Workplace knowledge-production through doctoral projects

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Summary

The author carried out a study in 2009/10 in which outputs from the Middlesex DProf were examined in order to identify how and what type of knowledge was being produced. The study identified four main project-types, developed to produce a typology of workplace knowledge production.

Background

The study is premised on the idea that 'ordinary' professional work activities – for instance organisations designing and managing change or practitioners engaging with the 'wicked problems' of real-life practice – can provide a source of new knowledge that has an equal validity to knowledge produced through academic research. It draws on both Gibbons *et al*'s (1994) idea of Mode 2 transdisciplinary knowledge-production, and Scott *et al*'s (2004) categories of knowledge – disciplinary, technical-rational, transdisciplinary and critical.

Process

The Middlesex DProf was expected to be a rich source of material for the study because of its work-based orientation and eclectic approach. Thirty-three doctoral outputs were examined, spanning the period 2000-09, to identify how and what kind of knowledge was being produced and how it was being used. These were evenly split between UK and non-UK examples and covered a broad range of activities and fields.

Findings

Outputs could be classified into one of four categories, with a few having features of more than one: development or 'practice as research' projects, research as an involved practitioner, detached research into an area of interest to practice, and syntheses of previous works. The categories differed in terms of methodological approaches, the type of knowledge produced (both in terms of Scott *et al*'s categories and what it focused on, summarised as knowledge of phenomena and knowledge of systems and practices), and how the knowledge was used. The categories could also be related to the doctoral types discussed by Maxwell (2003) and subsequently expanded by Lester (2004), Boud & Tennant (2006) and Stephenson *et al* (2006). These findings were refined to produce a typology of workplace knowledge-producing activities, summarised in the table below.

Publication

The study described in this poster is quoted in Costley, C & Lester, S (2012) "Work-based doctorates: professional extension at the highest levels," *Studies in Higher Education* 37 (3), 257-269, and will be published in Lester, S (2012) "Creating original knowledge in and for the workplace," *Studies in Continuing Education* (DOI 10.1080/0158037X.2011.613595).

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Table: workplace knowledge-producing activities

Activity type	*Description*	*Main methodological approaches*	*Type of knowledge*	*Application*	*Related to doctoral type*
A1 **Reflection on action**	Reflection on past activities to produce new insights and knowledge	Varied, typically personal/phenomen-ological though can involve more formal qualitative or quantitative analysis	Systems and practices; transdisciplinary though may be developed to include other forms	Inform future action, make recommendations, disseminate	
A2 **Practice as research**	Real-life development or change pursued in a researching or critically reflective way	Action-based e.g. action research or soft systems methodology	Systems and practices; transdisciplinary though may be developed to include other forms.	Guide real-time activity, inform ongoing and future action, disseminate	Third-generation, practitioner or work-based
B **Research within practice**	Clearly-defined research embedded within the practice situation	Action-based or participant research	Systems and practices; transdisciplinary and technical-rational	Inform ongoing and future action, disseminate	Second-generation
C **Research for practice**	Discrete research in an area relevant to practice	Non-action-based, 'insider' or 'outsider' but not participant research	Phenomena; technical-rational and disciplinary	Make recommend-ations, inform future action, disseminate	First-generation
D **Synthesis**	Synthesis of previous knowledge-generating activity to produce new conceptualisations and insights	Varied, can be interpretive, documentary analysis or more formal	Systems and practices, sometimes phenomena; all forms can be produced	Disseminate, make recommendations	Public works