Liminal transgressions, or where should the critical academy go from here? Reimagining the future of doctoral education to engender research sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Journal rankings are increasingly becoming institutionalized in business schools throughout the world. The logical outcome that has followed from this phenomenon is the proliferation of a set of institutional pressures cast on scholars to produce research that will be published in 'journals that count'. One group that has been particularly implicated in the process are doctoral students—a group that is often situated in the most disempowered position within the academic hierarchy. Doctoral students habitually encounter myriad discursive and coercive forces, which encourage them to pursue scholarship within a certain assemblage of paradigmatic boundaries, methodological approaches, and research parameters. While members of this group will eventually become the future of their respective disciplines, their voices have been largely silenced in, or absent from, the ongoing conversation regarding the implications emerging from the current nature of institutional pressures for research output. Focusing on the area of critical research, this article identifies two trajectories by which to reimagine the future of critical doctoral education in business schools: i) reconstituting the role of senior professors in the field whose ontology and scholarship are inflected by a critical orientation, and, ii) pursuing concerted efforts to disengage with the mainstream.

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When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to the processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice.

(hooks, 1994: 61)

While no individual scholar can change the overall system, each one of us can make a contribution by, at the minimum, starting to change the framing of our research conversations from vocabularies of individual success to vocabularies of contribution and significance.

(Adler and Harzing, 2009: 92)

1. Introduction

The social conditions engendered by what Michael Power (1998) has now famously dubbed, the audit society, have ushered in a cultural logic, under the auspices of new public management (Humphrey and Owen, 2000), which demands accountability through myriad systems of verification. A site that has been particularly implicated by the establishment of the audit society is academia, where scholarly work is increasingly the subject of panopticon-like structures (Foucault, 1997)—often represented by the exercise of academic rankings and performance appraisals (Townley, 1993)—which endeavor to systematically adjudicate research and research productivity (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Craig et al., 2014). Using ideologically restrictive criteria, these structures serve stringently to demarcate between that scholarship which qualifies as being "worthy" (and thus meriting recognition and rewards) and that scholarship which does not (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Gendron, 2014; Giacalone, 2009; Malsch and Tessier, 2014; Reinstein and Calderon, 2006; Tienari, 2012; Tourish and Willmott, 2014). The poignant implications that emerge from the codification of such a system have been cited by critical accounting and management scholars, and include coercive pressures to pursue research within the boundaries of dominant paradigms and confining the scope of research questions and broader research agendas in ways that make them more amenable to certain coveted journals (Butler and Spoelstra, 2011, 2012; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Prasad, 2013; Richardson, 2004; Tourish, 2011; Willmott, 2011).

In his recent article, 'Business doctoral education as a liminal period of transition: Comparing theory and practice', Nicolas Raineri (2014) explores how the mounting institutional pressures for research output are fundamentally transforming the doctoral student experience. Understanding the 'lived realities' of doctoral students is essential if the field is to seriously grapple with important questions about the academic and the research sustainability of disciplinary fields like accounting and management. Indeed, addressing the doctoral student experience is particularly urgent in such fields where the "publish or perish" or "paying-off" mentality has acquired a high degree of hegemonic authority at the costs of various pedagogical and intellectual considerations (de Rond and Miller, 2005; Gendron, 2014). Adopting an auto-ethnographic approach in an academic setting (see Harding et al., 2010), Raineri considers how these pressures are changing the dynamics of the liminal period that is constitutive of doctoral student education. Drawing on his own experiences—and, incidentally, those of his colleagues—at a Canadian business school, Raineri observes that doctoral education has moved from being a period marked by opportunities to pursue reflexive social inquiry to a period defined by a strong predilection toward instrumentality; wherein specialized field and methodological training is offered to PhD students with the specific (and almost exclusive) intent that it will provide them with the necessary technical skills to publish in top-tier journals. This situation has perilous consequences for knowledge production. At the very least, Power and Gendron (forthcoming) warns that, "*excesses* in specialization can be detrimental in terms of constraining innovation and encouraging an *excessive* strategic approach to research". Raineri contends that it has become essential for accounting and management scholars to consider trajectories for redressing this predicament—to imagine paths for "emancipation and change".

I concur with much of Raineri's argument concerning the dynamics of the doctoral student experience, and I have made similar claims pertaining to this situation elsewhere (see Prasad, 2013). In this paper, focusing on the critical research area, I extend Raineri's position by identifying two ways which, I believe, are consistent with the constructive transformation to doctoral student education that he advocates: namely, i) reconstituting the role of senior professors in the field whose ontology and scholarship are inflected by a critical orientation, and ii) pursuing concerted efforts to disengage with the mainstream.[1]

Before proceeding, I will offer two points for the purposes of conceptual and empirical clarification. The first point pertains to the central theoretical concept invoked by Raineri in describing the doctoral student experience: liminality. Liminality is a useful analytical tool in conceptualizing periods of transition. However, in this paper, I will deploy the term in a slightly different way than that utilized by Raineri. Raineri relies on Victor Turner's (1987) anthropological meaning of the concept, which defines liminality as a site of a rite of passage—therein, underscoring the transitory meaning of the term. Extending Turner's idea, postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha (1994), re-orientates liminality to capture a discursive site where (often-competing) cultural meanings are negotiated and re-negotiated (also see Frenkel, 2008). Such an understanding of liminality explicitly affords agency to those subjects situated at transitory sites or those subjects simultaneously occupying multiple cultural realms—thus, allowing individuals, in the latter case, to navigate between and across the rigidities and homogeneity of disparate cultures. What appeals to me about Bhabha's articulation of liminality is that it represents a discursive location where the purpose of doctoral education can be re-thought and re-negotiated in order to move toward achieving what conscientious scholars envision it to be. The second point concerns the subset of doctoral students and professors for which this paper is targeted. Much akin to the spirit of Raineri's article, I am particularly interested in responding (and stimulating responses) to the conditions encountered by doctoral students whose research

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[1] By critical research, I refer to scholarship that broadly, "critiques our intellectual and social practices, questions the 'natural order' of institutional arrangements, and engages in actions that support challenges to prevailing systems of domination. Such an agenda has broad implications not only for the business world and the way that it is governed but also for our academic and intellectual traditions. It means a commitment to questioning the presuppositions and values that guide institutional, managerial, and intellectual practices; the ways in which we create and structure our social and organizational realities; and how we relate to others. Furthermore, it means thinking about the beliefs and practices underlying how we constitute knowledge about the world" (Cunliffe et al., 2002: 489; also see Chua, 1986). Given this definition, I consider critical research to capture both overtly critical as well as much of interpretive scholarship.