Doing a doctorate in business administration: The case for critical reflexivity

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses upon the value of critical reflexivity in illuminating practice-based management inquiry. Drawing upon contributions to debates in the field, the paper demonstrates how critical reflexivity permits interrogation of the dynamic tensions associated with 'real life' practice and scholarly research on Doctor in Business Administration (DBA) programmes. It offers clearer understanding of the complex journeys undertaken, greater recognition of the organizational and cultural landscapes inhabited, and broadens concepts of how 'success' on DBA programmes may be evaluated. The paper further argues that critical reflexivity plays a key role in highlighting the various processes underlying the design, management and delivery of DBA programmes. In this way, the paper offers useful insights likely to be of interest not only to taught doctoral students in the field but also academics involved in developing practice-based management programmes in higher education. The paper's arguments are developed using a qualitative methodological approach underpinned by two primary data sets collected from different cohorts of students on DBA programmes and secondary sources subject to retrospective content analysis.

1. Introduction

It has long been argued by management educators that merging theory and practice will result in better theory and better practice. Over a decade ago now, Raelin (2002; 2007) and Van de Ven (2007) maintained that scholarship and 'real life' practice were separated by thinking underpinned by Cartesian logic which should be challenged. This paper argues that scholarly contributions to both theory building and practice development are an essential component of many professional doctorate programmes in the field of management education (Klenowski & Lunt, 2008). Taking as its focus the Doctor in Business Administration (hereafter DBA) programme at a higher education institution in the UK (hereafter given the pseudonym SWAN), it is argued that critical reflexivity is key to deepening our understanding of how theory informs practice and practice informs theory. This is of relevance to this particular doctoral programme because DBAs are distinct from other forms of doctorate, especially the traditional doctor of philosophy (PhD), in terms of their structures, relationships between students and programme teams, and management of student studies.

Since its inception, the DBA programme at SWAN has emphasised the requirement for students to be critically reflexive (Cunliffe, 2011; Gray, 2007) in terms of their theoretical, work-based and research practices. But with notable exceptions (Dent, 2002), inquiries into how critical reflexivity contributes to the distinct 'doctoralness' of DBA programmes is lacking. The paper does not seek to

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articulate how critical reflexivity should be incorporated into or taught on DBA programmes. That undertaking has strong precedents in the work of others (Cunliffe, 2004; Klenowski & Lunt, 2008). Here the focus is upon the value of critical reflexivity in illuminating a 'scholarship of practice' (Ramsey, 2014), specifically in relation to systematic analysis of the DBA student experience and the DBA programme team input.

Consideration of the role of critical reflexivity is crucial in terms of not only providing a grounded exploration of the various perspectives of DBA students but also illuminating the processes underlying DBA programme design, delivery and management. DBA students are expected to establish when, how and why their research makes a difference to the businesses and organizations in which they work and identify their contributions to knowledge and understanding. In short, it is incumbent upon them to become critically reflexive scholarly practitioners. That requirement can also be extended to academic staff as management educators, primarily in terms of considering how and what they input into the DBA programme over time and how they constitute and shape relationships between DBA programme teams and DBA students. As Raelin (2007: 498) argues: '… by immersing management students in a protracted period of study prior to entering the profession, management would be in a better position to assert its legitimacy'. Undergoing a high level 'protracted period of study' is clearly not the sole aim or outcome of taught doctoral programmes in management education. A review of debates in the field of critical reflexive management inquiry and practice and their particular relevance to the DBA, follows.

2. Literature review

2.1. Critical reflexivity

Reflexivity is concerned with questions about researchers as agents in a situation, whereas, reflection is concerned with questions that they may have about a phenomena (Hibbert, Coupland, & MacIntosh, 2010). Both are important for both academics and practitioners alike. Conventionally, reflexivity has been identified by Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton (2009: 661) as: '… a way to give insightful commentaries into the research process itself'. On the other hand, rather than simply offering insights into methodological issues, critical reflexivity involves: '… turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author' (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009: vii). Cunliffe (2004: 407-8) has defined critical reflexivity as meaning, in practical terms: '… examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions, the impact of those actions, and from a broader perspective, what passes as good management practice'. More than this, she also argues that: 'the practice of critical reflexivity is particularly important to management education because by thinking more critically about our own assumptions and actions, we can develop more collaborative, responsive and ethical ways of managing organizations' (2004: 407-8). Critical reflexivity also involves exposing contradictions, doubts, dilemmas and possibilities (Hardy & Palmer, 1999). This has particular relevance for DBA students where implications for professional practice require systematic consideration of their potentially conflicting roles within academic, organizational and business life (Cunliffe, 2002, 2003; Hibbert et al., 2010).

But the matter goes deeper than this. Raelin (2007: 496) has argued that: 'the dominant empiricist epistemology governing our educational enterprises in higher education as well as in corporate training and development leads us to separate theory and practice in an aspiration *to define the best conceptual models to map external reality*' (496: emphasis added). It could be argued that in terms of mapping relations between theory and practice, undertaking a professional doctorate such as the DBA potentially addresses this problem and results in more 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven, 2007). By means of developing critical reflexivity in both contexts then, many DBA programmes in higher education are explicitly designed to offer a bridge between theory and practice. Ramsey (2014) identifies three domains of attention: 'an engagement with ideas, a practice of inquiry and a navigation of relations' (2014: 6-7) and argues for: 'a scholarship of practice that centres intentional attending-to as its core'. These aspects are central to the DBA programme at SWAN. Given this, it is incumbent upon those involved in the DBA, both as students and academics, to engage with debates on critical reflexivity in business, management and the social sciences (Conklin, Kyle, & Robertson, 2013; Keevers & Treleavan, 2011; Paton, Chua, & Burt, 2014; Vince, 2002). That is what this paper sets out to do in terms of specifically addressing how critical reflexivity informs practice-based management education. The next section turns to discussion of the development and status of professional doctorates more generally.

2.2. Professional doctorates and the DBA

The UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) describes a doctorate as having: 'common currency globally as the highest academic qualification a university can award' (QAA, 2011: 5). Historically, a doctorate has been the 'gold standard' (Ruggeri-Stevens, Bareham, & Bourner, 2001: 61) in respect to higher education awards in the UK and elsewhere and has been awarded for an original contribution to knowledge made by the candidate's work. Traditionally, the PhD in the UK has followed an apprentice/master model but since the early 2000s, doctoral programmes have incorporated research methodologies and generic skills training (see for example, the Quality Assurance Agency's Characteristics Statement - Doctoral Degree 2015). This expansion or diversification has been a response to the changing loci and a wider appreciation of what constitutes a doctorate. There are now a range of different forms of attaining a doctorate, including the PhD by publication (Costley & Lester, 2010; Usher, 2002). Doctoral level qualification is increasingly sought in professional areas, beyond and outside of academia. As such, UK higher education has developed a portfolio of alternative forms of doctorate such as the professional and practice-based (or practitioner) doctorates. Although some have identified differences in the delivery and assessment between different doctoral awards (Bourner, Ruggeri-Stevens, & Bareham, 2000; QAA, 2011), the fundamental difference between a PhD and a DBA lies in the contribution to knowledge. As the QAA (2008) states: 'the