

Changing the Subject: When ‘Enquiry’ gets Personal

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Abstract

This article seeks to give a brief account and evaluation of an innovative, collaborative project in theological education in the UK – the Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology (DPT), on which there are currently some 50 students in three universities (Anglia Ruskin with the Cambridge Theological Federation, Birmingham and Manchester. The University of Wales Lampeter has validated but currently not recruited). After a brief review of the rationale for such programmes, and their affinity with the philosophy and practice of Enquiry-Based Learning, I used some of the material from candidates on the DPT at Manchester to illustrate how the subject of the ‘enquiry’ of EBL in the context of a professional doctorate is not simply a candidate’s own institutional or work-based situation, but necessarily their own *subjectivity* as an emergent ‘reflective practitioner’. This adds new dimensions and exciting possibilities for further research, to emergent claims that professional doctorates are a form of ‘action-research’. Indeed, within the Doctor of Practical Theology, the talk is of practice- or enquiry-based research leading to changes in theory and practice, not only in the public contexts of academic scholarship and workplace settings, but in the researcher’s own continuing professional and personal development.

Background: What is a Professional Doctorate?

This case study discusses some of the main aspects of the professional doctorate in Practical Theology, part of a national consortium of universities and a CEEBL Faculty Project since September 2006. Over the past three years, the programme team has worked closely with CEEBL to develop an innovative, enquiry-based research degree in which critical reflection on professional practice has served as a prominent method of learning and assessment. The students’ own work-based context and their own experience are held to be significant *primary sources* for research. As a result, the pedagogies of action-reflection, journaling and action-research have featured strongly in the programme design and delivery, both in group residentials and individual study.

According to a recent discussion paper published for consultation in May-July 2007 by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA 2007, para. 8),

[s]o-called 'professional doctorates' are doctorates that focus on embedding research in a reflective manner into another professional practice. They must meet the same core standards as 'traditional' doctorates in order to ensure the same high levels of quality....In order to ensure a broad discussion on this topic it will be important to ensure the dissemination of information on the rapidly growing number of professional doctorates – particularly in the UK but also in other countries – across the entire European higher education sector.

Continuing the focus on practice-based research, Scott and his co-authors observe that professional doctorates 'exist in the twilight zone between the university and the workplace (Scott *et al.* 2004, p. 1).

The defining feature of the professional doctorate is a focus on professional work, reflecting a recognition that work-based learning should be extended to the highest level of award, the doctorate (ibid., p. 22).

Throughout the recent QAA *Framework for HE Qualifications* (August 2008, para. 46), this emphasis on an element of professional practice co-exists with attention to its distinctive mode of delivery:

Doctoral programmes that may include a research component but which have a substantial taught element (for example, professional doctorates), lead usually to awards which include the name of the discipline in their title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education or DClinPsy for Doctor of Clinical Psychology). Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge.

These extracts highlight three important factors about professional doctorates: first, their embeddedness in professional practice; second, the necessity of their equality in core standards with Ph.D.s; and finally, their rapid growth. On these, all would be agreed.

A less well-agreed issue is whether such doctorates are also necessarily 'taught' degrees, and the nature of any such elements. In the responses to an earlier QAA discussion paper on doctoral benchmarks, some objection was taken to reference in the Code of Practice definition to 'all forms of taught or professional doctorates', which appeared to make the assumption that all professional doctorates would be *taught* doctorates (QAA 2004). In fact, this link is disputed throughout the sector; indeed one way in which those of us involved in professional doctorates in Practical Theology distinguish it from other qualifications, such as the Doctor of Ministry (DMin), is that we do not offer subject- or content-based taught elements. The only 'teaching' would be introductions to aspects of research design and methodology, although more often than not these, too, are delivered via enquiry-based methods, such as the 'speed DPT' (as discussed later).

The idea of the professional doctorate in Practical Theology in the UK began at a fringe meeting of the *International Academy of Practical Theology* in 2003 and has developed since under the auspices of the *British and Irish Association of Practical Theology*. The programme is designed to appeal to those interested in relating theological, ethical and spiritual insights and methods to their own professional and/or voluntary practice. Participants are not required to have a personal faith-commitment, but they should be interested in the role of religion, theology and ethics, as forms of 'action-guiding world-views' (Pattison, 2007, p. 7). Students come from a range of professional backgrounds, including social policy, management, politics, health care, community work, congregational ministry and institutional chaplaincy.

Those of us involved in its development nationally were, above all, drawn to the professional doctorate model, as it offers a chance for doctoral candidates to research the practice of their own profession, thus maximising the integration which we and they sought. We could see that this would have importance, not only for the candidates, but for the professions and specific institutions which they represented.

Similarly, the way the professional doctorate was developing in our institutions offered a model of doctoral research which moved away from the traditional lone Ph.D. student and towards working in cohorts, and away from the single thesis towards a portfolio of work. Both of these suited our clientele and their contexts and working practices. Finally, we saw in this venture the possibility of working together rather than in competition and of developing this degree within a collaborative framework that would maximise the sharing of staff expertise and use of time, as well as student collaboration and transferability. So far the members of the consortium are Anglia Ruskin University and the Universities of Birmingham, Manchester and Wales, Lampeter. A new DProf in Practical Theology will start at the University of Chester for 2009-10. The consortium is open, both to new members and to the development of DPTs in the field outside the consortium.

In 2006, the first students were admitted into programmes at Anglia Ruskin University and at Manchester, where the partnership with CEEBL enabled us to establish a regular series of residential research training seminars with a strong enquiry-based ethos. I will say more later about student evaluation of the value of residentials, and the affinities between EBL and practice-based research.

We have already published material covering the history of this consortium, the nature of the degree and our hopes for it within the field of Practical Theology (Graham, 2007; Bennett, 2007; Bennett and Graham, 2008). This case-study does not intend to repeat that history, but seeks to give a brief introduction and some reflection on where we have come in the three years since we took our first students.

Rationale: The Professional Doctorate as Enquiry-Based Learning

As I have heretofore indicated, professional doctorates

- are subject to the same standards as a Ph.D.;
- are a fast growing sector across a wide range of subjects in postgraduate research, ranging from Education to Business, Healthcare to Built Environment, Law to Counselling;
- sometimes involve taught subject elements although in other contexts this is fiercely resisted;
- always involve research which moves from *practice to theory to practice*, requiring the candidate to make a contribution to knowledge in the specific context of the professional or voluntary practice in which they are engaged.

Professional doctorates often deploy pedagogies that owe much to the philosophy and practices of Enquiry-Based Learning, in that students are often researching their own professional or institutional contexts. They also deploy the activity of 'reflective practice' with an emphasis on the reflexivity of the candidate and processes of personal reflection. Practice is identified as the locus of learning, whether it is through the widespread adoption of Enquiry- or Problem-Based Learning in the undergraduate curriculum (Kahn and O'Rourke 2004; Boud 1985) or in the debates about experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and the reflective practitioner (Schön 1983) in relation to professional formation and training. Schön's work has had particular impact in disciplines, such as education (Schön 1987) and health care (Jarvis 2000), encouraging a context-based approach to training which values pragmatism, flexibility and acquisition of analytical and self-reflexivity skills, which facilitate the development of practical wisdom (Jarvis 2000, p. 34). 'Research is now not removed from the daily round of practice: it is being demystified and democratized' (Jarvis 2000, p. 35).

But in addition to these skills and practices, students are often engaged, to a greater or lesser degree, in researching *themselves*: either as agents in a programme of action-research, or, in the context of one element of the doctoral assessment, evaluating their own development as 'reflective practitioners' (Schön 1983). In other words, the enquiry-driven element of the research extends to their own subjectivity and reflexivity as a crucial 'primary source' for their research. This is evident in the design and methodology of student assessment. A greater

flexibility in terms of modes of assessment and forms of research output (such as the portfolio – see Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk 2006) is commonplace and intentional. Rather than a single thesis, which is normal for conventional Ph.D.s, the Doctor of Practical Theology is assessed by means of a research portfolio, comprising several different elements:

Unit 1 of Part I is entitled 'Key Voices' and is effectively a literature review, normally submitted at end of year one. The aim of this unit is to offer a foundation in the field of Practical Theology, by introducing participants to debates, methods and writers in the discipline. In year two, students prepare a publishable article, often driven by a practice-based survey or research enquiry. In year three, candidates are asked to provide an extended critical reflection on their own development as a 'researching professional', by drawing on material contained within their Research Log & Learning Journal and in dialogue with relevant scholarly literature, prior to entering the final stage of a research dissertation.

It is possible to see the progression through the portfolio as a gradual transition from being a listening researcher, seeking to eavesdrop on current trends and debates in the field, towards one who makes an intervention in the debate via a publishable article, to one who moves again into a highly sophisticated level of reflexivity in relation to his/her own vantage-point as a practitioner-researcher. This progression culminates in a final thesis that demonstrates an ability to generate research findings that contribute to the critique and advancement of both theory *and* practice.

But overall, the research conducted as part of any such programme would still conform to conventional definitions of a doctorate as 'the capacity to make a significant original contribution to knowledge in a particular discipline through research' (Bourner, Bowden and Laing 2001, p. 72). In addition to a 'contribution to knowledge' within the academy, it is generally envisaged that professional doctoral research will also enhance the candidate's own professional and intellectual development, as well as his/her organisational or institutional setting (Bourner, Bowden and Laing 2001, p. 71; Powell and Long 2005, p. 27). This diversification of research contexts and objectives may be conceived as a 'triangulation' of outcomes in relation to academy, professional development and institutional best practice.

Evaluation: Facilitating Reflection on Research

Has the creation and development of the professional doctorate in Practical Theology within the ethos of Enquiry-Based Learning made a difference? Certainly, it has given the programme team an important tool kit of vocabulary and pedagogical strategies by which we have located our own rationale as a form of action-research or practitioner-centred research. This reflects

wider intellectual shifts in Practical Theology, itself, over the past two decades, away from self-understanding as an 'applied' discipline towards a 'turn to practice', in which the theorisation and analysis of context and practice assume renewed significance and in which the processes and methods of 'theological reflection' on practice are placed at a premium (Graham 1996).

So whilst some literature might emphasise (quite rightly) how professional context or individual practice/competence can be informed by research, it seems to us that it is also appropriate to explore how research is informed by practice, and how the latter serves as a primary 'knowledge base' for doctoral work. This may be expressed as follows:

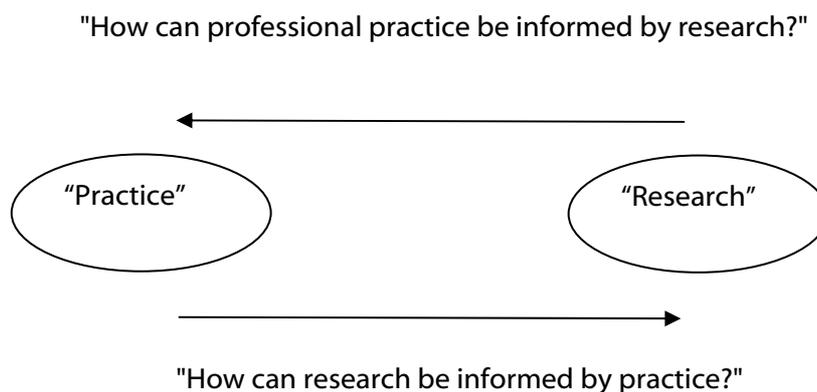


Figure 1. From 'applied' research to 'practice-based' research.

Yet the dynamic of theory and practice may be further elaborated, after the work of Kolb (1984) in education and Segundo (1976) in contextual theology, to substantiate models of theological reflection which follow a cycle of 'practice-theory-practice'. This process may be more appropriately rendered as a learning cycle, or hermeneutical circle:

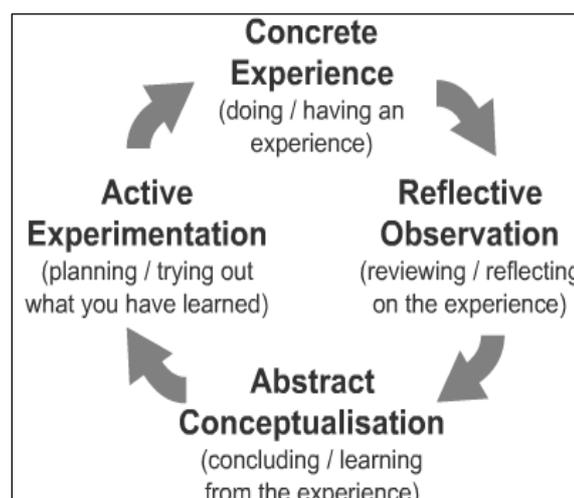


Figure 2. The Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984; <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm>).

There are two features of the methodology of our professional doctorate that strongly exemplify this approach. First, it is action-guiding. Practical Theologians are generally interested in the relationship between belief and practice from the standpoint of having a critical faith perspective themselves; they are '*critical inhabitants* of action-guiding world-views' (Pattison 2007, p. 7, my emphasis). The basic intention of the professional doctorate is to examine values, practices and performances in order to yield better performances. However, this is not to be reductionist, and it is important to resist any tendency in the ethos of professional doctorates to simply go for interventions that enhance performance in a way that smoothes over both the inevitability and the importance of failure and the unpredictable – for such is the nature of research.

Second it is interrogative: 'it seeks to excavate and evaluate the sources and norms of practice, and the values and visions thereby disclosed' (Graham 1996, p. 204). A key feature of the residentials and day conferences we have held has been the communal exploration of that feature of research in which questions regress back to the very foundations of what we have taken for granted. Participants have found themselves personally questioning at a deep level. This has bearing on the nature of supervision; it also indicates one of the reasons why working collaboratively in a cohort is so productive and necessary. We meet for two two-day residentials each year when all the participating universities join together, and then we have at least as much time gathering as separate university groups. Peer support and challenge in the business of questioning and analysis are essential. The residentials and day conferences build a sense of cohort identity and also enhance learning through collaboration in unexpected ways, as two participants' comments illustrated:

it's about managing isolation, but you know you have colleagues [L, year 2],

Being part of the learning community and making my own links with what others are doing [T, year 1 student].

The theme of the programme as 'building a learning community' – in which learning takes place *in a* community situated within collaborative, enquiry-based, mutually supportive networks – has recurred frequently in student feedback on residentials:

What I value particularly highly is the experience and opportunity of being with fellow students who are engaged in the same process, irrespective of the subject matter of our research. This is invaluable, and extends not only to the time spent together in formal workshops, lectures, etc., but also to time which could be perceived as 'social', but is actually essential for support, sharing ideas, learning informally from the experiences of others, and having the opportunity to discuss with others some of the issues that might have arisen for us in material looked at in more formal teaching sessions. I would feel utterly lost and alone in the process of the DPT without these times, and feel that it is a particular strength of the DPT that fosters collaboration and sharing within the academic discipline of Practical Theology, which appears to be a strength of the discipline [A, year 1].

The significance of peer review also builds skills of giving, as well as receiving constructive feedback:

It has been suggested in the DPT programme, particularly in connection with the second year task of producing a 'publishable article', that research is not complete until it has been 'published' – which can include oral publications such as this presentation. It has certainly been a new experience for me to have the confidence to 'publish' my reflections by sharing them with colleagues in a number of situations and in various ways over the past two years and to develop my thinking in the light of their feedback. I have begun to see myself as part of a research community, and since my research is in theology I have begun to appreciate the way in which theology can be a shared enterprise, a collegial conversation [S, year 3].

Reflexivity: Facilitating Reflection as Research

Working in groups on problem-based case-studies has been an important tool of learning. Chief amongst these has been the 'Speed DPT' exercises, based on the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures training courses for Ph.D. candidates. On the professional doctorate example, candidates are given fictitious job-briefs and asked to design and plan a professional doctorate portfolio accordingly. They are exposed to all the challenges of clarifying core research questions, assessing the merits of particular research methods and communicating their findings.

Yet, as our first cohort moves into its third year and tackles the 'Reflective Practice' element of the portfolio, we are confronted with another, different, aspect of learning from enquiry: that of learning from one's own experience. The question of the student's own subjectivity, or reflexivity, becomes paramount, as well as how their own personal and professional development has been shaped by their commitment to a long-term research programme. Much of this draws from another distinctive element of the DPT, namely the requirement to maintain a regular Research Log and Learning Journal.

As Jennifer Moon (2002) notes, journaling is a time-honoured technique in many educational programmes, but it is also deeply-rooted in many spiritual and religious traditions. It has often functioned as a uniquely *theological* variant on 'reflective practice', as the writer searches his/her own experience for signs of spiritual or religious insight. Graham, Walton and Ward (2005, p. 19) write of 'turning-life-into-text' by developing verbatim accounts in order to analyse pastoral practice and enabling reflexivity. Writing in a journal without constraints allows deep thoughts to surface to aid reflection. By noting personal reactions to events, personnel, literature and situations encountered in the context of a research career, students have been

aware how their understanding, both of themselves and the organisations in which they work, has evolved over time and how the 'researcher and research affect each other'. (Fox, Martin and Green 2007, p.156)

Autoethnography, an approach to researching the self, has also guided many of the students in their approach to journaling. Carolyn Ellis (2004), a key advocate of autoethnography, frequently makes use of creative writing forms and techniques in exploring and presenting material that is often highly personal. Indeed, some scholars suggest that creative writing and journaling themselves might be legitimate academic 'methods of inquiry' (see Richardson 2003).

It is possible, perhaps, to see how the students' own *reflexivity* is starting to work not only as a research resource, but as another mode of enquiry:

During my research on the DPT as my own frame of reference has changed I have become more self critical and have been able to reflect on the existence of several points of view, the coming together of different cultures, all of which are equally valid... [C, year 3].

Reflexivity has been valuable as a tool for enabling all aspects the world in which I live and work to speak to each other. It has enabled both my personal and professional development and has resulted in the production of a Chaplaincy Manual [M, year 3].

Reflexivity has been defined as 'the ability to look both inwards and outwards to recognise the connections with social and cultural understandings' (Fook and Gardener 2007, p. 27). 'Being reflexive by taking into account subjectivity (that) will involve knowledge of who I am as a whole being.... and understanding the effects this has on the knowledge I perceive and create' (*ibid.*, p. 29). In looking at the debate about reflexivity within sociology in the work by Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash, John Reader (2008, p. 15) suggests that 'what is at stake are both the unconscious dimensions of human operation and the unintended consequences of actions'.

However, there are ethical and political decisions to be made as one reflects on one's professional practice. Research is not only disturbing to the individual who conducts it; the professional doctoral research may also be subversive to the organisation within which it is conducted. Scott *et al.* (2004, p. 65-66) record the experience of one professional doctorate student who found, upon returning to his work environment that, as a result of having been trained as a reflective practitioner, he had an uncomfortable tendency to ask awkward questions. Our students, similarly, are finding already that their research is raising questions about appropriateness, values and efficacy within the organisations for which they work. How

can enquiry-based research on one's own practice facilitate that greater self-awareness, at the expense of perhaps subverting one's own very professional or institutional security?

As a Doctor of Practical Theology (DPT) student I have learned that a researcher must 'problematise' – at all times and in all places. Or at the very least, complexify. In other words, don't make assumptions about things [S, year 3].

There are some obstacles, however, to the use of journaling. Although journaling is a powerful tool for reflexivity, it may not be everyone's cup of tea. Jennifer Moon (2002, p. 79-80) acknowledges the difficulty of finding time for journaling, and although some participants have enjoyed experimenting with a kind of 'portfolio within a portfolio', for many others it has felt a bit too much like homework (and Moon reminds us to remember the importance of feelings in processes of experiential and Enquiry-Based Learning). As an antidote, Etherington (2004, p. 132-134) writes of a session in which she and some of her students shared the chaotic nature of their 'journals'. For some of them the journal was in fact a collection of scraps and jottings. Indeed, Etherington makes use of drawings in *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher* (2004) and Moon (2002) explores some non-verbal methods of working in a journal.

Further Development

I have been emphasising the origins of the Doctor of Practical Theology in the ethos of professional doctorates, and indicating how they model a process of enquiry-based research that moves from practice to theory to practice. Yet, as candidates move through the programme, issues of reflexivity and the standpoints of students investigating not only their own practice, but their own subjectivity, begin to emerge. This represents a powerful new dimension to the field of EBL and the DPT is already generating significant insights into the many qualities that make a successful 'reflective practitioner' in the context of practice-based doctorates.

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