

New paths to research based doctorates

The growth of practice based doctorates and their transdisciplinary varieties has been a significant feature of new developments in doctoral education during the past two decades across the English-speaking world. The UK Council for Graduate Education has participated in the organisation of international conferences in practice based doctorates, and has within its ranks a thriving International Association of Professional and Practice-led Doctorates (IAPPD) attracting colleagues from continental Europe exploring the possibilities offered by the Bologna process, as well as academics from North America, Australia and the Pacific Rim.

The paper will take the Doctorate in Professional Studies (DPS) developed at the Institute for Work Based Learning (IWBL) since 1997 as a model and explore its pedagogical underpinnings. These roots are partly in decades of developing work based learning programmes for adult learners and curricula for people in work and independent studies. This tradition accepts that knowledge can be produced outside academia and can be formalised and codified through different modes of systematic reflection on practice, tacit knowledge and other forms of practical reason shared by communities of practice.

A second important influence has been the approaches explored in the Charter of Transdisciplinarity launched by the First World Congress of Transdisciplinarity held in Portugal in 1994, which further developed the early OECD formulations of 1970 associated with Jean Piaget and Claude Levi-Strauss. Finally, in the past twenty years or more the Quality Assurance Agency and HEFCE have been involved in formulating generic Level Indicators and Learning Outcomes to match work-based academic degrees, including Level 8 or doctoral level indicators which have facilitated design and assessment of practice based and professional doctorates.

This 'generic' or transdisciplinary programme is open to all professional areas and the content of each programme is defined by that candidate's particular work / organisational / professional context embedding her/his professional practice. Another key and distinctive feature is that the DPS programme incorporates a significant element of accreditation of previous experiential (APEL) or credit-rated learning (APL) in its structure. The intention here is to explore the professional "I", how that "I" is positioned as an insider researcher. The relationship between 'theory' and 'practice' takes new and interesting forms, as the insider researcher is asked to 'theorise' her/his 'practice' in a way and at a level which will involve 'doctoral level' (Level 8) outcomes and impact upon professional practice which can be disseminated in the relevant communities of practice. The implications of this for 'knowledge transfer' should be fairly clear, so too its implications for the creation of new forms of knowledge transgressing the traditional 'top down' models of the academy.

This in turn leads to acquiring the appropriate methodological tools to frame, scope and design real life, real time and real world research with impact and outcome built into it. The candidate is given the simultaneous roles of the 'insider-researcher' and 'change agent'. The programme is firmly based on 'R & D' with a rigorous doctoral level research element wherein the 'R' component is decanted into the 'D' element in such a way that it is close but not necessarily identical with forms of 'applied research' based doctorates. The 'D' or programme outcomes can and frequently do include concrete 'products' such as artefacts, publications, course design and other professionally relevant and suitably (as defined by Level 8 impact criteria of the QAA) impactful outcomes in wider or professional public contexts.

There are clear relationships between work based learning as a 'field' of study and some conceptions of what has been called Mode 2 knowledge. The latter has been described as being contextual, problem-focused, multi-disciplinary and taking into account the interests of the various 'actors', 'subjects' 'stakeholders' / 'collaborators' increasingly involved in contemporary projects. The argument is that these new contexts require a reflexive approach whereby the status and value of 'knowledge' itself is negotiated with 'producers', 'collaborators', 'users' and so on. (This does chime with Habermas's early notions of "communicative rationality").

An argument will be made that the IWBL DProf programme synthesises these elements into a concept of transdisciplinarity which can lead to knowledge that is produced in practice situations with the purpose of application to practice and is primarily judged by its purposefulness and by social and ethical criteria. Transdisciplinarity and interprofessionalism imply taking a practical context as the starting point and a point of reference for the doctoral work so that knowledge, insights and theories are developed out of a context and applied back into the same or parallel contexts. Transdisciplinarity draws ideas from different disciplines but its logic is contextual and expert practice based.