

Time and tradition: resolving tensions in the organisation of doctoral training in Sweden

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ABSTRACT: This is a position paper. It focuses on the Swedish doctoral dissertation in Pedagogik. It identifies tensions that arise from the co-existence of 'masterpiece' and 'apprentice piece' models of production. It suggests that these categories are unclear – particularly in the minds of students and supervisors. A resolution is proposed. Students who have spent a lifetime working towards their doctorate should be allowed to follow the 'masterpiece' or monograph model; whereas other doctoral students should be encouraged to build their dissertation around a series of progress papers that, on the one hand, represents a logbook of an apprenticeship and, on the other hand, constitutes a platform for post-doctoral research.

This paper arises from a serious error of judgement. It occurred when I arrived in Sweden, from the United Kingdom, at the beginning of 1998. The seminars I encountered at Umeå university reminded me of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and his influence on European education. Humboldt was Prussian Minister of education when Berlin University was founded. He is also remembered as the father of the research university, an institution that is also traced back to small-group teaching in German universities like Göttingen and Halle (see, for instance, Leventhal, 1986; Clark, 1989; and Brockliss, 1996, p. 586).

Unfortunately, my hasty interpretation was erroneous. I was naïve in linking the practices of the late 1990s to Humboldt's ideals. It is more reasonable to link current doctoral practices to the Swedish reforms of 1977, 1979, 1993 and 1998 (see National Agency for Higher Education, 2001). Of course, the Prussian past should not be forgotten - it is repeatedly revisited by elitist defenders of the research university. In such cases, Humboldt's name serves merely as a rhetorical device - a tool for re-positioning debates about the future of higher education. Nostalgia and romanticism have their place in the creation and affirmation of educational practices. But why Humboldt? Why not Aristotle, Confucius, Machiavelli, Descartes, Queen Christina, Nietzsche or Wittgenstein?

Constant change

My gradual appreciation of the far-reaching changes of the last thirty years has led me to a different view: doctoral studies are constantly changing. Here are four illustrations from Sweden:

1. the doctoral dissertation of Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) was, according to a recent biographer, 'a hasty affair of some thirteen pages' submitted in 1735

during von Linné's 'eight-day stay at the Dutch mail-order university of Harderwijk' (Koerner, 1999, p. 56);

2. only two doctoral dissertations in pedagogik were defended in Sweden during the 1930s (Rosengren & Öhrngren, 1997, p. 237);
3. over 400 doctoral theses in pedagogik were defended in Sweden between 1972 and 1993 (Rosengren & Öhrngren, 1997, p. 243); and it has been estimated that
4. doctoral students following pedagogic or pedagogy-related studies in Sweden during 2001 exceeded 800, with women in the majority.

The rapid pace of change since the 1970s has had one major effect. Each cohort of doctoral candidates is inducted into different assumptions about doctoral work. Further, these different assumptions are evident in the dissertations that are examined. And, finally, the fact that candidates take different amounts of time to complete their dissertations - in some cases decades rather than years - means that recent submission exhibit a wide range of forms. Table 1, for instance, shows the surface features of three dissertations that I examined, as a jury member, in the autumn of 2001.

(table 1 about here)

The longest dissertation (C) was almost twice the length and weight of the smallest. It had an elaborate argument and was accompanied by an extensive range of sub-arguments. Overall, it read as a testimony to a lifetime's work. At the other extreme (A), the shortest dissertation explored a simple but profound idea over four separate papers; and complemented them with a 42-page introduction. It demonstrated two features of an apprenticeship experience. First, it provided evidence of a exemplary research training; and secondly, it foreshadowed research horizons beyond the current competence of the author.

If the longest dissertation was a 'masterpiece', the shortest was an 'apprentice piece' (Kyvik & Tvede, 1998, p. 13). Such contrasting characterisations suggest deep differences in the regulation of Swedish doctoral practices in educational studies. As I see it, the issue can be described as follows. First, two conceptions of doctoral work are conflated; and secondly, these differences are not made explicit. The problem, then, is not only the co-existence of two cultures but also the fact that these cultures interfere with each other. Do the new regulations mean that doctoral candidates, like their supervisors, are being socialised into a regime of ambiguity and insecurity? As a member of a jury, what am I examining? A masterpiece or an apprentice piece?

Unclean Categories

Faculties and departments may resolve these tensions by prioritising one of the se options. In the field of pedagogik, however, such resolution seems to be unusual. 'Masterpiece' and 'apprentice piece' remain unclean signifiers. They are contaminated by connotations that infiltrate from each other. Doctoral students wrestle with the problem. Those who aspire to produce a monograph operate within a masterpiece framework. They take different studies and weave them together, hoping to mask the imperfections in their earlier work. If their bluff is successful, closure is complete.

References and, especially, footnotes are important markers in this respect. From a generous perspective, they are legitimating features of the dissertation. Yet, in their

density, they are rhetorical sandbags. They channel the flow of the argument. In other words, footnotes are the protective or defensive ornamentation of scholarship. With such devices, a quasi-monograph begins to take on the appearance of a monograph (cf. Donald Campbell and Julian Stanley's characterisation of 'quasi-experiments', 1963, where quasi means 'as if' or 'almost'). It is no accident, therefore, that the English word *ornament* comes from a Latin word (*ornatus*) that, among other things, described the weapons and accoutrements of war (see Skinner, 1996, p. 49). The net result is that, annually, Sweden produces a crop of dissertations that embrace the categories: monograph, quasi-monograph and folio (of papers).

Closure is also an endpoint. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that doctoral students may be reluctant to deconstruct an extended and coherent argument into a series of separate papers for publication. It would mean breaking down the defensive walls that safeguard their work. They would not only expose themselves to further scrutiny, but also run the risk of public humiliation. Monographs (or quasi-monographs), therefore, symbolises the tidy endpoint of a research career. Despite the recent increase in disputations, the flow of articles to journals, like *Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige*, has decreased. In short, the refinement of the (quasi) monograph may have become counter-productive in the advancement of science.

A second example of category confusion concerns the academic rights conveyed by the award of a doctorate. The Latin word *doceo* means 'I teach'. During the Middle Ages the award a doctorate represented the right to teach in the higher faculties of a university. But insofar as university teachers also constituted a guild, they also had the right to take apprentices (cf. doctoral students). These distinctions are unclear in Sweden. A doctorate confers greater privileges and authority as a teacher (i.e. a lektor is more than an adjunct/assistant teacher); but it does not automatically confer the right to be a doctoral supervisor - a privilege conventionally identified with docents (readers) and professors.

In these terms, possession of a doctorate carries conflicting cultural messages. Does it confer the right to join a guild of teachers (to use the formulation of the Middle Ages), to enrol in an invisible college of researchers (to use the language of the Scientific Revolution) or does it, using a more recent formulation, confer voting rights in a community of practice that combines teaching and supervision? Or does submission of a quasi-monograph merely lead to the status of quasi-supervisor?

There is only a partial resolution of these category problems in Sweden. Science, engineering and medical departments seem to prioritise the apprenticeship culture. And my limited experience within the social sciences and humanities suggests that cross-disciplinary dissertations (e.g. pedagogical measurement, mathematical didactics, instructional informatics) also follow the apprenticeship model. Elsewhere in pedagogics, however, students struggle with the tensions that surround producing an apprentice piece that looks like a masterpiece.

In the English-speaking world, these category confusions became resolved early in the twentieth century, through the separation of lower and higher doctorates. The medieval doctorate (Weijers, 1987 is a good source) survived until the 1900s. By that date, possession of the degree was marked by letters such as M.D. (doctor of medicine) or D. Litt. (doctor of [humane] letters). At the same time, however, the German doctorate was also taken up in the USA - as a research degree; and it was re-exported to the UK after the First World War. By this time, however, the degree was known as a 'doctor of philosophy', a label reduced to Ph.D. or, occasionally, D.Phil. This transatlantic exchange is not well documented - I cannot find a comprehensive analysis. Whatever its origins, however, it had two consequences: it

crystallised the difference between *higher* and *lower* doctorates; and it reduced Ph.D. candidates to the status of students engaged in a threshold-crossing activity.

Value for Money

Since 1998, however, Swedish doctoral candidates have had another uncertainty to grapple with. Admission to a doctoral programme became contingent upon two new criteria: (1) applicants must have 48 months of guaranteed funding; and (2) they must have a study plan. Further, it is assumed that these criteria are complementary: the study plan is to be fulfilled within the allocated time. Needless to say, the formulation of this research training agenda was driven by political and economic considerations. If the new criteria can be met, doctoral training will be more efficient, completion rates will be increased and, in the process, the expansion of higher education will be justified. Swedish doctoral training, in other words, manifests features of the 'New Public Management' and, in the process, the value-for-money discourse of the 'audit society' (Power, 1998). For articles that illustrate the penetration of audit thinking into British Universities, see Wilson, 2002; and Shaw & Green, 2002).

Linking Swedish doctoral work to a study plan means that new recruits do not waste time choosing a field for their studies. Likewise, by linking doctoral work to a funding schedule, doctoral students have a clear horizon for the completion of their work. The validity of this politically-endorsed fusion of time and money may be unclear (e.g. what are the side-effects?). Nevertheless, its practical implications can be discerned in a report by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskolverket):

[from] 1999 all admitted doctoral students have to be guaranteed financial support in the form of positions or grants. It should be possible to complete the doctoral degree ("doktorsexamen") after 4 years of full-time study but the average time [for students who started before 1999] is around 6 years. (National Agency for Higher Education, 2001, pp. 17-18)

A reduction from six to four years may bring Sweden into line with Anglo-American practice but it marginalises the masterpiece dissertation. Doctoral candidates begin to live a double life. They are resourced as if they are completing a lifetime's work; yet they are taught and supervised as if they are students. A Swedish doctoral candidate who spent time at Cambridge University during the 1990s, highlighted – and, needless to say, lamented – this contradiction:

As a doctoral student [in the UK]... you are not allocated any departmental facilities. No work surfaces, no telephone, no computer, no photocopying. (National Agency for Higher Education, 2000, p. 58, my translation).

New rules, new steering

The post-1998 regulations invite at least three responses. One response is protean, that students should remain faithful to the monograph culture and mould themselves to the new time-table. The second response is bureaucratic, that doctoral work should be brought within the target-setting, benchmarking and survival-of-the-fittest discourses of New Public Management. And a final response is that doctoral work can be successfully sustained under the new time constraints – as has been done elsewhere in the world.

This last challenge represents my own outlook. The supervisor's task, I feel, is neither protean nor managerialist. It is not to squeeze old traditions into new constraints of time and money. Rather, it is to develop new practices, thereby remaining faithful to the idea that universities are legitimate sites of innovation and change.

As suggested, the new Swedish regulations have a political purpose. They are expected to generate a new discourse that, in turn, will foster new practices. They will steer faculties that approve the doctoral student's funding schedule; they will influence departments that manage the doctoral student's employment and, not least, they will have an impact on the lifestyles of students and supervisors.

No doubt, the impact of the new regulations will be evaluated after 2003 – forty eight months after their introduction. But supervisors, like me, have been unable to wait until 2003. We have had to make our own preliminary judgement on the new regulations and, in the process, seek ways to reduce the average time for the completion of a doctorate from six to four years. Supervision, therefore has become more time-sensitive. We are not only academic sponsors, patrons, mentors and facilitators but also progress chasers. We are expected to keep our students on course, on task, and on time.

Time-sensitive management allows no delays. Supervisors cannot wait for months or years before students select their research topic. Likewise, admission procedures must match applicant's research interests to the available pool of supervisors. Time considerations also come into play when contracts of employment are stretched beyond 48 months. Indeed, prolongation may be an unwanted side-effect of the new regulations, jeopardising the the new regulations and their impact on completion rates.

Time considerations also suffuse the day by day work of supervisors and doctoral students. Rather like mobile phone users, supervisors have to start with 'where are you?' rather than 'how are you?'. They have to balance the *when-are-you-going-to-finish* question, 'How much time do you have left?', with the *how* question, 'how are you going to reach or revise your goals in the available time?'

Progress Papers

None of these questions is easily answered. My own approach is to offer students the following perspective on the doctoral process. Four years of scientific work can be represented as a series of *progress* papers. In turn, the concept of progress papers avoids the undesirable connotations associated with *published papers*. What, for instance, constitutes a published paper? Is it an article that has appeared in print? Is in 'in press' (articles may take more than a year to appear)? Has been accepted 'subject to modifications'? Or is it merely an article that has been submitted to an academic journal? There are quasi-published papers just as there are quasi-monographs.

With good reason, therefore, doctoral students are suspicious of collections of quasi-published papers. The category 'dissertation by published work' is a platonic ideal that young doctoral students can rarely meet. They have no folio of research papers completed earlier in their research careers. They can rarely produce such a folio in four years. Further, doctoral students do not wish their careers to be tainted by the uncertainty associated with ill-defined labels. In the past, many doctoral students prudently turned to preparing a monograph. They persevered, even if they risked finding the additional time. Of course, not everyone will finish in 48 months. Nevertheless, an *average* completion time of 48 months is still projected as a reasonable – and value-for-money – aspiration.

Bildungsreise

Progress papers provide, I believe, a viable third way. The resultant dissertation has two parts: (1) a series of *progress* papers that displays the intellectual development of the doctoral student; and (2) an overview that further demonstrates the student's intellectual breadth and

depth. The progress papers indicate how the candidate's thinking evolved. They are the record of an intellectual journey – a *Bildungsreise*. Together, the progress papers constitute a folio of papers that, because it hangs together, also maps out a research journey. Each paper is complete (e.g. with page numbers and notes). But each paper is also unfinished.

The overview has a complementary purpose. It binds the collection together. It is much more than a summary of the progress papers. It allows doctoral students to reflect on the material contained in the dissertation. Why, for instance, was the research topic chosen? How did it evolve? How was it broken down into manageable units? How did it relate to earlier and parallel research? How was it tested in front of peers and other researchers? Why does the title represent the overall endeavour? And, not least, what pointers can be given for further research?

In other words, the overview probes the validity of the progress papers. It is a recursive inquiry into the ‘adequacy and appropriateness of the interpretations and actions’ that fostered their production (Messick, 1989, p. 31). A similar view has also been expressed in Sweden:

validation should be seen as a scientific outlook where, throughout the research process, inferences and interpretations are appraised, questioned, scrutinised and re-examined. (Borgström, Gougoulakis and Höghielm, 1998, p. 92, my translation)

There is no reason why such a validation exercise should be written as a single paper. It might also be written as a commentary linking the progress papers. Indeed, by identifying and implementing an appropriate format, doctoral students would also demonstrating their own powers of analysis.

Overall, a doctoral dissertation should be both a logbook of an apprenticeship and a threshold or platform for post-doctoral research. Further, it should also be a public record, an act of communication. Its preparation encourages students to recognise that research is an intellectual, social and political endeavour. Research, that is, includes challenging earlier interpretations; reflecting on interim outcomes; communicating alternative interpretations; and deliberating about the ethics of future possibilities.

This is the vision of doctoral studies that I try to share with my students in supervisions and seminars. It is not, however, a closed vision. There are still many questions that I am unable to answer about, for instance, the formal and informal powers and responsibilities of universities, candidates and their supervisors under the post-1998 regulations. The proposal presented here is merely for further discussion. Candidates will make their own judgement on the relative merits of monographs and collections of papers. In the process, they will evolve a research outlook for themselves, in the light of changes in the regulations, their own social circumstances, and their short- and long-term aspirations.

Reconciliation

Ironically, these reflection on the new Swedish regulations of 1998 bring me back to Berlin at the beginning of the 1800s. The model of progress papers, outlined above, embodies the same sense of *individual* improvement or self-improvement that lay behind the *Bildungsideal* and the foundation of the (research) University of Berlin. I believe, too, that the widening of higher education in Sweden between 1977 and 2000 can be seen, as Gustavsson (1996) suggests, as an attempt to convert the elitist and meritocratic features of Humboldt's *Bildungsdeal* into more democratic, inclusive and collectivist forms of teaching, learning and inquiry. Doctoral studies, indeed, are constantly changing.

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Dissertation	A	B	C
Candidate's age (approx.)	35	45	55
Weight (grammes)	335	445	640
Pages	158	216	285
References	158	233	387
Footnotes	15	613	104

Table 1: Surface features of three successful doctoral dissertations