

**Becoming a Scholarly Management Practitioner – Entanglements between the worlds of practice and scholarship. *The International Journal of Management Education*. 19, 2.**

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**Abstract**

Our contribution in this paper is to elucidate how doctoral education can enable professionals to develop through an experiential pedagogy that is based on a theoretical model of scholarly management practice. It will draw from our experience of designing and running a large online DBA with participants from across the world. We present a model of Scholarly Management Practice and explain how its use differentiates this approach to doctoral education from others in that there is a clear focus on how holders of the DBA enact their management practice, characterised by an orientation to problematization, inquiry, dialogue and critical reflection. We describe the design and underlying theoretical and philosophical rationale for how the program elements articulate together to stimulate the development of scholarly management practitioners. The implications for teaching and learning are presented in the form of a description and rationale for the design of the program in its three stages. We illustrate the trajectory of potential development as a doctoral practitioner through the vignette of one student's journey. We also reflect on the limitations and lessons learned of our own theorising and practice in the development and delivery of this DBA.

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper, we elucidate how experiential practices within Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) programs, including that delivered in an online mode, can enable managers to become scholarly practitioners. It draws from our experience of designing and running a large online DBA with participants from across the world and every sector of employment. We present the design and underlying theoretical rationale of how the program elements articulate together to stimulate the development of scholarly management practitioners using an experiential approach. We propose that the purpose of teaching and learning within DBA programs is to develop scholarly management practice and to strengthen reflexivity in managers in order to deal with ambiguity and complexity.

We present our argument as follows; the first section outlines the emergence of DBAs as a form of doctoral education and identifies the continued struggle of DBAs to articulate a distinctive identity vis-à-vis PhDs. Following this we introduce the theory underpinning our particular DBA program, describing scholarly practice and the notion of ‘becoming’ in management education and development. We then outline the program design and pedagogy and offer an illustrative vignette before discussing challenges of what has worked well and not. We conclude by offering insights and implications for doctoral management education, as well as limitations and implications for further research.

## **2. Doctoral education and the rise of the DBA**

The DBA is a research-based degree for practising managers that seeks to develop professional practice alongside knowledge contributions (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2019). It is one of several professional or practitioner doctorates (others include the Doctorate in Education, Doctorate in Engineering, Doctorate in Clinical Psychology for example) that are seen as being the highest academic qualification, equivalent in standard to a PhD (Doctorate of

Philosophy). DBAs are offered worldwide, particularly in Europe and the USA, but also by universities in Australia, China, India, the UAE and several African countries. The equivalence of DBAs with PhDs is captured by the following descriptor from the UK's Quality Assurance Authority (QAA): 'All UK doctorates, regardless of their form, require the main focus of the candidate's work to demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge in their subject, field or profession, through original research or the original application of existing knowledge or understanding' (QAA, 2016:1). This description aligns with that used in the European Higher Education Area, a collaboration of 49 countries, and is similar to descriptors in other regions.

Alongside this shared characteristic of generating original knowledge, as a generalisation, there are two key contrasts between a DBA and a typical management/business PhD. First is the emphasis of the former on applied research and advancing professional practice rather than principally aiming to advance theoretical knowledge. Second is that DBA students are almost invariably experienced professionals undertaking their doctorate mid-career and studying part-time whilst they continue their employment (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016). A simple way of distinguishing between a PhD and a DBA is the suggestion that a PhD trains professional researchers whilst a DBA engenders a researching professional (Bareham et al, 2000; Simpson and Summer, 2016).

The rise of DBAs from the 1990s was in part a response to criticisms of the relevance of university research to practice (Banerjee and Morley, 2013) and an attempt to address a 'theory-practice' gap in management research (Bartunek and McKenzie, 2017). This impetus is no doubt what underlies the consensus to be found in descriptors of DBAs, in national policy frameworks and in academic literature, that DBA research is concerned to generate knowledge that will contribute to professional practice. However, once we start to look at how the relationship between knowledge and practice is actually articulated and how this is manifest in program design, there is less clarity or consensus. Some DBAs have substantial taught subject

content prior to a research thesis; others only teach research methods to underpin a thesis. Whilst all follow through with the aspiration for applied research, only some place the personal development and enhancement of leadership practice at the heart of the program design and pedagogy.

Many applicants to DBA programs are graduates of the MBA, a qualification often portrayed as encouraging learners to store up stockpiles of knowledge as an arsenal to be successfully deployed at the appropriate juncture (see, for example, Mintzberg, 2004). Without further exploration of the knowledge-practice inter-relationship, there is a danger that progressing to doctoral study in a DBA may still be seen in terms of accumulation of yet more knowledge for later application rather than integrating the development of the learner as a researcher of practice, able to consciously create their own knowledge as much as they make use of others. The question of how managers actually change their practice through their DBA scholarship or have impact on their organisations is not well understood (Creaton and Anderson, 2021). In this paper we contribute to addressing this gap. We advocate that if the purpose of a DBA is development of a ‘scholarly management practitioner’ (Anderson, Ellwood & Coleman), in the sense of an individual who emerges from the DBA able to create and use scholarly work to question their own and others’ practice and to make a significant contribution to the development of management practice, then the process of knowledge creation needs to be dialectical, through engaged scholarship and collaborative inquiry (Van der Ven and Johnson, 2006). The DBA we describe here reflects these principles, emphasising the development of candidates as scholarly management practitioners using an engaged and experiential approach.

In the next section we expound the underpinning theoretical ideas of scholarly practice before going on to describe how these are effected in the DBA program design.

### **3. Theoretical Underpinning**

#### *3.1 On becoming a scholarly-practitioner*

We conceptualise management as both a process and a relational practice, undertaken in contexts of ambiguity and intricacy, which are often politicised and emotive. Becoming a scholarly practitioner involves developing a disposition that treats management practice as a subject of inquiry: having a propensity for critical reflection and the ability to use systematic data and research to inform and evaluate practice. Scholarly management practice also emphasizes the capacity for collaborative inquiry and dialogue. This idea of being a manager involves making decisions and exercising intuition in one's day-to-day practice which has the potential to lead to an examination of self and own practice in the light of new knowledge, often referred to as critical reflection (Reynolds, 1998; Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004; Hibbert, 2012). The practice of managing, by its very nature, also involves the exercise of moral judgement both in managers' dealings with others and in the decisions they make about the more technical aspects of their role. To understand how managers learn to engage in scholarly practice, we draw from literatures on how merging theory and practice leads to effective learning (Raelin, 2007), phronesis (Flyvberg, 2001) and collaborative inquiry (Coghlan, Cirella and Shani, 2012).

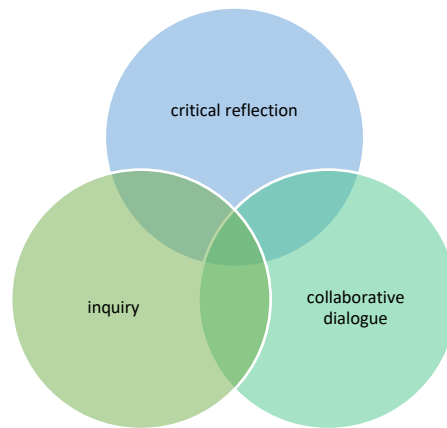
#### *3.2 Entanglements of theory and practice*

Raelin (2007) addresses the challenge of how we develop thoughtful, resourceful and research-oriented practitioners in business schools. He proposes a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice and suggests that we need to be clear about how theory improves practice and how practice can contribute to the development of theory. The DBA we describe in this paper invites managers to couple the explicit knowledge learned over the course of their studies with their tacit knowledge, experience and intuition to produce context-specific knowledge

through a process of questioning insight and insider access (Coughlan, Coughlan and Shani, 2019). Despite the fact that many issues that are questioned will arise from problem situations (Bourner, Bowden & Laing, 2001), this approach precludes a solution-seeking mentality and encourages managers to consider workplace problems in the round; to make judgments that take account of existing theory, ethical and moral questions and to explore how such situations present an opportunity for individuals and the organization to learn and grow.

Scholarly practice is characterized by praxis and phronesis. Praxis, the art of doing, acting and enacting, is described as a form of critical thinking that combines reflection and action with a commitment to human flourishing, a quest for truth and respect for others (Kemmis, 2010; Küpers, & Pauleen, 2013). The Aristotelian idea of phronesis denotes practical wisdom based on ethics and values and informed by reflection (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Flyvberg, 2001; Ramsay, 2014). In Heidigger's terms, phronesis is concerned with a way of being in the world (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014). It is pragmatic, context-dependent and oriented towards action (Kinsella and Pitman, 2012). This contrasts with the more established approach to business and management education of episteme, where value is placed on management knowledge as 'something which can be clearly formulated, codified and generalised' (Hahn & Vignon, 2019: 340)

The design of the DBA we describe is centred on the ideas of praxis and phronesis and is predicated on an epistemology of practice (Raelin, 2007). Action is implicit and is reflected in the pedagogy of the DBA through the integration of three elements (inquiry, critical reflection and collaborative dialogue), as illustrated in Figure 1, the Liverpool Model of Scholarly Management Practice. Also implied here is scholarship, in the sense that 'inquiry' encompasses scholarship in the form of systematic research aligned with action and everything this encompasses at doctoral level including use of literature, research design, theorising and writing.



**Figure 1. The Liverpool Model of Scholarly Management Practice**

The following section explains how these three elements are designed into the three distinct phases of the DBA.

#### **4. Program design and delivery**

The DBA we present here has graduated over 200 students from every continent over the past 8 years. Participants are experienced, often very senior practitioners. They have been professionally successful and hold a Master's degree. However, such is the leap to doctoral study, in research terms they are scholarly novices. Therefore, the program begins with a series of taught modules designed with Raelin's (2007) 'epistemology of practice' in mind in order to bring '*... mental models, which are often untested and unexamined and, consequently, often erroneous, into consciousness in such a way that new models would be formed to serve us better*' (Raelin, 2007: 500). Informed by the Liverpool Model introduced above, the design was deliberately crafted so as to foster the scholarly practice of participants, taking them through three stages of development. The first comprises structured online classes, run as virtual action learning sets (ALS). The second is a 10,000 word Doctoral Development Plan as

a transition from taught modules to thesis. The third stage is an Action Research thesis, in which students use research to lead a major organisational project. Below we elaborate on each of these stages and provide an illustrative vignette of one student's development through each phase.

#### **4.1 Stage One – Online Taught Modules**

This first stage comprises nine ten-week modules, in which participants engage with 6-10 peers in a virtual action learning set (ALS), facilitated by an online tutor. Learning employs core principles of action learning (Revens, 1982; Pedler et al, 2005), namely, a focus on issues of concern on which the problem-holder is keen to see action, peers who will engage with one another and ask insightful questions, reflection on experience, engagement with program knowledge, and a facilitator. This model works equally well in an online setting as in a face-to-face learning environment.

The aim in the ALS is not to simplistically seek application of ideas from the academic literature for workplace problems. Paton, Chia and Burt (2013:2) use the term 'relevate' to describe how learning should: "*Offer the intellectual space and the stimulus to stretch horizons of comprehension so that familiar problems, situations and circumstances may be rethought and reassessed for their strategic implications.*" Theory and practice are entangled: students bring an issue to the group which they problematize using the module readings as a means of unsettling existing thinking and to enable them to see the issue from different perspectives. These multiple framings are then augmented by the questions from the group, posed, in the tradition of action learning, to be naïve, insightful, thought-provoking and ultimately leading to action. The student 'problem-owner' takes informed action over the course of 10 weeks and ultimately presents a 'Critical Action Learning' project (Anderson & Gold, 2015) for assessment in which they reflect on the steps they have taken to engage with their wicked issue



and how their actions and thinking have been informed by their engagement with extant research.

In this manner, the ALS unfolds through scholarly debate and discussion about a real-life issue; students benefit by gaining insights into the organisational problem they have chosen to work on and also vicariously by engagement with others' issues. The global nature of the online classroom is particularly significant in that different cultural perspectives are discussed. The ALS reflects the complexity of many situations that doctoral-practitioners will be researching and fits with Bartunek et al's (1983:282) concept of 'complicated understanding' which involves 'increasing the variety of ways (events) can be understood'.

One of our students, Juan (a pseudonym) was interested in how leadership was practised and experienced by senior members of staff in the multinational military organization in which he worked. This interest in the relationship between organizational culture and leadership was prompted by his experience halfway through the taught module phase when he encountered Raelin's (2011) notion of 'leaderful practice' and the idea of soft power. As part of the action learning process, he developed and implemented a staff survey that foregrounded a misalignment between the organizational mission and the way in which leadership was perceived to be practised. He concluded that the 'command and control' model was evident in the practice of leaders rather than the organization's espoused model of transformational leadership.

#### 4.2 *Stage Two - Doctoral Development Plan (DDP)*

Towards the end of the taught modules, the DBA students prepare a Doctoral Development Plan (DDP). This is a reflexive piece of writing in which they are encouraged to reflect back critically over their learning in Stage One, and to ask the following questions:

- Who am I as a researcher?
- How will my presence in a research intervention affect it?
- How do I use data? (e.g. as objective truth, as constructions?)

The second part of the DDP requires a proposal for their action research thesis. They are required to identify a ‘wicked’ issue (Rittel & Webber, 1973) where the complexity of influences and stakeholders has previously defied resolution. They are asked to explain how certain action research methodologies may suit the kind of change they are hoping to bring about or the questions they want to answer. They also provide an explanation of how they will draw ideas from literature to help them frame their issue and work with others in pursuing solutions.

In his DDP, Juan reflected on his learning throughout the first phase of the DBA and how the misalignment between what leaders did and what they said they did was worthy of further study and presented an opportunity for an action research project that would bring about meaningful change. He also reflected on the risky nature of such a project that challenged both the organizational status quo and the credibility of senior colleagues and how this could affect his own professional standing and future career. He wrote about his multiple ‘personalities’ (as he termed them) as manager, researcher and internal consultant, and how these might play out in the thesis stage.

#### 4.3 *Stage Three – Thesis*

The third, synthesizing and culminating stage of the DBA is a deep engagement with research, in which the participant designs a study on, for and through their practice in their working context. Taking an action-orientated research approach, typically as an insider-action researcher (Coghlan, 2019) they seek to use inquiry in collaboration with other organisation

members, so as to problematize and take steps to resolve a significant issue in their organisation and/or in their own practice. Their thesis supervisor encourages them to be a reflexive researcher, in which they acknowledge their own ontological position and how this impacts on the research process and outcomes. In this integrated manner they bring the elements of the Liverpool Model (Figure 1) into the embodiment of their leadership of organisation change. The DBA student should also demonstrate they understand the difference between being a consultant and a researcher, showing the importance of well-formulated research questions that are informed by the literature and are not simply driving predetermined solutions. As such the thesis supports the students/candidates to extend their capacity to be scholarly practitioners through engaged and impactful scholarship and is not simply a means to acquire knowledge.

Juan's research project to address the considerable mismatch in leadership practice and discourse was sanctioned by the senior management in his organization and, having problematized his organizational issue by engaging with the literature on culture and leadership, Juan led a major culture change project that he wrote up in his thesis. He adopted the role of insider action researcher and brought about significant change within the organization through a process of engaging in collaborative dialogue with colleagues and senior managers (often in quite testing circumstances when his research began to reveal difficult issues) and with his supervisor. Framing the project as piece of action research and working through the various stages, enabled a consistent focus on inquiry rather than consultancy or problem-fixing. The literature informed his thinking and action throughout the project in a way that enabled him to problematize his own organisation's situation but also to make a wider contribution to professional knowledge about the nature of leadership in similar contexts.

In the following section we reflect on our experiences of running this program over the past eight years.

## **5. Challenges – what works or not**

### *5.1 Towards scholarly practice*

In charting the development of the post-experience students on any doctoral program, we suggest that their capability as scholarly-practitioners may be categorised in three ways: simplistic, overly-complex and mature. The latter can be thought of as an ideal of scholarly-practice: being able to make use of scholarly resources to understand the complexity of organisational life but having sufficient critical and reflexive command over those resources in order to deploy them in the measured pursuit of practical improvements. Whilst it is tempting to think of the other two categories as intermediary stages along the road to this level of proficiency, that would not be our experience. The development of scholarly-practice does not proceed in such linear terms, but rather involves iterations and dead-ends. It is also our observation that students start with different levels of capability and progress at different rates. The ‘simplistic’ and ‘overly-complex’ categories represent immature levels of scholarly practice, and we describe our observations of such behaviour in the following sections, along with the ways in which a more sophisticated degree of scholarly-practice is realised. We outline and illustrate this development activity in terms of the three constituents of the Liverpool Model.

### *5.2 Inquiry*

Informed by Dewey’s observation that knowledge comes not from observation but from inquiry and active experimentation, inquiry is one of the key constituents of the Liverpool

Model. A disposition toward treating their leadership as a subject of inquiry is instilled from the outset of the program, by the way in which students are asked within each module to engage with literatures in relation to their own management practice, and to reflect on the same within the online action learning classroom. Their obligations to this forum entail both offering questions and reflections as well as receiving feedback from others. The diversity of the program cohort guarantees that they will be exposed to fresh perspectives on familiar practices. Within these peer interactions we observe a tendency, initially, to 'apply' conceptual frameworks from the literature by seeking a one-to-one correspondence between some element of an academic model and their organisation or management practice; there is scant criticality in their attempts at contextualising it for their own situation. In some ways the polar opposite of this behaviour is one in which an extensive knowledge of a literature results in a prolix analysis of an organisational issue, in which a complicated understanding (Bartunek et al, 1983:282) is replaced with an expression of understanding that is obfuscated. This orientation towards the overly-complex can also be manifest in research designs incorporating multiple and inappropriately-mixed methods as if more data alone would ensure a better research outcome. Developing sophistication with inquiry is helped when students keep a regular research diary whose subject is their own development rather than the topic of their research.

### 5.3 *Critical reflection*

Student engagement within the ALS provides a vehicle for them to enhance a capability for critical reflection. We have observed unsophisticated posting to these forums that appear little more than memories; narratives of experiences that might have solidified into personal folklore in which conclusions have become unquestioned. The other extreme here can be overthinking in which an organisational event is considered from multiple angles, making reference to multiple models and ideas from literature, until the challenge seems more concerned with

generating yet another perspective rather than critical insight. Such overly complex reflections lack authenticity and do not guide action.

Improved personal competence at critical reflection owes much to the effective facilitation of the ALS, both by the tutor and, perhaps more importantly, by the students themselves. We have encountered forums that suffer from a surfeit of politeness in which a culture of respect morphs into uncritical regard. The online environment makes this aspect of learning group culture more difficult than in a face-to-face situation. It is known that asynchronous forums can be prone to misunderstandings leading to dysfunctional behaviours. Although expectations of the format and tone of peer feedback are set in the first weeks this requires on-going attention and facilitation from the tutor (Pedler & Abbott, 2013; Trehan & Rigg, 2015). Revans (1982) famously described AL set participants as "comrades in adversity", and this well describes the relationship between students, many of whom work together over many years. Strong professional friendships build, and this can make it difficult to constructively challenge a colleague.

#### *5.4 Collaborative dialogue*

As described above, one of the foundational principles of the program concerns viewing management as a relational practice. It informs the ALS mechanism most notably in stage one, and it is manifest in the final thesis stage in requiring students to undertake some form of action inquiry in collaboration with other people in their organisations. Despite becoming accomplished in entering into collaborative dialogue with peers within the program, the prospect of collaborative dialogue within their organisations appears deeply unsettling to many students. Many of them work within hierarchical organisations in which they may be subject to impositions that are not congruent with collaboration. Many also work in countries typified by high power distance (Hofstede, 1997). For others their own position may be the source of

the hierarchical dysfunction. Regardless of the exact source of antipathy towards collaboration its consequences are manifest in a number of ways during the thesis stage.

The simplistic response in this situation is for the student to go through the motions of collaboration. For example, some thesis projects risk being a poor quality consultancy intervention. Such cases might involve some consultation with staff, but that interaction falls short of the ideal of dialogue and is more about seeking support for a course of action upon which the researcher has already decided. A more complex situation arises in the case of students who would make capable scholars, and avoid collaborative dialogue by writing, in effect, a mini-PhD. With these projects students have lost sight of achieving practitioner objectives, or producing actionable knowledge (Argyris, 2004), and instead pursue a contribution to the scientific literature.

Participants achieve a ‘complicated understanding’ when they grasp entanglement between the scholar and practitioner, meaning they are able to deploy scholarly means in order to achieve practitioner ends. Maturity in engaging in collaborative dialogue owes much to supervision that corresponds with action-orientated research, as well as to the student’s openness to working with critical feedback. The scholarly practice is evident in the articulation of actionable knowledge, and their argumentation makes explicit the logic connecting intervention and outcome, in context. Such knowledge examined through collaborative dialogue within organisations then creates a sound base for identifying and implementing impactful organisational interventions.

## **6. Conclusions and implications for educators**

We have presented the design of doctoral management education through an engaged, relational, experiential process and have explicated the underpinning theory. We have discussed how it plays out in practice with some of the challenges that confront our

expectations. Although we have drawn attention to the particular global, online context of this program, we anticipate that our conclusions apply to face-to-face contexts as well. In this section we summarise key insights into the process of delivering doctoral management education from our experiences and outline implications for educators' practice more widely.

We have conceptualised the potential of a doctoral level of education within DBA programs in terms of students maturing as scholar-practitioners. With the Liverpool Model (Figure 1) we have articulated the key elements of scholarly management practice that inform the design of our DBA and differentiate it from other business and management teaching and learning that is predicated on episteme rather than praxis and phronesis. With the overlapping form of this model we have conveyed the relational nature of this type of management education (Anderson, Ellwood & Coleman). This is to recognise that development does not follow a linear trajectory but may be expected to vary with different learning iterations for each individual: iterations that are enacted through inquiry, reflection and collaboration with others. One implication for program designers is to adopt a program design which not only looks for this development in a final thesis stage but builds up such capabilities in pre-thesis through learning activities that invite smaller cycles of entangling practice and theory.

Our contribution in this paper has been to elucidate how doctoral education can enable professionals to develop their capacity to lead and manage well through an experiential pedagogy that is based on a theoretical model of scholarly management practice. Our particular approach has employed action learning and action research, and a second implication for other educators could be to do likewise. However, this is not necessarily the only way in which our theory (the Liverpool Model) could underpin the pedagogical philosophy and design of a program. Educators could look for other ways in which to integrate the components of collaborative dialogue, inquiry and critical reflection into their design. Key is that educators should adopt a philosophy of knowledge that makes explicit the iterative entanglement of



practice and knowledge. By showing how the use of such a model can differentiate doctoral education from other levels and approaches to management education, we also make a contribution to academic, practitioner and policy discussions on how DBA doctoral education can have a wider and positive influence on management and organisation practice when managers become scholarly practitioners with an orientation to problematization, inquiry, dialogue and critical reflection.

The challenges we have presented also suggest lessons for other educators. First, to encourage students to be inquisitive and enquiring about management practice, rather than either uncritically applying theory or over complexifying, it helps to have students keep a regular research diary for which the subject is their own development. Second, to foster critical reflection, individually or within peer learning groups, skilled facilitation is often needed both to model the kinds of supportively challenging questions that promote it and to point out avoidance. Third, to support students to engage in collaborative dialogue within their organisations as a way of developing their relational leadership capabilities can be assisted through multiple interventions, from the use of peer learning methods such as action learning, to thesis supervision that is rooted in practitioner research and action-orientated approaches, such as action research.

## **7. Limitations and further research**

Our arguments in this paper are based principally on reflections on a single DBA program, albeit that this involves eight years' experience and several hundred students, and is supplemented by the authors' involvement with other DBAs as supervisors, external examiners, validators and DBA student themselves over the years. As such, our conclusions are limited to this experience and may not resonate with other contexts. The program we describe is also an online one and this again may bound the applicability of our experience

compared to blended or face-to-face programs. As such, there are interesting questions which would benefit from further research. This might usefully compare learning from online and face-to-face programs as one example. It would also be valuable to make a cross-case comparison of different DBA designs internationally to explore further the relationship between underpinning pedagogical principles and impact on students' development as scholarly practitioners as well as changes to their own and their organisation's practice.

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