academic community (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009).

The sense of feeling like an academic occurred when they each enacted or projected academic role identities and this was accepted or confirmed by those with whom they interact, including other faculty, professors, and colleagues (Jazvac-Martek, 2009).

Doctoral student learning happens frequently in relationship with supervisor who need to model agency (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009).

Doctoral Studies as Learning Journey / Rite of Passage

There are times during their research education when candidates demonstrate through their writing, presentation, discussion, and demeanour that they have undergone a change in the way they understand their learning and themselves as learners (Kiley, 2009).

The learning journey for doctoral students is experienced as multi-dimensional, involving ontological, epistemological, emotional, and professional development, along with cognitive shifts in understanding; this is all closely interlinked (Wisker et al., 2010).

Doctoral Studies are Changing!

Traditional theories of doctoral study focused on policy, programs, and the learning experience of students, though changes in society bring new needs to higher education, and a holistic approach to these changes and structures needs to occur to meet the needs of knowledge workers, interdisciplinarity, and changing assumptions (Boud & Tennant, 2010; Lee & Boud, 2009).

Why *this* Research?



Why *this* Research?

Context & Experience!

- An American postgraduate student living in New York while engaging in a taught PhD program in the UK = direct experience of study from a distance
- Previous doctoral program & most recent master's degree = distance
- I teach in a blended doctoral program
- I work professionally to communicate and collaborate online in a large organization

Problem

There are major shifts occurring in doctoral education, and while many of them are happening to the extent that its focus has shifted away from a product or specific deliverable, namely the printed and bound doctoral thesis or dissertation, they have instead moved to a complex relationship between numerous domains of practice (Lee & Boud, 2009).

Problem

Easily lost in this shuffle toward attempts to try to identify doctoral thresholds are the experiences of learners themselves (Keefer, 2010).

What happens when these learners experience disorienting dilemmas; when their frames of reference shift, as new learning leads to new ways of thinking and perceiving reality (Kiley, 2009; Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008)?

Problem

These moments of transition are also known as periods of liminality from a former way of being or knowing into a future state (Meyer & Land, 2005).

The literature around the experiences of identifying conceptual and or process thresholds is increasing enough to be able to identify and classify some of them. These include elements of "identity construction, rites of passage, tensions and resolutions" (Wisker et al., 2010, p. 16).

Problem

However, little research focuses directly on this experience of liminality itself, that in-between period associated with rites of passage from a pre-liminal state to a new identity (Turner, 2011; Van Gennep, 1960).

Problem

While the literature speaks about conceptual and process thresholds from both student and tutor perspectives, gaps exist when trying to make sense of what happens in that liminal space, especially for what it feels like for well-educated learners to feel confused, overwhelmed, disoriented, and at times lost in a process much larger than they are.

Purpose

The experience of liminality in doctoral studies and the increase in studying and being supervised at a distance are both disparate concepts that are being linked in practice, though in ways that have not been well explored. This research will seek to identify these emerging issues and investigate what it means to link them to benefit supervision strategies and sense-making on the part of the doctoral learners themselves.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of doctoral students, studying at a distance, whose postgraduate experiences involve passing through troublesome periods in understanding concepts or processes that shape their identity as independent researchers or expert practitioners in order to provide insight for tutors who engage in distance supervision.

Research Questions

1. How do doctoral students experience and make sense of liminality and the disorientation that often accompanies it?
2. How does(do) this(these) experience(s) shape identity as a researcher or research practitioner?
3. To what extent does studying at a distance contribute to this experience?
4. What factors (could have) supported the transition from the pre-liminal to the current state?

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form. This research will be a thematic narrative analysis, that means it will focus on "what" is said (not why, how, or to whom), following the work of Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008).

The narrative interview is a conversation between participants, not a question / answer exercise, with the intention to generate a detailed account. This then preserves elements of narrative as units, rather than fragmented pieces to cut up and analyze.

Actor-Network Theory

An actor-network theory (ANT) lens will inform the interview protocol development and presentation of findings by acknowledging how complex the doctoral learning experience via distance can be and how more factors may be involved in liminal experiences than the overly-simple student and supervisor / tutor relationship (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Fenwick, 2010; Fox, 2005; Hanseth et al., 2004; Latour, 2005; Oliver 2011).

An actor-network lens may reveal additional aspects of the researcher that may be overlooked if only the direct human elements were studied exclusive of the stratified networks in which they constantly expand and contract. ANT can be used to "offer an unfamiliar take on many familiar issues" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 2), such as through exploring the influence of distance study, social media tools, and developing research experiences themselves.

Philosophical Frame

Ontology refers to the nature of the "knowable," namely the very nature of reality itself (Guba, 1990, p. 18). This research is primarily constructivist, meaning that the individual actors in the study interpret and construct their own vision of reality (Patton, 2002, p. 96). The vision of reality is not pre-established, but rather the meaning is made through the experiences of individuals who give meaning to their experiences.

Epistemology refers to "the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowable)" (Guba, 1990, p. 18). This "how do we know what we know?" (Patton, 2002, p. 134) includes issues of how we are able to reach the findings, as they are mitigated through the shared and co-constructed interviews that result in the narratives to be analyzed.

The **methodology** is concerned about how the inquirer, or researcher, should go about finding out knowledge (Guba, 1990, p. 18). The methodology will be narrative inquiry, with data gathering technique involving single in-depth interviews with doctoral students or those who recently completed their doctorates.

Ethics & Invitation to Participate

The invitation to participate included three criteria:

1. You engaged to some extent in studying from a distance.
2. You are a doctoral student or have recently completed your doctoral degree.
3. You had some troublesome experience while engaging in the work toward your degree that resulted in your having a learning leap or a-ha moment about your discipline or your identity as a developing researcher / expert practitioner, transformed understanding of concepts or skills as a result of your academic pursuits, or sense that some threshold has shifted or transitioned in your scholarship.

Piloting



Sampling via Twitter

Jeffrey Keefe
@jkeefe
Do you have a doctorate / are a doc student?
Troublesome experience? Distance involved?
Consider discussing it <http://bit.ly/oAsJh3> #ir12

Jeffrey Keefe
@jkeefe
Beginning data collection for my doctoral thesis
<http://bit.ly/oAsJh3> - please consider
participating and please RT to colleagues #phd

Jeffrey Keefe
@jkeefe
Beginning data collection for my doctoral thesis.
Please RT my invitation to participate
bit.ly/oAsJh3 #phdchat

Jeffrey Keefe
@jkeefe
Do you have a doctorate / are a doc student?
Troublesome experience? Distance involved?
Consider discussing it <http://bit.ly/oAsJh3>
#phdchat

#	Location of Studies	How Accessed?	Completed?	Doctorate Type?
1	USA	Direct Request (Pilot)	Yes - 5 years ago	EdD Education Leadership
2	USA	Direct Request (Pilot)	Yes - 15 years ago	PhD Sociology
3	New Zealand	Twitter	No - 1 more year	PhD Nursing
4	UK	Twitter	No - 1 more year	PhD Information Systems
5	USA	Twitter	No - a few more years	PhD Educational Technology
6	USA	Twitter	No - about to defend	PhD Educational Psychology
7	USA	AoIR	Yes - 2 years ago	PhD Expressive Arts*
8	Singapore	AoIR	No - a few more years	PhD Sociology
9	UK	Twitter	Yes - 2 years ago	PhD Linguistics
10	UK	Twitter	Yes - 2 years ago	PhD Global Studies*
11	USA	CSquare	No - 1 more year	PhD Educational Technology
12	Australia	AoIR	Yes - 1 year ago	PhD Internet Research
13	USA	LinkedIn	No - a few more years	PhD Healthcare Management
14	UK	Facebook (Twitter)	No - 1 more year	PhD Educational Technology*
15	USA	AoIR	No - a few more years	PhD Educational Psychology
16	USA	Somebody forwarded to a listserv	Yes - 3 years ago	PhD Anthropology
17	New Zealand	Twitter	No - a few more years	EdD Healthcare Education*
18	USA	QUALRS-L	Yes - 1 year ago	PhD Educational Administration
19	Australia	AoIR	No - 1 more year	PhD Anthropology
20	USA	Somebody forwarded to a listserv	No - 1 more year	PhD Curriculum
21	UK	QUALRS-L	Yes - 5 years ago	PhD Organizational Behavior*
22	Australia	Twitter	No - 1 more year	PhD Internet Research
23	USA	Somebody forwarded to a listserv	No - about to defend	PhD Anthropology*

Interview Protocol

Personalized interview questions will include recombination of eligibility and consent for participants.

Background

- Tell me about your academic / professional status
 - currently a student / graduate / faculty (when finished)
 - employed
 - location of studies / now (institution + city / country)
- How do you and your program classify your studies?
 - full-time or part-time?
 - research or professional doctorate?
- Tell me about your research
 - what is your research about?
 - what ideas or theories inform your work?
- Can you describe how distance or technology usage was a factor in your studies?

Thresholds experiences (barrier / transformed perspective)

- Tell me about a troublesome experience or barrier you had while working toward your doctorate.
 - To what extent did this experience:
 - Lead to a learning loop or an abate moment about your discipline or your identity as a developing researcher / expert practitioner?
 - Transform an understanding of concept or skill as a result of your academic pursuit?
 - Provide you a sense that some threshold has shifted or transitioned in your scholarship?

In-between or liminal experiences

- Tell me about the in-between state from when you recognized you are transitioning to when you believe you have developed in a significant way.
 - How long did this in-between period of flux last?
 - How did you manage to work your way through this experience?
 - What help or support did you need and receive?
 - What help or support do you wish you would have received?

12. If you were to supervise or advise doctoral students, what would you do to help them recognize, acknowledge, or work through these challenging in-between time periods and experiences?

13. What role did distance, technology, or social media play in this period?

14. How are any of your abate experiences involved with something you already thought you knew?

15. If so, what was this in-between period like for you?

Close

13. Is there anything else you want to add, share, or give voice to?

Transcription & Member Checking

The interviews were transcribed and then sent back to the interviewees, including the two pilot participants, for member checking.

100% response and return rate, including corrections, clarifications, extensive revisions / additions by 3 participants to clarify and explain what happened between the interview and the transcription if they related to the academic studies or liminal experiences we discussed in the interviews.

Preliminary Findings

- Feelings of isolation led to challenges articulating and processing liminal experiences
- Liminal experiences were so strong they were relived during the interview
- Distance is contested and problematized

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