

## **'Ways of Knowing' in doctoral examination: how examiners position themselves in relation to the doctoral candidate**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses ways in which examiners position themselves in relation to doctoral students' knowledge. The epistemological thesis of Habermas is utilized and its well-established connections with the world of formal learning re-stated. Against this conceptual framework, the examiner reports are appraised with a view to identifying the ways of knowing being employed by the examiners. Of direct relevance to the PhD study is that each of the three ways of knowing identified in the Habermasian thesis implies a different positioning of the examiner against the doctoral candidate. These three positions could be described as 'expert', 'partner' and 'listener', with each of them implying both a different relationship with the candidate and a different appreciation of the work under examination. It is concluded that the relative dominance of one way of knowing, its allied positioning and typical textual form suggests that the doctoral examination report may constitute a virtual literary genre not necessarily conveying easily the worth of the work under examination.

**Keywords:** ways of knowing, examiner positioning, expert, self-reflectivity

Part of the extended analysis undertaken on 303 examiners' reports of doctoral theses has employed the theoretical lens of critical hermeneutics in an attempt to uncover the epistemological assumptions being employed in the examination process. This early analysis has provided some evidence for the assertion that there is a relative lack of critical reflection to be found in the doctoral examination. The analysis itself was in the form of semiotic appraisal, a methodology utilized widely by the 'Frankfurt School' of critical theory (Habermas, 2001) and centred particularly on the 'Ways of Knowing' thesis of Jurgen Habermas (1972; 1974). Critical reflection is therefore defined strictly according to the terms of this thesis. Herein, Habermas proposes that critical/self-reflective knowing constitutes an advanced if not supreme form of knowing, characterized by a level of self-knowing that makes one not only aware of the limitations of one's textual and human sources of knowledge, but of one's own dispositional limitations as a knower. Through elaboration of the Habermasian thesis and appraisal of the examiner comments, this chapter will explore the nature and incidence of this form of critical reflection in the examiner reports and extrapolate from them to make a case that the relative paucity of such reflection may constitute a potential limitation on the process of PhD examination as it exists.

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## 1. Unity of knowledge

As Lee Shulman (2001) outlined so well in his invited address at the 2001 conference of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI), the attempt to identify the standard patterns which underpin knowing, and therefore learning and instruction, go back in modern times at least as far as Dewey (1922; 1956; 1956a). This quest developed into a veritable science through the work of Tyler (1949), with special reference to assessment, and Bloom (1956) and Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia (1964), in relation to the taxonomies of educational objectives. It was a later development that saw the emphasis being placed on realms of meaning (Phenix, 1964) and forms of knowledge (Hirst & Peters, 1970) as ways of conceiving of fundamental difference in knowledge forms between the disciplines. With the work of Stenhouse (1975) and, especially the derived work of Habermas (1972; 1974), the earlier trend towards the essential unity of knowledge was re-captured.

In contrast with the infamous 'Forms Thesis' of Paul Hirst and Richard S. Peters, the 'Ways of Knowing' thesis of Jurgen Habermas suggests that there is a consistent pattern across discipline areas by which knowledge is revealed and further negotiated. This is an important thesis for a project attempting to identify and define patterns of research higher degree examination across discipline areas. We will begin by exploring the conceptions behind the Habermasian thesis.

## 2. Ways of Knowing: towards critical reflection

Habermas's (1972; 1974) explanation for apparent divisions in what is, for him, an essentially unified knowledge reality is that the sense of difference arises not from anything inherent about knowledge, but from human perception. In turn, the perception arises from a series of 'cognitive interests', interests which are part and parcel of the way the human mind works. These interests are three-fold. First, there is an interest in technical control which impels an 'empirical analytic' type of knowing. Second, the interest in understanding meanings gives rise to an 'historical hermeneutic' way of knowing. Third, there is an interest in being emancipated, a free agent as it were, which issues in a 'critical', or 'self-reflective' form of knowing.

As far as Habermas is concerned, all three interests are operative regardless of the discipline area. Whatever the subject matter, our interest in technical control will lead us to want to know all the facts and figures associated with the subject at hand; this is where the quest for empirical-analytic knowing originates and is of use in the total quest to 'know'. Similarly, our interest in understanding the meaning behind an event will lead us to explore the inner dimensions, to try to relate one factor to another; this impels an historical-hermeneutic type of knowing which serves to extend our understanding and the totality of our knowing. Finally, our interest in ensuring our autonomy as a knower will make us reflect critically on our subject matter, our sources and ultimately ourselves as agents of knowing. This is the preserve of critical or self-reflective knowing and where, according to Habermas, the only truly assured and totally comprehensive knowing occurs.

As an example, the knowing relevant to the fullness of understanding about the Vietnam War could be seen to reflect these three ways of knowing. Empirical-analytic knowing would be relevant to understanding who was involved, what events were crucial, what years certain things happened, and so on: through this way of knowing, our cognitive interest in technical control can ultimately be satisfied. Historical-hermeneutic knowing would help to ascertain what these events meant to the histories of the nations involved, as well as to their people, why they felt the way they did, where the anger, confusion and hatred came from, and like concerns: through this way of knowing, our cognitive interest in understanding meanings can finally be satisfied. Self-reflective, or critical, knowing would then be relevant to asking whether the information we have received is reliable, whether there might be points of view other than the ones we have heard, whether we are ultimately in a position to know the truth, or whether we might not somehow be controlled by the forces of propaganda which surround us. At this point, we may need to ask of ourselves whether what we 'know' stands up to the best evidence before us or whether, in part at least, what we claim to 'know' might not be the result of our own choices based on our upbringing, cultural beliefs, personal experiences and even personal

dispositions. In other words, how free are we in fact as agents of knowing? Only at this point, according to Habermas, can we truly claim to know, or are we in a position to stretch the accepted boundaries of knowing and engage in *praxis*, action for change. For Habermas, *praxis* is the ultimate goal of the quest to know and the final measure that knowing has occurred.

A vast amount of important educational research has been spent in making application of the Habermasian thesis to a range of issues relevant to educational theory and practice (Van Manen, 1977; Young, 1989; Doll, 1993). Of special interest is the application to curriculum theory, where each of the ways of knowing can be seen to issue in different philosophical assumptions and practical work in classroom-based curriculum practice (Lovat & Smith, 2003). Also of interest is Habermas's own recent acknowledgment of the role that semiotic analysis played in the Frankfurt School with which his work is so associated (Habermas, 2001). All of these connections are relevant to making application to the world of higher degree supervision and examination.

### **3. Ways of Knowing and the Relationship of Teacher/Supervisor/Examiner with the Learner**

Of direct relevance to the project in hand is that, in the application to education of the Habermasian theory, each of the three ways of knowing implies a different positioning of the teacher/supervisor, or, in this study, examiner, against the learner. Where empirical/analytic, or technical, knowing is operative, the teacher/supervisor/examiner is most likely to be the 'expert'. The expert represents and stands as custodian of the body of technical and conventional knowing to which the learner must conform. A key aspect of the expert's responsibility is in making sure that the learner can reproduce this knowledge. Examination in this realm will clearly be hierarchical in orientation.

Where historical/hermeneutic knowing is operative, the teacher/supervisor/examiner and learner are more like partners, communicating about meanings and negotiating about understandings. Herein, the concern is not with 'right' or 'wrong' knowing but with knowing that results from interpretive understanding. The teacher/supervisor/examiner may be more experienced in dealing with the interpretations relevant to a particular discipline area, or may even represent a dominant interpretation. Regardless, the understanding of the learner can only be assessed by the nearest possible, most mutually reciprocal interaction between the two parties. The teacher/supervisor/examiner cannot coerce nor force the learner to negotiate meaning. Where this is attempted, it becomes impossible to establish in any authentic way what the learner truly knows. In this case, evaluation of the learner's learning would be an enforcement of teacher/supervisor/examiner construction, and so rendered unreliable and probably invalid. Effective examination in this realm will exude negotiability and have a co-learner 'feel' to it.

When dealing with knowing of the critical/self-reflective type, the traditional roles of teacher/supervisor/examiner and learner are potentially reversed, with the learner being acknowledged as the one who is in control of their own knowing, and the role of the former being as listener. If the listener wishes to know what the learner has learned, and even more so if the listener wants to 'know' what the learner now knows, then she/he will be dependent upon the learner sharing what is known. In some cases, this latter may be impossible. The knowing of the learner may be so profound, built on such a level of personal experience and self-reflection, that there may not be a listening sufficiently intensive to allow for a sharing of this knowing. In this case, the examination process has to deal with an element of the unknown, the untestable in any normal sense. The examiner is left with the choice to believe/trust the testimony of the learner or, of course, to reject it. The challenge here for any traditional modes of teaching/learning relates to the fairly obvious truth that learners may often 'know' in ways that are beyond the knowing of the teacher. It is no different when it comes to the phenomenon of examination. In the empirical/analytic domain, it would be intolerable that the learner might be said to know more than the examiner. In the historical/hermeneutic regime, this is tolerable and able to be negotiated. In dealing with critical/self-reflective knowing, it is to be expected and indeed celebrated that new knowing, quite beyond the first hand knowledge of the examiner, has occurred. The examiner will happily acknowledge the role of 'listener'. Van Manen (1977) may well

capture the role of teacher/supervisor/examiner as 'listener' best when he says of the type of learning he sees ensuing from critical/self-reflective knowing:

*The norm is a distortion-free model of a communication situation ... (where) ... there exists no repressive dominance, no asymmetry or inequality among the participants of the educational process. (p. 227)*

For Van Manen, like Habermas, it is at this point alone that education, and presumably examination, becomes distinctively ethical, characterized by a sense of justice, equality and the freedom of individuals to follow their instincts of knowing wherever they might lead. It is also the way of knowing which, it is said, is a necessary precursor to the stretching of the boundaries of knowledge, to genuinely new knowing taking place. Granted the elevated status that the PhD enjoys in the learning system, and especially granted the mandatory tenet related to originality, one might hypothesize that this type of knowing would be fairly prominent in the average dissertation. Furthermore, if one were to take Van Manen's 'no asymmetry' thesis seriously, one would surmise that the only form of examination which could do justice to, or perhaps even detect, originality of this type would be one which was conducted largely in self-reflective mode. It is with these thoughts in mind, and conscious of the inherent limitations of process, that the examiner reports were appraised.

#### **4. Case study of PhD Reports: In Search of Critical Reflection**

For the purposes of this exercise, the 'formative instruction' sections of the reports constituted the primary focus of appraisal. As illustrated in Holbrook et al. (this issue), these are the sections that are deemed to deal most intensively with the content, scope and inherent worth of the thesis. It is neither surprising nor particularly revelatory that the overwhelming tenor of these sections of the reports exhibited an empirical/analytic frame of mind on the part of the examiner. According to this, the examiner's self-perception was as expert, with the task being to offer a judgment on the accuracy, validity and plausibility of the thesis. This stance revealed itself across the full range of formative and summative comment, with heavy skewing towards negative expression. Indeed, the weight of negative comment in the formative instruction sections of these reports left one with an impression that the vast majority of the works under study must have been sufficiently flawed to have failed. In fact, this was not the case, with not one of the theses in question ultimately being deemed a failure and only six requiring substantial revision to the extent that they had to be re-examined. On the assumption that so many 'experts' would not be derelict in their duty to be custodians of the standards requisite to doctoral level, it seems a likely if not inescapable conclusion that the empirical/analytic rhetoric of 'expert' has come to hold the status of the fundamental and expected text of the PhD examiner, regardless of the quality of the work under study.

In this context, it is worth fortifying the previous point by reference to one of a number of theses which were rated by all three examiners as being in the top category ('accept as is') and yet was subjected to sharp forms of seeming indictment by the full force of empirical/analytic appraisal. One of the reports is constituted of a number of cutting questions about certain details and assertions that seem to call the integrity of the thesis into question, without once offering a positive word. Another report is even more explicitly negative in tone, speaking freely of "... shortcomings in the way the thesis is argued", "... analysis which is very limited in scope", "... does not deal with the arguments", "... without an acknowledgment of its underlying arguments", "... understandings are so limited", "... no discussion about", etc. The third report begins with the words: "Most important are weaknesses in the structure of the thesis." It then proceeds to question why the literature review was not focussed on something entirely different, to suggest that two of the chapters were irrelevant to the rest of the thesis, to castigate the overall length of the thesis, its presentation and sequence, and to criticize a host of particular points made, suggesting at one stage that the author's "... reading ... is very limited." Yet, all three of these examiners recommended a 'top box' pass, representing the perfect score, and presumably therefore rated the thesis as constituting a major contribution to the world of public

knowledge. This serves to illustrate the point above that, in the PhD examination report, we may more often than not be dealing with a particular type of text, a virtual literary genre, born of assumptions about the nature of the task and its incumbent duties, as well as about the relationship between the examiner and the student.

If the above is the case, the rhetoric in which the examination report is bound is far from value-free and certainly complex. From the point of view of this particular study, this implies that the rhetoric of examination is at least as much of an issue as the quality of the theses under examination. As such, the rhetoric is not necessarily easily revelatory of the quality of the work in question, nor of its overall worth as a contribution to the public world of knowledge. If this is the case, then the rhetoric may even have the potential to mask, if not frustrate, the most adequate appraisal of the central purpose of the PhD. Empirical/analytic appraisal tends naturally towards the linear rather than the lateral, to deal with trees rather than forests. Combined with the stance of the 'expert', the resultant text will likely be focussed on the detail rather than the scope, and will most naturally be inclined towards negative expression. Granted that the vast majority of the works under study passed the test of excellence expected of the doctoral thesis, and so became the vehicles by which new knowledge was contributed and authors went on to take high places in the knowledge hierarchy, one wonders whether the 'expert' rhetoric of empirical/analytic appraisal should most appropriately be the dominant genre for PhD assessment.

If one accepts the above tenet, even for the purposes of further exploration, the challenge would be to re-conceive, and then re-fashion, the rhetoric. In other words, what is it that an examiner might wish to say other than cast judgment on the detail in essentially negative ways? Once this was understood, what might the new rhetoric look like? This will constitute a further aspect of ongoing study as the category of 'tone' has now been added to the coding (as identified in Holbrook & Bourke, this issue) and so will be the subject of more intensive scrutiny.

### 5. A Glimpse of Critical Reflectivity?

There was only one report that offered a text that seemed convincingly to express something of the self-reflective dimension, as defined above. The difference in tone from the norm would likely catch the eye of even the casual reader. This report began:

*There are those pleasant occasions when one is asked to review a paper or examine a thesis and you wish that you had written it. I believe that this is one of those experiences.*

Such a beginning clearly positions the examiner's relationship with the student away from one of expertise and even negotiability. The relationship established is at least symmetrical and could even be argued to be one of awe on the part of the examiner towards the student's original contribution, one which the examiner admits she/he had not themselves made. In that sense, the student has exceeded the expertise of the examiner and, in a rare display, this examiner is prepared to admit it.

In this case, the examiner goes on to specify in precisely which ways the student's work had exceeded his/her own, including adding value to the examiner's own work. That is, in a sense, the student has helped the examiner to understand the latter's own work:

*I thought that the interpretation of my work was very interesting as I had quite a lot of trouble digesting the data and simplifying it to explain what was happening and why. X's interpretation of this and his approach ... demonstrate how a fresh approach by a creative researcher ... can re-interpret source data to add value and create or develop valuable new knowledge. When I think of my work now in these ... terms, I find that the results become more meaningful.*

In the last sentence, the examiner makes explicit the self-reflectivity impelled by reading the thesis, including being brought to an enhanced understanding of her/his own work. Such a perspective was exceedingly rare and yet, as argued, one that the Habermasian thesis would tend to suggest might be found regularly as part of the examiners' rhetoric.

According to the Habermasian thesis, both the historical/hermeneutic and self-reflective analyses build on the important foundations provided by the empirical/analytic. Historical/hermeneutic analysis

deals with meanings and intentions; it provides a means for accessing and making judgments about the quality and integrity of people's thinking. While in part deriving from the coverage of detail analysis offered by the empirical/analytic, it is clear that, in Habermas's thought, it is a superior way of knowing, dealing with more profound content, with matter that taxes and stretches the mind beyond the matter dealt with by the empirical/analytic. If this is accepted, even in part measure, one might expect to find its expression occurring more often in appraisal of doctoral research. Furthermore, critical/reflective knowing represents the zenith of Habermasian thought on knowing, denoting the point at which one knows, knows that one knows, and knows why one knows. It deals with the most profound knowing of all, a knowing that is free to break with the constrained forms of convention and cultural determination and so to generate, as well as recognize, entirely original knowing. It is impelled by knowledge of the self, such that the knower is freed from these environmental constraints, and even from those of personal disposition, in order that new knowing can be crafted and dealt with fearlessly. Again, if it is accepted even partially that Habermas has identified herein the knowing most likely to be associated with new and original contributions to the world of public knowledge, then one might expect to see its expression regularly in both the doctoral dissertation itself and the appraisals of its worth. This is especially the case when one considers that the plausibility of the Habermasian thesis and its adaptability to teaching and learning regimes generally has been demonstrated well in curriculum theory and is well referenced in the literature (Van Manen, 1977; Young, 1989; Doll, 1993; Young, 2002; Lovat & Smith, 2003). Why then would this same element be absent from the purportedly supreme expression of knowing in the doctoral phenomenon? This remains one of the key questions for ongoing pursuit in this study.

## 6. Conclusion

One might conclude that the rarity of the demonstrably self-reflective comment in the PhD examiner reports relates to the rarity of instances whereby theses truly do break new ground to stretch the boundaries of knowledge. Against this are a number of facts: first, and as mentioned above, all the theses under examination were deemed ultimately to be successful by the essentially custodial examiners within a regime that demands that original contribution to the relevant field of knowledge be in evidence. Second, and of greater significance, is the fact that, in the case of the one report above that exhibited expression consistent with self-reflective analysis, the other two reports on the same thesis did not move beyond an essentially empirical/analytic appraisal, and this in spite of commending its excellence. This suggests that the frame of mind of the examiner, including the latter's explicit and implicit theory of knowledge, and more so the application of this knowledge to the examination process, are considerable factors in the final shaping of the examination report, and may in fact be the most determinative factor. If this is the case, identifying the final worth of a thesis may require a measure of deconstruction of the examiner text. Could it be then that training examiners to express their appraisals in ways other than the limited terms of empirical/analytic text would, while losing nothing of the careful and detailed appraisals which are to be found in the tradition, add considerably to the capacity of the report to convey the essence of the new knowledge being contributed? It may also be that the findings herein, and any likely training mechanisms that might ensue, could equally and perhaps more appropriately be applied to the regime of supervision. This dimension will be explored in future work of the PhD examination study reported in this issue.

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