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Beyond knowledge exchange: doctoral training, collaborative research and reflective pedagogies in human geography

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the pedagogies of collaborative doctoral education. Collaborative doctoral studentships link the academy to wider societal concerns and aim to address unease about employability post-PhD. Dominant discourses of collaboration by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and its associated research councils, give primacy to importance of knowledge exchange within doctoral education. By drawing on my own experiences of undertaking a collaborative studentship this paper articulates the benefits of a reflective pedagogical approach to collaborative studentships. This reflective pedagogy is both a way in which collective aims are potentially accomplished and an opportunity to understand more about the institutions, systems and environments in which the research relationship is embedded. This approach resonates with participatory geographies literature and this body of work can be drawn on to support collaborative students to explore the relational dynamics of the research process and reflect on the role of the university. A reflective approach highlights the importance of the relationships that are produced through collaborative research and it is by attending to these relationships that collaborative students can understand more about the inner socio-political worlds of both the academy and their non-academic partners

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Introduction

Collaborative partnerships between academic bodies and non-academic institutions are celebrated within academia, offering opportunities for universities to influence societal change and economic prosperity. Despite their diversity these relationships are often premised on some of form of knowledge exchange. With increasing emphasis put on collaborative research at post-graduate level, this paper considers how pedagogical approaches to doctoral education can respond to the rise in (and celebrations of) collaborative research.

The paper begins by situating collaborative studentships within human geography. It then outlines the dominance, and limitations, of knowledge exchange as an approach to collaborative research. Reflecting on my own experience, the paper goes on to argue for the benefits of a pedagogical approach to collaborative research that is rooted in reflective

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learning, contending that the use of a reflective pedagogy can help early-career researchers think of collaborative studentships as situated within the wider socio-cultural politics of academic and non-academic communities, institutions and relationships. The paper concludes with suggestions towards developing a reflective pedagogical approach to collaborative research, aiming to encourage collaborative students to explore the potential of such an approach.

Whilst there is substantial literature on the often-interchangeable terms collaboration, co-production and participation, this paper focuses on collaborative PhD studentships in the UK funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) through their associated research councils, of which the triadic relationship between a higher education institution and an external organization to guide a student to complete a piece of research that supports the work of the partner organization is a key feature¹ (Hill & Meek, 2019). This differentiates collaborative studentships from “standard studentships”, in which students develop their own research project and apply for funding (Hill & Meek, 2019).

Situating collaborative studentships within human geography higher education

Reforms by the UK government to make academia more relevant have transformed academia’s political and cultural economy, emphasizing the building of a knowledge economy for the public good, economic growth and societal prosperity (Demeritt & Lees, 2005; Wilson, 2012). This importance of collaborative research can be seen in UKRI council strategies, with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (n.d.) commenting: “Closer engagement with the private, public and civil society sectors is an ESRC priority” and setting doctoral training partnerships (DTPs) “a target of 30% of each [doctoral] cohort to be engaged in some form of non-academic collaboration” (ESRC, 2015, p. 6). This is supported by the production of good practice guidelines for the setting up, managing and monitoring collaborative studentships (ESRC, 2021). Collaborative studentships are then one mechanism for linking the academy with wider societal concerns, yet they also reflect an increasingly marketized environment as a potential channel for private sector engagement (Bos et al., 2017; Collini, 2012).

Collaborative studentships also respond to concerns over employability and completion rates of doctoral students. Whilst fuller engagement with the literature on collaboration is outside the scope of this article, explorations of collaborative doctoral experiences highlight their ability to develop skills beyond the academy, exposure to different working cultures, greater engagement with policy formation and increased access to networks and data, whilst also accentuating the geographically uneven, situated, fragile, liminal and sometimes ambiguous nature of these experiences (Bos et al., 2017; Craggs et al., 2013; Demeritt & Lees, 2005; Macmillan & Scott, 2003; Reid & McCormick, 2010).

This interest in collaborative research is echoed within human geography as a discipline, awarded for example, 82 collaborative studentships by the ESRC between 2004 and 2010 (ESRC, personal communication, 12 August 2015). A report into Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) collaborative studentships, of which human geography is one of the ten most common subject areas, suggests that collaborative studentships “provide a route to diversify the Early Career Researchers in arts and humanities, attracting more women, as well as people who already have work

experience . . . ” (Hill & Meek, 2019, p. 18). The duration of studentships can vary, with a tendency towards 1 + 3 or +3 models of study, and there is a variety of projects undertaken ranging from partnerships with energy providers to cultural institutions (Souch, 2013, p. 1). Having situated collaborative studentships within human geography as a discipline, the next section of this paper will consider how knowledge exchange is seen as key to these endeavours.

Doctoral training, collaborative research and knowledge exchange

Knowledge exchange, the set of practices that accompany the formation, sharing and using of information appropriate for the context and audience, is viewed as an effective way of making academic research have social impact (Fazey et al., 2014), with the ESRC (2021a) commenting: “knowledge exchange, the enabling of two-way exchange between researchers and research users to share ideas, research evidence, experiences and skills, is fundamental to our understanding of what makes excellent research”. Knowledge exchange is an integral part of doctoral training, with the ESRC, for example, encouraging DTPs to “set up and organize knowledge exchange activities for ESRC funded students” (ESRC, 2021b, p. 3). Learning to do, and the “doing of” knowledge exchange becomes a critical aspect of doctoral education, particularly for those undertaking a collaborative studentship.

Traditional assumptions presume that knowledge can be transferred from one agent to another effectively using appropriate techniques, communication channels and governance structures (Mitton et al., 2007; Turnhout et al., 2020; Yusuf, 2008), yet these dominant narratives have tended to neglect the relational processes of generating knowledge (Fazey et al., 2014; Fransman et al., 2021). Whilst deeper engagement with these literatures is outside the scope of this paper, more critical assessments of knowledge exchange articulate these points, highlighting the social processes involved and its situated and contextual nature (Fazey et al., 2014; Turnhout et al., 2020). The remainder of this paper takes this critique as a starting point to develop a pedagogic field of reflection for collaborative doctoral studentships.

A pedagogy of reflective learning for collaborative doctoral studentships

Within UK higher education there has been a shift from knowledge transmission towards the facilitation of learning, with pedagogical approaches offering opportunities to explore the social worlds involved in the formation of knowledge (Golubchikov, 2015). One aspect of this transition is the possibilities offered by reflective learning. Drawing on concepts developed by amongst others, Dewey (1933), Freire (1970/2005), Kolb (1984), and Gibbs (1988), reflective learning uses experience, observation and reflection to understand concepts and generate ideas, providing an avenue for deeper learning (Harrison et al., 2003; McGuinness, 2009). Often modelled through distinct stages, reflective learning incorporates descriptive, analytical and critical phases, closing with an articulation of how the experience connects to prior knowledge, shapes new ideas and impacts on future learning. Geography as a discipline has engaged in the many possibilities offered by reflective learning approaches, including through fieldwork, journaling and reflective assessment (Golubchikov, 2015; Haigh, 2001).

This paper will now use an illustration from my own collaborative studentship to explore the possibilities of a pedagogical approach to doctoral studentships informed by reflective learning. My ESRC-funded collaborative PhD (2014–2017) was undertaken with an international development institution “World Aid” (pseudonym), whose aim is to support civil society and participatory governance. The purpose of the studentship was to develop greater understanding of civil society in contemporary democracies. I had returned to university 8 years after completing my undergraduate degree, and with experience of working outside academia, the collaborative studentship provided a more accessible entry-point into postgraduate research than the standard route. The collaborative nature of the studentship challenged me, particularly the differing values, timescales and priorities between academia and the partner institution, but working with an external organization also helped define the research focus and connect my own research to wider development practice. I (admittedly) sporadically kept a reflective diary throughout the studentship, focusing on research processes and encounters. This was encouraged by my supervisors, with reflection also encouraged in supervisory meetings. Informal discussions with other students undertaking collaborative studentships, particularly in the field of global development, also helped me to think through the collaborative process. The next section will illustrate, using two brief descriptions from different points in the studentship, how a process of reflective learning generated new ideas that shaped the collaborative process.

14 January 2015

“I’m on the train on the way home from attending a [World Aid] strategic planning meeting. I felt awkward at first – was I wearing the right clothes, where should I sit, who should I speak to? The purpose of the meetings was to develop World Aid’s strategic plan for the next 5 years . . . we split up into small groups – I sat with [Leona’s] team and we talked about changes to the capacity development programme. I really don’t know where my research fits in. There were also some sessions on professional development . . . I felt a bit strange doing this as I’m not a member of staff.”

12 August 2016

“I ended up doing the presentation [of my initial research findings] in the garden, it was so hot. Glad I’d printed out my slides . . . [Some of the senior management team] were unable to attend at the last minute. It was a shame in a way but made me feel less nervous. We sat on the grass under a tree in a circle. After the presentation [some of the staff] talked lots about fostering conditions that allow civil society networks to develop organically, which led to lots of questions about what international donors can do to help . . . This made me wonder if I’d been asking the wrong questions and thinking in the wrong way . . .”

Coming away from the first meeting I felt that I did not understand the wider environment in which World Aid operate. This experience, and the feelings of anxiety and insecurity it elicited, encouraged me to think more deeply about the global development industry, enabling me to connect an analysis of my observations to wider theories and concerns about global development – shifting articulations of democracy support, changing aid architectures, and fluctuating public perceptions of aid. Through reflective learning this meeting became a lens through which to interrogate some of the wider debates that are present within global development research and practice and acted

as a point from which to start to think about international democracy support in the current aid landscape.

Both these diary excerpts, and the second one in particular, voice concern about the place of the researcher within the institution, with a reflective learning approach emphasizing the importance of attending to the dynamics of the relationships between the academy and external institutions, and between the researcher and individual members of the partner organization. Following the presentation of my research findings, I exchanged a few emails with one member of staff which elaborated on the points raised in the garden. Reflecting on both the meeting and the email exchange highlighted the complex internal worlds of organizations, and how the values and approaches of staff members may also interrogate and critique the institution, and the wider development paradigm, with the researcher potentially drawn into these dynamics through their work.

When looking for literature to help me understand my own experiences, the literature drawn from participatory geographies was particularly useful in its ability to attend to the systems and institutions involved in the research and processes of group formation and dynamics, particularly across difference (Askins, 2017; Pain, 2004; Wynne-Jones et al., 2015). A reflective approach and (subsequent) engagement with literature stemming from participatory geographies encouraged me to connect my experiences to wider critiques of “partnerships” between academia and (global development) institutions, in particular the power dynamics, organizational hierarchies, the fragility of collaborations, the sometimes-conflicting timescales and the constraints of academic processes (see also Fransman et al., 2021).

This paper has articulated the benefits of adopting a reflective pedagogical stance in collaborative doctoral research, viewing the formation of knowledge as a social process and emphasizing the importance of understanding collaborative research as a learning relationship between academic and non-academic groups (Demeritt, 2005). This reflective pedagogy then becomes a way in which collective outcomes are potentially accomplished and an opportunity to understand more about the institutions, systems and environments in which the research relationship is embedded (Lucas, 2018).

Conclusion: reflective pedagogies in collaborative doctoral research

Collaborative awards are commonly undertaken in human geography in the UK, as figures from the ESRC testify. Doctoral education emphasizes the importance of learning to do knowledge exchange, often neglecting the socio-political contexts and relationships in which collaborative research takes place. This paper instead articulates the benefits of approaching collaborative studentships from a reflective pedagogical stance, allowing the studentship to be viewed as a way of thinking through the new relationships formed through the research process. Discussing this approach with external partners seems important for building an open and transparent research relationship. Based on my own experiences detailed above and the wider literature on collaborative studentships, this paper will conclude with some suggestions about how doctoral students can engage in a more reflective approach to collaborative studentships:

- (1) Refining practices of reflective learning, for example, reflective diaries, conversations with other (collaborative) students or blog writing (see Brockbank & McGill, 2013; Ryan & Ryan, 2013).
- (2) Creating spaces for groups of early-career researchers undertaking collaborative research to reflect on their experiences.
- (3) Making opportunities to write together about experiences of collaboration (e.g. Bos et al., 2017).
- (4) Engaging with the work done by participatory geographers, and for collaborative studentships with global development institutions exploring the literature on research collaborations in this context, for example, Fransman et al. (2021).

Reflectivity encourages exploration of the social processes associated with collaborative research and space to interrogate the contexts, communities and institutions in which research takes place, potentially developing a wider scholarship on the social worlds of academic and non-academic communities and the relationships between them. This approach can then help explore what the rise in (and celebrations of) collaborative research mean for doctoral education, and the wider academic and non-academic community.

Note

1. For examples see: <https://esrc.ukri.org/collaboration/postgraduate-collaboration/>

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