Doctoral Students’ Identity Positioning in Networked Learning

Agenda

- My interest in online doctorates
- The nature of the doctoral degree
- The challenges facing online doctoral students
- My Research description and results
- Implications

My interest in online doctorates

- In 2008, Athabasca University opened the first “Doctor of Education (EdD) in Distance Education” program.
- I was hired as the program administrator
- My task was to help organize and manage the program as well as field inquiries.
- As the program began, I noticed that some students lacked preparation.
  - Lack of financial preparation
  - Lack of job stability
  - Family instability
  - Lack of support
- A year later, I began my own doctoral degree by distance at Lancaster University. I was interested in learner identity in online, distance programs. I focused on learner identity of doctoral students in distance programs.
  - In this presentation, I will present my results.

The nature of the doctoral degree

- Intensity & duration is greater than other degrees
- Working at a conceptual level
- Considering the nature of knowledge
- Making an original contribution to the body of knowledge
- New identities

Significance of doctoral degrees

- The source of new knowledge, practices, and technologies.
Retention can be seen as an indicator of a university’s commitment to student success or even of the quality of the institution itself (ICEF Monitor, 2014); a reflection of the institution’s prestige.

Doctoral studies may have significant impacts on society as learners potentially emerge with increased ‘resilience, creativity, determination and problem-solving abilities that shape the subjectivities and identities of individuals and [such individuals] make a longer term contribution to the public and social good’ (Halse & Mowbray, 2011, p. 521).

Types of doctoral degrees
- From most traditional:
  - Traditional PhD with individual supervision
  - PhD by publication
  - Taught doctorate characterized by courses, research training, and a shorter thesis
  - Practice-based doctorates with written piece and other expressive elements (art, performance, portfolio, etc.)
  - Practice-based doctorates with written piece and other expressive elements (art, performance, portfolio, etc.)
  - Professional / work-based doctorate with taught elements and "applied" research

- Modalities
  - Individual/group face-to-face meetings
  - Face-to-face classes
  - Telephone
  - Videoconferences (online) – individual/group
  - Email / text message?
  - Virtual reality?

Challenges with distance learning
- Students (across levels) pursuing degrees through online learning are thought to be 15–20% less likely to complete their programs when compared to students enrolled in face-to-face learning (Varney, 2009).
- How can distance-based doctoral students observe the norms of academic conduct in their field?

Why offer doctoral degrees online?
- Notwithstanding efforts to modify traditional PhD courses to accommodate the demands of knowledge production and social accountability in the current economy (Chiang, 2003), the newer professional doctorates, particularly those offered at a distance, can offer greater flexibility to accommodate the needs of professionals and practitioners. Increasingly,
programs encourage cohort interaction as a means of reducing isolation and increasing support (Loxley & Seery, 2011; Neumann, 2005; Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

Why should we study online doctorates?

- Statistics / proliferation of online doctorates
  - Enrollments in distance education programs continue to grow at much faster rates than traditional, face-to-face programs; their findings show online enrolment increases at yearly rates of 10%, compared to less than 1% growth in the overall population of higher education (Allen and Seaman, 2011).
  - Increases in doctoral enrolments around the world, accompanied by an increasingly diverse doctoral student demographic with wider age ranges, more part-time enrolments, different purposes, and a variety of employment choices following graduation contribute to the difficulty of measuring the complex ways in which doctoral research affects society (Halse & Mowbray, 2011).
  - A report published in 2012 by the Canadian Virtual University makes it clear that online students are more likely to have characteristics and be in situations, which challenge completion and that online retention is more negatively impacted by a lack of supports such as early interventions and social connectivity than is face-to-face learning.

Completion rates (over 10 years)

- Such statistics are difficult to measure, but here are some that I have found:
  - Canada: 34% to 71%
  - Australia: 30% to 70%
  - England: 76% for full-time students; 48% for part-time students
  - United States: 54%

The important thing about these and other statistics is that it suggests there is a high non-completion rate. And, this is as source of criticism. Other criticisms revolve around the inability of recent graduates to secure academic work.

(Statistics from: Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (2004); Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, & Farley (2004); Gittoes (2007); Council of Graduate Schools in the United States (2008).

Theoretical framework of my work
Philosophical background – social constructionist view of identity: co-construction of identity through social discourse.

Theoretical framework – Social positioning (Harré, 2010).

The SPC (annotated) adapted from Harré (2010, p. 144).

This diagram, as it currently appears, neglects the other social environments in which the distance doctoral students remain embedded. (Face-to-face doctoral students can become somewhat sequestered from their other social environments.)

The study

- Research question:
  - The main goal of this research was to explore how doctoral students in NL programs experience challenges to their current identities, norms, and relationships across the various boundaries of their academic and non-academic worlds.
  - The main research question was: ‘How do doctoral learners in NL programs describe identity positioning?’

- Participants
  - Two programs in a Canadian distance university
- Education (n = 15)
- Business (n = 4)
- Participants were in various stages of their degree programs
- 8 male; 11 female
- Only one was not working
- Mostly in the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Post-secondary professor, lecturer, instructor</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning designer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher (K-12)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Director (post-secondary)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Executive officer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not indicated</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.2. Occupation of interview participants.**

- **Methodology**
  - Preliminary questionnaire
  - Qualitative, open coding (influences from phenomenography)
  - Discourse analysis

- **Data collection**
  - Semi structured interviews
  - Described their experiences

- **Data analysis**
  - Themes, patterns, co-occurrences noted.
The Results – Positioning within general society

- Reinforced value on serving society
  - choosing to teach

- Increased sense of understanding society
  - teaching as means of perpetuating understanding amongst people

- Appreciation of others in society
  - increased interaction and sharing ideas
  - critiquing ideas

- Rejection/Adoption of age myths
  - decision to persist in doctoral studies

- Changing practices and perspectives
  - moving children to private school

Manifestation
- Public
  - Values
    - Practices
    - Mythologies
    - Discourses

Location
- Collective

Conventionalization

Publication

Transformation
### Sensing:
- anxiety

### Questioning
- reasons for study
- benefits of study (social and personal)
- studying after 50 years of age
- others’ behaviours / reactions
- information circulating in the media

### Observed practices and values:

**Usefulness of doctoral studies**
- status
- intelligence
- practicality

**Expected behaviours at certain ages**
4.3.2 Positioning amongst friends and family

The most salient narratives in this context were related to how friends and family members reacted to the participants’ doctoral studies. Figure 4.8 provides a visual summary of the participants’ descriptions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling alienated</th>
<th>Observed reactions of others to one’s doctoral studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examining priorities</td>
<td>o disinterest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o time</td>
<td>o rejection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o activities</td>
<td>o lack of understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o people</td>
<td>o familiarity with academic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o self</td>
<td>o surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Private
4.3.3 Positioning within the professional context

- Increased *sense of agency*
  - introducing new ideas and practices

- Synthesizing of academic and workplace knowledge

- Increased status
  - having a voice in decision making

- Job stability
  - promotion
  - prestige
  - worthiness

- Rejection / support
  - change jobs
  - strengthen network

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**Values**

**Practices**

**Mythologies**

**Discourses**

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**Manifestation**

**Public**

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**Conventionalization**

**Location**

**Collective**

---

**Publication**

**Aproptiation**

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**Individual**

Q4  Q1  Q2  Q3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Craving for intellectual engagement</th>
<th>Observations in the workplace:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alienation, sense of becoming different</td>
<td>Few others with doctorates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to influence the workplace</td>
<td>o hostility and sense of threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining old practices and workplace identity</td>
<td>o lack of understanding of doctoral work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others with doctorates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o support network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o lack of alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional/expected practices and attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o non-adherence leading to conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Private_
4.3.4 Positioning within the doctoral cohort

During the interviews, the doctoral cohort emerged as a significant location of positioning. Figure 4.10 provides a representation of the participants’ descriptions of their experience.
4.3.5 Positioning within the academic department

During the interviews, the participants revealed some of the struggles they experienced whilst attempting to locate themselves within the academic department (figure 4.11).

**Fear of divulging**
- lack of knowledge
- lack of intelligence
- poor level of expression

**Observations of cohort behaviour:**
- defensiveness / openness
- competition / collaboration
- collegiality and supportiveness
- frustration
- differing prior education and experience
- shallow discussions
- values: accountability, integrity

**Private**

**4.3.5 Positioning within the academic department**

During the interviews, the participants revealed some of the struggles they experienced whilst attempting to locate themselves within the academic department (figure 4.11).

**Increased confidence**
- sharing writing
- expressing academic positions
- aligning oneself
- understanding methodology
- passing performance measures

**Public**

**Values**

**Practices**

**Mythologies**

**Discourses**

**Transformation**

**Conventionalization**

**Q4**

**Q1**

**Q3**

**Q2**

**Location**

**Collective**

**Individual**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fear, shock, confusion of/from</th>
<th>Observations of the academic department:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>not meeting standards</td>
<td>o expectations of behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lacking ability</td>
<td>o reading, discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of control</td>
<td>o relationships with professors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of preparation</td>
<td>o standards of performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>conflicting expectations</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questioning ontology</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alignment with academic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conflicting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positions/expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questioning epistemology</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>certainty of knowing, how</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one knows, what one knows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Evaluating self against    |                                       |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>measures</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>candidacy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>defence (viva)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*Observations of the academic department:*
4.3.6 Positioning within the academy

Manifestation
Public
Informing practice
  o expanding knowledge
  o tying knowledge to practice

Increasing confidence
  o becoming a peer

Expressing
  o careful arguments
  o commitment to values (such as academic integrity)

Values
  Practices
  Mythologies
  Discourses

New ideas / challenges
  o exploring, examining and weighing
  o increasing one's repertoire

New expectations
  o loss of confidence

Questioning conflicting ideas
  o considering others' views
  o possible critique of the masters in the field

Questioning one's place and self presentation

Observations and preconceptions "academia":
  o how academics behave and think
  o a safe-haven of thought
  o the academic mystique
  o infallibility

Conventionalization
  Appropriation
  Transformation

Individual

Collective

Location
Implications

- Distance-based doctoral students remain embedded within multiple social contexts, which . . .
  - have various views of the value of doctoral study,
  - place demands, and expectations upon the students,
  - require careful management to ensure support

- Students can actively shape their support structures:
  - Locate a mentor(s)
  - Foster relationships with other students
  - Learn to describe their research in non-threatening and meaningful ways to friends and family
  - Consider the timing of the doctoral journey

- Institutions can
  - Provide orientation sessions that include
    - Discussion of how to manage support structures, finances, health, cohort relationships, schedules, etc.
    - Clarify standards of performance and expectations of behaviour (provide writing samples, analytical work, etc.)
    - Encourage conference participation and publication.

References

Contact / thank you