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Producing the professional doctorate: the portfolio as a legitimate alternative to the dissertation

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This paper outlines the potential of the portfolio as a product of doctoral work, especially in the Professional Doctorates. It compares the traditional mode of a single, lengthy but clearly focused doctoral dissertation with the portfolio as a collection of shorter research reports, held together by a linking paper articulating the thesis. We argue that the portfolio is appropriate for the Professional Doctorate that focuses upon improvement in the professional workplace and that coherence and significance are key issues.

Keywords: portfolio; doctoral education; dissertation; professional doctorate

Introduction

In this paper we address the problem of how professional knowledge production as a form of scholarship can be presented, and hence evaluated, in the university award context. We take the stance that, in addition to the usual dissertation, a portfolio has added potential as a form of product particularly in a professional doctorate. In accepting the dissertation as a legitimate product, we make the distinction, following Professor Bill Green, from Charles Sturt University in Australia, by focusing on the original meaning of ‘thesis’ as a premise in an argument, and contrasting it with the later meaning of ‘dissertation’, an extended scholarly essay (see Brown, 1999). Thus, in doctoral education, a dissertation will expound a thesis.

The reasons why the dissertation has become the ‘gold standard’ of academic achievement are clear as it has become the usual form of final product for the PhD. Yet it is a mistake to assume that the award quality is uniform within or across institutions or disciplines. Institutions do, however, try to establish clear guidelines, for example, as set out in the *FEHPS Research Guide* at the University of New England:

A (dissertation) is a sustained and systematic piece of research that incorporates a logical line of argument, is supported by evidence which may be based upon analysis of data and contains argument relevant to the examination of a particular topic or hypothesis (or set of hypotheses). It should reflect a high level of theoretical conceptualisation. A (dissertation) is usually divided into coherent sections or chapters that link together in a logical manner. ... Whatever the approach, the (dissertation) is expected to add something new to our understanding of the particular problem studied. (Eckermann, 2001, p. 14)

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The task for those proposing the portfolio as a final product for a doctoral award is to make a case for it being equivalent to a dissertation and also to establish criteria for quality at the doctoral level. In order to do this it is necessary to see why a product other than the dissertation is necessary.

Background

The strength of the (PhD) dissertation is its focus, in-depth analysis and coherence, but these can also be its weakness; narrowness. Consider these criticisms of PhD programmes that, at the time that they were enunciated, had significant impact in Australia:

- Lack of consistency or quality assurance across programmes;
- Programmes driven by the philosophy of science 'in isolation' from other key criteria (*such as reality checks*);
- Failure to inculcate teamwork skills, good workplace practices, creativity, and lateral thinking in graduates; over-specialisation at the expense of risk-taking and frontier-breaking activity; and
- The gap that is maintained between knowledge and skill. (Clark, 1996, p. 4–6) [*italics, our addition*].

Government concern has also been evident (West, 1998; Kemp, 1999). Such criticisms of PhDs are also found in the UK (United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education, 2002).

Not all of these criticisms can be attributed to the dissertation itself (cf. Johnson, 2005) although Lee (1998) makes a strong case for writing as research. The nature of the PhD dissertation, in which the examination process is by academic peers, almost exclusively demands the kind of isolated pursuit of disciplinary knowledge about which Clark is critical, as were Scott, Brown, Lunt, and Thorne (2001) from an epistemological point of view.

Proponents of professional doctorates are seeking to carve out a place alongside the PhD (equivalent to, but different from it), in which the Professional Doctorate can be seen as:

a programme of research, scholarship and advanced study which enables candidates to make a *significant contribution to knowledge and practice in their professional context*. In doing so, a candidate may also contribute more generally to scholarship within the discipline or field study. Professional doctorate students should be required to apply their research and study to problems, issues or other matters of substance which produce *significant benefits in professional practice*. (Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, 1998, p. 1) [*italics, our emphasis*].

This definition retains the notion of research being key in the professional doctoral form of the doctorate. More recent work has begun to differentiate the research professional doctorate and other forms of doctoral research (see McWilliam et al., 2002). The present discussion assists in widening the potential of the research professional doctorate by the consideration of the portfolio as a legitimate form of product. However it is the prior question about the nature of professional, as opposed to academic, research that requires examination.

Nature of professional doctorates

The Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (CDDGS) definition was an important impetus in Australia because it enabled the direct focus of professional doctoral work on the matters italicised in the quote above. The early structurally different professional doctorates became known as 'first generation' in contrast to 'second generation' professional doctorates which were more professionally focused and centred more on the realities of the workplace (Green, Maxwell, & Shanahan, 2001; Maxwell, 2003). They were also likely to be more trans-disciplinary in nature, not privileging academic knowledge, and resulting in action which was intended to achieve improvement, that is, significant benefits in professional practice. Scott et al. (2001) were able to show, on the basis of analyses of a range of professional doctorates in the UK, that there were four, not one, knowledge forms produced. From this and other related work the issue of the doctoralness of the award is not what knowledge form (academic or not) but rather what form of research is exemplified.

Earlier, Boyer (1990) in his influential *Scholarship reconsidered* addressed directly the question of research process. Boyer's work predates the initiation of professional doctorates in the UK but has been very influential. Boyer's scholarships of discovery (the traditional academic view of research), integration (making connections between forms of knowledge), application (creating knowledge out of making things work), and teaching (knowledge production resulting from the action of teaching and learning) all apply to the definition of the knowledge production as set out by the CDDGS definition above. For example, the scholarship of application requires context dependent knowledge to be created, which in turn requires other forms of knowledge such as discovery to be re-formulated. The important point here is that the research processes associated with the four scholarships are varied and also consistent with the kinds of knowledge production that can co-exist with the kinds of improvement consistent with the professional doctoral definitions quoted above. However, one person's improvement of professional practice is passé for another. This means that we need to consider what constitutes 'significance'.

There is a difference between significance and impact. This is an important practical distinction as far as an award such as the professional doctorate is concerned. Impact is important when it comes to professional practice. But impact is a temporal concept and in some situations impact can only be determined in the long term and so does not lend itself easily to doctoral research in the present imperative for throughout (Kemp, 1999). Moreover, a perceived conceptual breakthrough in a case study may have nothing to do with the study itself but more to do with the insularity of the professional practitioner than the quality of the work. It would appear to be a bonus if a professional doctoral candidate could show that a significant impact had been made.

More appropriate, however, is the requirement of significance related to benefit. This is similar to the requirement of the PhD, where the onus is upon the candidate to show significance. Such significance could be theoretical, practical, or political in nature. Criteria for significance in professional doctorates have been developed by O'Mullane (2004) in his paper entitled 'Demonstrating significance of contributions to professional knowledge and practice in Australian professional doctorate programmes: Impacts in the workplace and professions' and also by Taylor (2002, p. 10). Significance here acknowledges that a professional doctorate necessarily implies that the candidate is not a novice, indeed is more than proficient. The expert, then:

not only sees what needs to be achieved, thanks to a vast repertoire of situational discriminations, he [sic] sees how to achieve his goal. Thus, the ability to make more subtle and refined discriminations is what distinguishes the expert from the proficient [practitioner]. (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2004)

This discussion highlights the return of professional doctorate work, away from the capture of knowledge production sanctioned by academia. This is not a slick play on words but rather an acknowledgement that the focus upon professional doctoral work is the community of the practice, as opposed to the community of academics (Lave & Wenger, 1991), an important distinction.

Who then is the audience for the professional doctorate? We take the view that the genre of communication in the award needs to be consistent with the community of the practice/profession. Here we disagree with Evans and Kamler's (2002) proposition captured in the title of their paper 'Theses: for examination not publication?' though we do agree with many of their ideas. Especially in the professional doctorate, where students are most often mid-career and part-time, the products need to be *for* the community of practice not for two or three examiners. A professional doctoral candidate is not honing writing skills for (future) academic audiences but rather showing skills, potentially at least, of a range of presentation media one of which is writing and this, perhaps, to different audiences. These skills are not normally central to the work of the professional in the same way as writing is central to the academic. Practically, then, what kinds of product are implied here? As soon as the plural is used the dissertation concept is left behind and we take up the idea of a portfolio. According to the *New shorter Oxford English dictionary* (Brown, 1999, p. 2297), a portfolio is:

- (1) A case for holding loose sheets of paper, drawings, maps, music, etc.
- (2) A case for official documents for a minister of state.
- (3) The range of investments held by a company or an individual.

The portfolio, as defined in (1) above, seems little more than a loose collection of papers, with none of the academic rigour one would expect as a product from a doctoral candidate. We need to add to this definition for its use as a professional doctorate form of product.

The portfolio concept

Can the portfolio fulfil the role of a vehicle for the examination of an award that has multiple products? The answer is already yes. The use of the portfolio is evident worldwide in doctoral education. Any Google search using the terms 'portfolio' and 'tertiary education' will find the use of portfolio in a range of awards in postgraduate awards in higher education. Furthermore, some higher doctoral degrees as well as some PhDs are awarded on the basis of a portfolio. Indeed, it is understood that in some disciplines, what is still termed a 'dissertation' can be rather like a series of loosely connected refereed publications, more suggestive of a portfolio than a dissertation. The portfolio definition has close affinities with the use of the term in the creative arts, where the artist builds a portfolio, a selection from amongst possible items for a certain purpose and a certain audience 'with exhibits selected to show what you can do in the face of commissions like those you might expect. And intended to impress' (Walker, 1998, p. 96).

When we extend the use of a portfolio to the professional doctorate, other parallels with the work of an artist are useful. A (thoughtful) artist, like a researcher, is intent on exploring an idea. Each may need to acquire new skills or hone old ones in order to do this. An artist may feel the need to move to a different medium – from pencil to watercolour or vice versa – to explore a particular effect or a particular problem of perspective; similarly, the researcher may have to move from one to another research method in order to address different research questions. However, unlike the artist whose explorations are communicated in the final product, the professional doctoral researcher may need to move from prose to an audio-visual presentation or to PowerPoint™ in order to communicate the results of the research to different discourse communities and in different settings (Maxwell, 2002). The use of a variety of media by the artist is not simply a desire to impress, though it may do this too, but a response to an imperative to explore an idea as fully as possible. In the case of the researcher, the desire is to communicate to the relevant discourse communities what has been found.

Thus a professional doctoral candidate has great potential to show a breadth of capacity in communication in a portfolio. This is not usual in a (PhD) dissertation. As noted in the previous paragraph, such variety in communication facilitates the presentation of research to different audiences, that is, to different discourse communities. For example, the same project might be reported to an academic audience as a refereed paper, to a professional audience at a conference as a PowerPoint™ presentation and/or to a community audience at a meeting in the form of a key point discussion. Furthermore, within the medium of prose, a professional doctoral researcher might portray the research using different genres; that is, write differently for academic, professional, or community audiences. Furthermore, just as artists may use different mediums at different times, their work may also be in different styles (e.g. figurative or abstract art). Similarly, the professional doctoral researcher might work within different paradigms or in different disciplines and so the research is likely to be drawn from a broad range of possible areas. To continue the comparison one stage further, artists choose different subjects even within the same style; and in much the same way, the researcher may select different research questions within a single professional workplace. For example, a researcher school principal might choose some questions related to staff development and others related to school-community relations, and another on the concerns about student learning in mathematics. Walker's use of the concepts of *purpose* and *audience* are the key to understanding why a particular communication style or medium is chosen for one part of the portfolio. The portfolio can encompass these variations in communication and purpose.

We contend that the potential of the professional doctoral portfolio must not be reduced to the mere collection of 'loose sheets of paper' in the Oxford definition, however. We agree with Walker (1998) who makes the point that the portfolio will have an over-riding line of argument – a thesis. For Walker (1998, p. 94) the thesis is the 'argument made, the intellectual and conceptual glue that holds the [port]folio together'. A thesis provides coherence and is usually a marker for quality scholarship. It is this requirement for the formulation of a thesis that distinguishes the research doctorate portfolio from a portfolio. The thesis provides the equivalence and the portfolio items a structural difference from the dissertation. However, in the art world, artists rarely explain their intentions in print, they leave it to the works to 'speak for themselves'. If and when the artist becomes famous, an exhibition curator or a supportive critic will point out the coherence in an artist's work in an introductory

speech or in the text accompanying reproductions of the artist's work. In contrast, it is the EdD portfolio writer's task to provide coherence.

A portfolio structure

In response to the desire for coherence, several possibilities come to mind. For example, a 'linking paper' is required in the 'new EdD at UNE' (Maxwell, 2003; cf Manathunga, Smith, & Bath, 2004).

An image, taken from architecture, has assisted us at UNE in our discussions about why this is, and how it becomes, a vital part of the portfolio. In the Greek temple (Figure 1), the linking paper is represented by the over-arching pediment, (the roof). The pediment is supported by the peristyle (a row of columns) in which individual columns represent the different pieces of research in the portfolio. The pediment might (and probably will) extend beyond the peristyle supporting it, either as a developed introduction or as a developed final section, or both. In a Greek temple, the columns are of regular proportions, but in the portfolio the research pieces may be of different proportions – some wider than others. The work would not be so classically elegant, but the key factor would be that each column would support the pediment. To carry out the role of supporting the coherent linking paper (the over-arching pediment), each piece of work (each column) must be firmly situated on a solid base. We see the foundation of the 'new EdD at UNE' portfolio as the professional experience that the professional researcher brings to the work. Such experiences commonly distinguishing the professional doctorate researcher from the traditional PhD researcher. The EdD is a degree for experienced education professionals working part-time, mid career on issues that interest them in their workplace, a feature common to most professional doctorates. This foundation is the basis of its strength – just as the solid foundation is an essential feature of a Greek temple. It gives the work credibility.



Figure 1. Model for 'new EdD at UNE' portfolio.

Thus the representation of the person in Figure 1 is important. The positioning of the professional researcher within the research product in this way symbolises the researcher's own voice as valid, especially in terms of the authority of the researcher as an experienced professional and hence the credibility that is brought to bear upon the analyses. It is appropriate that the figure stands on the foundation of the structure.

The linking paper is one way to create coherence in the portfolio, the structure needs a roof. Other possibilities to create coherence include short linking pieces between main items, some diagrammatic representation, development of themes through the different items, or some combination of these.

Potential of the portfolio

The potential of the portfolio in professional doctoral work is largely dependent on its structure. It is particularly attractive to the busy, senior professional whose work is complex and diverse. This preoccupation is different from the single endeavour of the traditional PhD researcher. As shown above, portfolio items can vary in subject and style. Putting this in another way, the portfolio is flexible enough, through the different forms of its columns, to allow different forms of scholarship in the Boyer (1990) senses. As well as different media, busy professionals need answers to research questions within a reasonable period of time. A portfolio presented for a professional doctorate encourages a number of studies of scholarship that take account of real people, real time, and available resources. As we have seen, the portfolio allows a number of studies, which recognises the breadth of expertise that an extended professional requires.

Furthermore, busy professionals simply do not have time to read a dissertation. We have argued for the importance of the discourse community. Our contention is that they are more likely to read shorter, quality research pieces that take into account real world circumstances from which the readers make the generalisations to their own situations (Stake, 1976). Thus the portfolio is more accessible to peers in the profession and even those beyond, especially when the same piece of research is written in different genres or presented in different ways to accommodate different discourse communities. Such examples of the same research presented to different audiences could reasonably be added as appendices. In practical terms, the series of shorter, quality studies (pillars) encouraged by the portfolio structure also accommodates the professional who changes employment while in the middle of a doctoral programme, a situation less likely in the single, focused dissertation and usually disastrous if it does happen.

Limitations

As discussed earlier, the structure of the portfolio could be seen as a source of limitations because its separate parts could contribute to a lack of coherence. Is such a lack critical? At this stage in our thinking we would argue yes. However, a significant portfolio without coherence might be possible. For example, distinctly separate quality studies between two covers can be envisaged. Each university would need to address this in their definition of 'portfolio'.

A portfolio with a broad scope could be criticised as lacking depth. For those who demand depth in their doctoral studies, then the PhD-style dissertation would be more suitable (and this is why the dissertation is retained as a possibility in the 'new EdD

at UNE'). The depth/breadth alternative addresses the purposes of the research programme.

Another limitation is more pragmatic. Portfolio demands will put pressure on a professional doctorate researcher in full-time employment. These demands may become excessive just because a series of studies (columns) is usually required. Each study requires the reading of different relevant literature. The conceptual demands of several projects may overload researchers, especially if the size and scope of each is not carefully controlled. It is for these and related reasons that the professional doctorate researcher would be well advised to limit research to professional workplace practice.

There are limitations to the portfolio but this is true of all kinds of work at doctoral level. The temptation is to think of the PhD as unproblematic. The PhD dissertation is the 'gold standard'. However, almost any PhD dissertation will vary in quality from chapter to chapter, as can be testified by any university doctoral committee member whose job it is to read examiners' reports. Dissertation researchers have to respond to examiners' comments and in portfolio examination this well developed process is likely to be retained. The key idea is peer review to ensure quality. It would be highly unlikely that any university would dispense with peer review to ensure quality in their doctoral portfolios but the range of background of examiners is one of the issues that need to be considered.

Issues

Examination will be fraught with difficulties simply because the nature and form of the portfolio will be unfamiliar to many in these early years of development. This is exacerbated by the focus upon the realities of the workplace and different forms of knowledge production (see Maxwell, 2003). Highly regarded, experienced professionals from relevant discourse communities are likely to be examiners of professional doctoral portfolios. Published criteria will assist this process although these might take time to develop and mature. (See Appendix 1 for the criteria for the 'new EdD at UNE'.) Students would be well-advised to be wary. 'Gung-ho' course coordinators may be doing their students a disservice by not pointing out the potential pitfalls.

McWilliam et al. (2002) make the point that present academics almost exclusively have the PhD as their doctoral qualification. They bring this experience to the supervision process. By implication, their experience of portfolio supervision is limited. However, academics are familiar with the shorter Masters form of dissertation as a quality piece of academic work. Hence it is likely that the problems of supervision will emanate not so much from size but from the variety of forms of presentation and genres that are possible within the portfolio format (see Evans & Kamler, 2002, pp. 7–8). Yet it is also evident that the academic genre of the dissertation is also being questioned (Richardson, 2000).

Lastly, such shorter pieces of research for a portfolio will be arranged in time, perhaps in series, perhaps in parallel. How do universities that reasonably require a proposal prior to the commencement of the research, cope with portfolio research, not usually experienced by the dissertation researcher?

Conclusions

We have made the claim that the portfolio has considerable potential for the professional doctorate for a number of reasons. If this approach is to be accepted, however,

the creative arts use of the term must be extended to include the notion of coherence. Portfolio coherence is central. It can be achieved through the development of a thesis (line of argument) through a linking paper and, implied above, direct connections made to the research pieces themselves. The separate research items can be conceived as supports for the thesis and will vary depending upon the research questions. This is a useful feature, since the areas in which the professional is required to be competent are themselves varied. The range of research questions to be addressed by the professional researcher can be accommodated better by the portfolio structure than the dissertation.

Furthermore, professional doctoral research is normally intended to produce '*significant benefits in professional practice*'. The professional has a variety of discourse communities with whom communication is required. The different discourse communities are likely to be interested in the '*benefits in professional practice*'. Portfolios have the capacity to include items for different audiences even on the same research question. Examiners from relevant discourse communities are implied.

Structurally, the dissertation is inclined to depth of treatment whereas the portfolio favours breadth. In both cases, however, quality is the key issue. In these early days of using portfolios in higher education, potential problems could arise from the lack of experience in the supervision or examination of the portfolio form of presentation. In this scenario, the portfolio constructor, supervisor, and examiner need to be wary and deserve clear guidelines. A minimum condition would appear to be the publication of the criteria for examination.

Notes on contributors

Associate professor Tom Maxwell is a member of the School of Education at the University of New England. Tom has been actively involved in teaching and researching in professional doctorates for more than a decade. He has coordinated the UNE EdD programme and most recently lead a team to create the new ProfD at UNE.

Glenda Kupczyk-Romanchuk has recently retired from the School of Education, UNE. Her specialist area of expertise is lexicography. In 2009 she spent a semester working in the Royal University of Bhutan teaching English language.

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Appendix 1. The University of New England Degree of Doctor of Education

Information for examiners (Extract)

2. Standard of examination

Overseas examiners who are unfamiliar with the standards applicable in Australian universities, are advised it is the University's intention that the standard of its EdD degree be equivalent to the standard of the corresponding degree in the leading universities of Great Britain and North America.

A portfolio/dissertation may be regarded as acceptable for the award of the degree if it: reflects international standards of academic rigour; is oriented to applied research in education; and, makes a contribution to the profession and/or professional practice. *The criteria, against which the portfolio/dissertation is to be examined, include:*

- significance of the research to the practice of education and the clarity with which it is stated;
- competence in identifying and reviewing relevant literature(s);
- adequacy of developing research question(s);
- Quality of basic research design(s): plausibility, parsimony and elegance;
- appropriateness of identification, collection and analysis of relevant evidence;
- expertise with which findings are interpreted in terms of theory, implications for policy and practice, and needs for further research; and
- quality and clarity of writing and presentation for relevant audiences.