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THE PRACTICE OF PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES: THE CASE OF A UK-BASED DISTANCE DBA.

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Abstract

In light of the prominent role of socio-materiality in contemporary social scientific (Nicolini, 2012), and particularly educational (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuck, 2011) research, this paper uses two practice-based theories to investigate the experiences of German business management professionals on a UK based DBA delivered in Germany. We specifically take concepts from Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT; Engeström, 2001) and Actor Network Theory (ANT; Latour, 2005; Law, 2009) to explore the evolving relationships between professional and academic identities as revealed in qualitative interviews with individual students and supervising faculty. The discussion underlines the potential of these theories to produce rich understandings of the identity formation of researching professionals. We conclude that professional doctorates should be seen not just as specific forms of advanced professional training, but as complex and indeterminate processes. Findings suggest that earning a professional doctorate often feels like a journey leading to some form of metacognitive shift from a problem-solving mindset to a more critical appreciation of different ways of knowing.

Key words: professional doctorates; DBA; practice theories; Cultural and Historical Activity Theory (CHAT); Actor Network Theory (ANT).

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Introduction

This article sets out to investigate the experiences of candidates on a UK based program leading to the award of Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA), one form of professional doctorate alongside various others (e.g. EdD, EngD) in the English-speaking world (Scott, Brown, Hunt & Thorne, 2009) which have appeared over the last few years. Professional doctorates are commonly distinguished from the traditional PhD by their purpose of developing *researching professionals* as opposed to *professional researchers,* and the normal requirement for candidates to "start with a problem in professional practice that needs investigation and resolution" (Bourner, Bowden & Laing, 2001). Although a number of new routes to earning a PhD have also appeared which either resemble the structure of professional doctorates or enable candidates to submit published work as the bulk of the content, the longer taught element and shorter thesis generally differentiate professional doctorates from the traditional PhD, which has a longer history. Candidates for earning a DBA are also generally differentiated from those on traditional PhD programs by their, often extensive, professional experience (Neumann, 2005) and, in most cases, their need to juggle part-time study alongside a full-time professional occupation. The overall objective of this study then is to find out what happens when professional practitioners become researching professionals on a professional doctorate.

The DBA program which is the subject of this study is designed to be followed on a part-time basis by professionals who might be unable or unwilling to take a career break, and who wish to obtain the higher professional standing accorded by a doctoral title. It is also a semi-distance program since the pre-thesis stage is delivered in English by "flying faculty" during weekend residential courses in various locations in Germany. This stage lasts about 18 months and consists of four taught modules: Reflective Professional Practice; Systematic

Literature Review; Methodological Fundamentals; and Research Methods and Analysis. The whole program is underpinned by a critically reflexive ethos (Cunliffe, 2004; Dehler, 2009), which encourages students to reflect upon their experiences by means of a research journal. The programme explicitly promotes Action Learning through the use of Action Learning Sets and Action Research as one possible approach to researching management topics. In this way the course design seeks to overcome what Raelin and Coghlan (2006) see as significant failures of conventional management education: the failure to use the actual experience of practising managers and the lack of opportunity to reflect on skills learned with others. Candidates are offered supervision either face to face in Germany or in the UK, or more often, via conference calls, while they work on a thesis which usually takes as its point of departure a current issue related to their professional practice. The part-time and semi-distance features of this course result in a hybrid educational format quite unlike a conventional educational setting, where students study full-time in classrooms located within university premises and have constant access to their tutors. Given the increasing popularity of professional doctorates, understanding how candidates perceive this hybrid educational setting promises to provide valuable insights for future program design.

Although the professional activity of most DBA candidates (most of them still work full-time in senior management positions) prevents them from studying as typical full-time students, it often provides unique perspectives on the research process and the opportunity to bring insights gathered from scholarly activity directly into their professional practice. However, candidates' experiences of these peculiar features of professional doctoral programs are relatively under-researched since most of the literature consists of either macro-level investigations into the impact of policy changes in doctoral education, or micro-level studies aimed at improving course design (Lee & Boud, 2009). There is therefore a compelling case for a study which provides insights into candidates' lived experience of a

professional doctoral program, as called for by authors such as Bourner, Bowden and Laing, 2001 Kang and Gyorke, 2008; Beauchamp, Jazvac-Martek and McAlpine, 2009, and Lee and Boud, 2009. This study therefore zooms in on the interface between candidates' professional and academic life worlds by exploring, through qualitative interviews, how they perceive the contribution of each to the other.

Our study sees the DBA as "a complex social field consisting of an interconnected array of kinds of activities at different levels of abstraction, with often conflicting purposes and with varying expectations of outcome" (Lee & Boud, 2009, p. 12). We wanted to explore the practice of "doing a DBA" from the perspective of the candidates themselves, and attempted to build theoretical sensitivity into our approach by adopting several concepts from two "practice-based" theoretical frameworks: Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Actor Network Theory (ANT). These two approaches seemed to offer a number of benefits. Firstly, they provided conceptual tools to explore those aspects of the experience which lie outside the formal structures of educational contexts, sometimes referred to as "deterritorialized learning practices" (Usher & Edwards, 2007). Secondly, they helped us to explore some of the highlights and challenges experienced by several doctoral students. Thirdly, they directed our attention to the tensions and intersections among the competing agendas of our students' overlapping life worlds. The contribution of this article is therefore a rich exploratory study of the relatively under-researched and complex social field of professional doctoral education. Findings suggest that, instead of being experienced as a conventional form of advanced training for managers, the practice of professional doctorates often feels more like a journey leading to some form of metacognitive shift from a problem-solving mindset to a more critical appreciation of different ways of knowing.

Literature review

The following review clarifies the main elements of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT; Engeström, 2001) and Actor Network Theory (ANT; Latour, 2005; Law, 2009) which we drew on for this study. This is followed by a review of work which has previously used these theories to underpin research into doctoral education.

Applied to educational research, CHAT interprets learning as a situated social process in which individuals co-create knowledge in particular settings (Fenwick *et al.,* 2011). Consequently researchers working in the CHAT tradition take activity systems, and even multiple activity systems (e.g. Engeström, 2001), as their prime unit of analysis. Three of the main concepts of this tradition are object-relatedness, contradictions and artefact-mediation (Fenwick *et al.* 2011).

Object-relatedness suggests that all human activity is based on individual intentionality and at the same time, as social practice, is shared with others, and is thereby subject to adaptation and transformation. Contradictions play a central role in activity systems as "sources of change and development" (Engeström, 2001, p.137) since they push individuals to move beyond existing forms of practice. Additionally, if human activity is seen as both culturally and historically situated, then the material and symbolic artefacts which facilitate and shape human activity also come to the fore as objects of interest. The notions of object-relatedness, contradictions and artefact-mediation therefore enable researchers to focus on students' motivations, their conceptualization of the object of their activity, and how they perceive and make use of the symbolic and material artefacts related to their experience.

Where CHAT focusses on the activity or practice of complex activity systems, by contrast ANT (e.g. Latour, 1996, 2005; Law, 2009) takes the complex web of relationships within and among actor networks as the object of investigation. ANT therefore enables us to consider education as a network of practices and to explore "the multiple overlapping worlds

that may be lashed together as temporary stabilizations in the process" (Fenwick *et al.* 2011, p. 95). It does this by providing a language to open up new questions rather than imposing a "totalizing theory of the world and its problems" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). The ANT concepts of overlapping networks and temporary stabilizations seem to support research approaches which consider a wide range of elements beyond the bounds of formal and institutional arrangements as legitimate objects of investigation. For this study, these include our participants' negotiation of the competing demands of their personal, professional and academic life worlds, the punctuated nature of residential courses and supervisory events, and the role of distance learning technology.

A recent review of 120 items of empirical research concerning the experiences of doctoral students in the UK (Leonard, Metcalfe, Becker & Evans, 2006) found that the majority of the studies (86/120) were not based on any explicit theoretical framework at all. Of these, fifteen looked at professional doctorates, only one of which was specifically concerned with the DBA. From this and our investigation of more recent literature, we concluded that research around the DBA is still relatively sparse, and that the use of an explicit theoretical framework might make a valuable contribution to our understanding of students' experiences on these programs.

A number of researchers (Bourner, Bowden & Laing, 2001; Neumann, 2005; Fink, 2006; Taylor, 2007; Scott *et al*. 2009; Lee, Brennan & Green, 2009; Watts, 2009; Banerjee and Morley, 2013) identify the characteristics of a variety of professional doctorates, especially in comparison with PhDs, but these authors generally focus on formal aspects and content. Other researchers (e.g. Kang & Gyorke, 2008; Beauchamp *et al*, 2009; Lee & Boud, 2009) call for the application of practice-based theories to the study of doctoral education in general in order to focus more explicitly on the students' lived experience. However, there appear to be few studies of professional doctorates which explicitly use CHAT or ANT

approaches. The rest of this review highlights several studies which offered insights as to how these approaches could be applied to our study of the DBA.

Lee (2011) uses practice-based theory to explore the nature of doctoral candidature from the student perspective, particularly the process of "becoming doctor" and what this actually entails. By asking what happens when professionals undertake doctoral research degree study, what kinds of knowledge are produced, and what kinds of identities are formed, Lee sets out to explore the complexity of the "becoming" process which she feels the discourses of the knowledge economy fail to acknowledge. Based on a narrative summary of the writings of a doctoral candidate, this discussion highlights the gap between the instrumentalism of knowledge economy discourses and the integrated nature of a broader philosophical perspective. The author refers to the latter as the "erotic" dimension of knowledge (after Barnacle, 2005), and suggests that doctoral learning is "not just an unproblematic acquisition of knowledge, but a fraught and incomplete process of learning how to know and be, differently" (Lee, 2011, p.159).

Using an auto-ethnographic approach, Barnacle and Mewburn (2010) use Actor Network Theory to show how researcher identity is formed in both traditional sites of learning (e.g. thesis writing) and beyond, since research activity requires researchers to "actively utilize, initiate and interface with myriad associations of people and things that populate what might be called the 'research landscape'" (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010, p. 434). An important insight from this approach is that learning takes place "within and across multiple overlapping actor-networks", as revealed when one of the authors took Latour's (2004) advice to "follow one of the non-human actors" (an academic book) in her own research network: "By treating the book, a piece of inanimate 'stuff', as an 'actor' in the network of heterogeneous elements she inhabited as a doctoral candidate, she hoped to reveal her own PhD practice in action" (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010, p. 436). This technique

revealed how her research activity came to include certain "deterritorialized learning practices" such as reading on the tram, in the park or in a doctor's waiting room. In this way, the authors demonstrate the distributed nature of scholarly identity and performance, and suggest that what is significant in doctoral research may not be the content of the thesis itself, but rather the ability of candidates to position themselves as researchers within relevant research networks.

Cotterall's (2013) longitudinal study of international doctoral candidates applies Activity Theory (AT) to highlight certain challenging experiences or "systemic sites of tension" e.g. writing and supervision encounters, and reveals a number of unexpected emotional elements. These include the desire to integrate within a disciplinary community, to achieve occupational stability or to become a confident researcher. Cotterall notes the difficulty of exploring participants' identities and their meta-cognitive reflections when so much emphasis is placed on the intellectual output of doctoral study. This underlines Bansel's point that emotional experiences are usually omitted from doctoral accounts since "knowledge and intellect come to define the whole process" (Bansel, 2011, p. 547).

Theoretical framework and methodology

Our review of conceptual and empirical research provided a number of conceptual tools for exploring the experience of doing the DBA. Firstly, object-relatedness suggested that we should take a strong interest in the motivations of our students and seek to understand how these change over time. Secondly, the notion of temporary stabilizations increased the analytical potential of the focus on artefacts by providing a means of exploring how individuals construct their identity as researching professionals, potential academics or highly qualified management professionals. Thirdly, viewing doctoral study both as a site of tensions between overlapping networks and a "fraught and incomplete process" seemed to

offer the possibility of exploring how our students negotiate the competing demands of their personal, professional and academic life worlds, and how they perceive the developmental aspects of this experience. Finally, the concept of artefact-mediation opened up the range of symbolic and physical objects which come into play when the physical presence of the university is replaced by a hybrid form of delivery.

The following key research questions emerged from our overall objective of investigating students' experience of the DBA and the previous literature review:

1. How do researching professionals negotiate the border-crossing between their professional, academic and other life worlds?
2. How does the DBA experience change candidates' professional practice?
3. How closely does the DBA program replicate conventional educational settings?

With regard to methodology, earlier CHAT research, with its roots in behavioral psychology, assumed the stability of objectives and therefore relied heavily on experimental and quasi-experimental research designs. By contrast, contemporary educational research in the CHAT tradition interprets the outcomes of human activity as negotiated and contested effects of the unstable relationships among the various elements of multiple activity systems. Consequently it uses various forms of qualitative research such as qualitative interviews, ethnographic methods and participant observation with non-probability samples of participants (Fenwick *et al.* 2011).

Since the aim of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of candidates' experience than could have been achieved through a survey of the whole population (about 250), a purposive sample of twelve was selected including ten students between the ages of

31 and 37 and two in their mid and late forties respectively. All but one were male, and all but one worked in a managerial or business consultancy capacity, with the exception being a university teacher. This sample reflected the gender distribution and professional experience (about 10 years) of the whole population. Candidates at various stages of progression were invited for interview, and of the twelve who accepted, six were at an advanced stage of the pre-thesis phase, and the other six were currently researching or had recently completed their thesis. This sampling approach aimed to capture both the immediacy of students at earlier stages of the program and the longer overview of those who were in the final stages. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 90 minutes were carried out, half of which were in English (by an English native speaker) and half in German (by a German native speaker) since a number of studies (e.g. Drew, 2012; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen & Tahvanainen, 2002) indicate that interview language choice can be a significant mediator of the data collected, even when interviewing highly competent non-native speakers.

Interview questions (see Appendix 1) were open-ended and designed to examine a broad range of experiential topics, including: students' motivations for doing a professional doctorate; their relationships with tutors and other cohort members; the activities and artefacts which they identified as crucial to their progress; and their experience of knowledge transfer between their professional and academic life worlds. Four interviews were also carried out with tutors with a view to adding a further dimension to our investigation of the students' actor network systems. These interviews used a range of open questions (Appendix 2) to investigate tutors' awareness of their students' experience, particularly those aspects related to its distance and part-time configuration.

All interviews were transcribed and, where appropriate, translated into English for analysis. In order to enhance inter-rater reliability, we listened to all of the recorded interviews several times separately and identified the main themes discussed in the interviews

before then meeting and agreeing the main thematic categories. Using these categories, a

more systematic analysis of the transcripts was then carried out using computer assisted

qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). This second step in the analytical process

produced a more fine-grained picture of the major themes and enabled us to investigate our

participants' experiences in more detail.

Findings

Table 1 is designed to capture the essence of participants' comments by presenting key

phrases and quotes which correspond closely with the sensitizing themes we took from

CHAT and ANT.

Table 1: Themes in the practice of professional doctorates

Practice-based themes	Illustrative quotes
Object-relatedness: Title, professional recognition Professional knowledge gap Qualification Personal interest and challenge Metaphors	*A door-opener; highly acknowledged* *It's the theory behind what I am doing as a day-to-day job* *A good push for your career; a route into academia* *The intellectual input; can I make it? Set a high aim and achieve it!* *A marathon with food stations, sore legs and the end nowhere in sight!*
Temporary stabilizations: University versus residentials Structures versus networking Tutors and learning sets	*It doesn't have to be five days a week and in a university* *You don't need the University on-site, that doesn't make any difference* *Modules become a virtual space within the university*
Overlapping networks: Separate, but connected life worlds Border-crossing Practical versus reflective thinking	*"My dear wife, my dear employer, now I have to study".* *I'm more than a simple problem-solving machine! Changed thinking* *"I have everything under control!"; "There is a right answer!"*
Artefact mediation: Blended educational setting Communications media Home, libraries and the office	*Tutors are available via email or skype or phone* *Speaking to others on our skype meeting was much better than I expected* *I spent whole weekends at the library; I read on the flight*

Object-relatedness

      All participants saw the DBA award as the ultimate object of their activity, but there

was considerable variety in their declared motivations. Many saw doctoral status as being

linked to enhanced professional esteem and consequent networking opportunities, and this

was perceived as difficult to achieve within the German HE system. Two thirds of participants described their decision to undertake doctoral study as motivated by the personal challenge: "to set a high aim and achieve it" (Student 1) or satisfying their need for professional esteem: "Do you know anybody who is doing a doctorate and is not keen on the doctoral title?" (Student 5). Professional knowledge gaps and the desire to undertake an academic career were each cited by four participants as important initial motivators. For several students, the inherent interest of their own research project was a significant motivating factor, either because it was a continuation of research they had carried out at Masters level, or because it concerned a work-based issue and therefore made a "value contribution to the business" (Student 3). The specific objective to apply theoretical insights to a topic rooted in professional practice was clearly expressed by two participants, who described their topic as: "a part of my professional life" (Student 9) and "the theory behind what I am doing as a day-to-day job" (Student 12).

Students used a wide range of metaphors to describe their experience and these underlined their feelings of personal achievement and gratification: a marathon complete with food stations (the pre-thesis assignments); sore legs and the finish-line nowhere in sight; a long journey undertaken in small steps; a sweet shop; hunting and gathering (always looking for new literature). Responses also suggested that initially instrumental motives (the "recipe book" approach) were sometimes overtaken by strong intrinsic interest as students suddenly realized the potential of alternative perspectives during the thesis stage.

Temporary stabilizations

Participants commented on a number of different activities and relationships which helped them to progress with their studies. These included: networking with other students in their Action Learning Sets; discussions with their supervisor and module tutors; attendance at conferences and workshops; doing in-class presentations; consulting with academic or

professional colleagues; reading materials related to their assignments; and writing the assignments themselves. As one participant put it: "I think I learnt most things from the people … like, from the experience and not from the university itself" (Student 10). This suggests that for many students the crucial input from the university is not so much didactic content as the provision of a research network or forum for consultation in one to one discussions or group activities. As one student put it: "It's a research degree so it doesn't have to be five days a week listening to lectures because it's actually about your own development" (Student 11). For another student, limited contact with the university was sufficient for their needs: "Theoretically you don't need much contact to the University…some people think they work more if they are on campus… but in my opinion you don't need the University on-site, that doesn't make any difference" (Student 6).

Participants' comments on their experiences of Action Learning Sets revealed that not all of these turned out to be reliable learning structures, and some of the groups disintegrated altogether. Furthermore, some students questioned the value of co-learning by discussing problems with other cohort members, as in the following comment: "The questions which I couldn't answer… I preferred to get directly an explanation from a professor instead of somebody who also hadn't understood it 100%" (Student 5). However, the motivational importance of socializing and working with other cohort members in the pre-thesis stage was clear in these interviews. As one tutor put it: "The modules become a virtual space within the university … not physically part of this university space, but an intensive kind of university experience for them" (Tutor 4).

Overlapping networks

A focal topic within our interviews concerned how students negotiate the various demands of their personal, professional and academic life worlds: "My dear wife, my dear employer, now I have to study" (Student 4), and there were over fifty references to this topic.

Most interviewees considered their academic and professional life worlds to be separate, and they saw themselves as moving gradually from a position of total immersion in the professional world to one of being equally connected to both. Some students expressed this idea in terms of developing the flexibility to juggle the competing demands of full-time work and part-time research: "Discipline is part of it, and you have somehow to manage this, nobody can help you here, you have to solve this on your own" (Student 5). Others emphasised the epistemic and cognitive aspects of border-crossing such as the ability to apply critical thinking or reflection to their professional work, and to bring significant professional skills such as practical thinking, systematic approaches to problem-solving and specialized knowledge of real world contexts to their doctoral research. One participant drew a sharp contrast between professional and academic thinking modes by suggesting that the latter required thinking much more critically about solutions and asking: "Why does it work like that? Could there be other options, and if so, why would I choose this option and not the other options?" (Student 11).

Tutors echoed this interpretation of border-crossing as they described how many of their students progressed from viewing the thesis as a problem-solving project in a consultancy sense to understanding it as a credible academic investigation. One tutor described this as: "a metacognitive shift" (Tutor 1). For another tutor, the process was "very challenging, very destabilizing for some of them" (Tutor 2), particularly for middle-level managers who might not see their professional role as exploring different ways of examining work-related issues: "There is a right answer and I should be able to normatively apply the right answer, and therefore succeed" (Tutor 2). In part this seemed to reflect the difference between the pragmatism of professional contexts, where the aim is to find out "what works", and the often more investigative or exploratory nature of academic research. This metacognitive shift inevitably produces certain emotional effects, and some students reported

an initial sense of frustration that the DBA did not immediately seem to confer enhanced problem-solving skills which they could readily transfer to their professional work. However, most students reported their encounter with research philosophy and methodologies as bringing about a significant intellectual development, from being a "problem-solving machine" (Student 7) to being "more critical about what people assume to be facts" (Student 11).

Artefact Mediation

Since we were interested in the mediatory artefacts related to the DBA experience, many of the participants' comments were concerned with the structures and content of the program. Regarding the remote nature of the distance DBA, although some interviewees conceded that their experience would be different if the DBA were provided by a local university, for most the physical absence of the university was not seen as problematic. In many cases the students worked in different locations within Germany or in other parts of the world, so the use of tele-conferencing facilities suited them perfectly. As one student who was based outside Germany commented: "I don't think we would see each other that much more even if we lived closer" (Student 10).

Students identified themselves as doctoral candidates of the university by their face to face contact with tutors and with other members of their cohort on the pre-thesis modules, and by their discussions with supervisors either through conference calls or occasional face to face supervisory meetings. Contact with other cohort members was extended through informal social meetings and more formally structured virtual meetings of Action Learning Sets via Skype conferences and telephone calls. As one student commented: "Speaking to others on our skype meeting was much better than I expected" (Student 8). "Deterritorialized learning practices" (Usher & Edwards, 2007) such as spending whole weekends at the library and reading on trains and flights were also an important feature of learning in the physical

absence of the university. These comments suggest that the perceived effectiveness of the DBA program depends largely on its ability to create a strong real and virtual presence through regular face to face contact supported by communications media, particularly during the pre-thesis stage.

Discussion

The application of a practice-based conceptual framework in this paper has resulted in a highly textured appreciation of the practice of professional doctorates. The findings highlight some significant aspects of doctoral education as experienced by students who are mostly employed as full-time management professionals. Our investigation used a number of concepts from CHAT and ANT both in the design of its data-gathering methods (semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed experiential data from students) and as sensitizing concepts for analysis. Applying the concepts of object-relatedness, contradictions and artefact-mediation proved useful in opening up discussion with participants on a number of themes: their motivations and interpretations of the main object of their activity; their negotiation of the sometimes difficult border-crossing between their professional and academic life worlds; and how they managed the temporal and geographic discontinuities of an off-campus experience.

From the responses of these students, it is possible to see the main focal object of the DBA (the research project or thesis) as a "boundary object", that is a "bridge between intersecting social and cultural worlds" (Nicolini, Mengis & Swan, 2012, p. 614). Exploring the tensions and contradictions between competing activity systems in students' life worlds also resulted in an appreciation of the ways in which students are often challenged to apply a wider range of epistemic and cognitive tools to conceptualize their professional activity. Finally, attention to the notion of artefact-mediation was productive in revealing that the

academic and social infrastructure provided by the university seemed to be more important in motivating students' learning than the physical presence of the university itself. The semi-distance structure of the DBA was crucial here as it provided "peer support and cross-fertilization of ideas" (Neumann, 2005, p.178) during the pre-thesis stage, in contrast to the often sparse peer interaction noted by Leonard and Becker (2009) among many full-time campus-based PhD students. In the absence of a key symbolic and physical artefact (the university), a new division of labour (Nicolini, 2012) seemed to come into play in which students saw themselves as responsible for building and maintaining these networks, rather than relying on the physical and structural routines usually associated with conventional educational programs.

The present study also raises questions about how student identities and networks are formed, specifically the question of how and when a professional "becomes" a doctoral candidate or postgraduate researcher at a distance from the university. For the DBA to be a credible form of advanced professional education, it must be *strategically* designed, that is, sufficiently malleable and tractable to enable the candidates to perceive its relevance to their professional contexts (Raelin & Coghlan, 2006; Banerjee & Morley, 2013). However, the responses of students in this study suggest that attention also needs to be paid to a much wider field of elements than the formal infrastructure and curricular content. For example, the experiences of certain groups of students who tried to meet physically outside the programmed events indicate that there would be some value in building student networks around geographic regions. These "vertical" networks would consist of students at different stages of the course, and complement the current horizontal structure (Action Learning Sets consisting of members from the same cohort), which clearly work much better for certain students than for others.

The ways in which our students negotiate competing demands from separate life worlds is an important factor in our understanding of how management education is experienced by our students. Given the increasingly networked personal and professional environments in which management professionals live and work, it is imperative for management educators to deliver programs which are less rigidly structured in temporal and spatial terms than conventional courses. This can be achieved by blended designs which capture both the motivational potential of face to face tutorials and classes (the cohort effect) and the convenience of virtual tools such as online resources, webinars and tele-conferencing.

Conclusion

Our investigation demonstrates that this flexibly structured distance DBA simultaneously meets a number of different personal and professional requirements. It does this by providing a strategically designed, semi-virtual learning structure within which candidates can apply newly acquired conceptual tools to complex issues within their professional contexts over an extended period (usually 4 to 5 years). Without attempting to narrowly circumscribe or predetermine the parameters of this learning structure, the program offers sufficient temporal and spatial continuity for individuals to identify themselves as engaged in an advanced form of university study alongside their full-time professional occupation.

An important consequence of this study for management educators and doctoral tutors is that, far from being an advanced form of professional training for senior managers, the DBA should be seen as a radically diverse form of education which promotes action learning and critical reflection on professional practice. The diverse instances of changing motivational perspectives, personal development and intellectual fulfilment recounted here

suggest that the practice of professional doctorates is closer to a journey leading to some form of metacognitive shift than a form of advanced training. Professional training is traditionally based on closed-system thinking which sets educational ends prior to the learning experience, and sees learning as a "specifically intended, directed, and controlled outcome – one that can be measured" (Doll, 1993, p.53). By contrast, the views expressed by participants in this study show the DBA to be a complex open system from which students' learning emerges in an uneven or punctuated fashion. The notion of temporary stabilizations is useful here to illustrate the university's role as one of offering a loosely-structured framework or scaffolding for students' developmental activity to take place rather than a pre-determined package of generic curricular experiences and outcomes. The contrast between this and the more conventional approach to management education suggests that professional doctorates provide a challenge and an opportunity for universities to adopt "new ways of working, thinking and achieving their broad objectives" (Banerjee & Morley, 2013, p.183).

From a researcher perspective, this study suggests that CHAT and ANT provide a number of useful sensitizing concepts to explore the experience of management education. Conceptualizing the DBA as a "practice" enabled us to focus our investigation on its phenomenological aspects, that is, to obtain a clearer picture of how the DBA is experienced by doctoral candidates. This approach reveals the evolving nature of candidates' motivations and the complexity of their engagement with the DBA as a "border object" between theory and practice. It seems clear that further research on professional doctorates would benefit from a closer focus on the nature this border space, particularly the interrelationship between doctoral research and managerial activity. Indeed, there is evidence that doctoral education is still seen as an academic exercise assessed by academic professionals and of only marginal significance for professional managers. This perception may reflect an ongoing prejudice based on the academic/practitioner divide related to PhDs, where the emphasis tends to be on

making a contribution to knowledge rather than practice (Banerjee & Morley, 2013). Whilst professional doctorates are often seen as practice-relevant, further research would be useful to clarify the specific nature of practice-based doctoral education. Finally, the developmental nature of our participants' experiences suggests that longitudinal study designs and more detailed individual case studies with recently completed or completing graduates would be appropriate for further investigation of this topic.

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Appendix 1

Interviews with 12 individual students (November 2013 – March 2014)

Generic question: What happens when professionals become researching professionals and enter the academic world?
- What was your motivation for doing a DBA?
- What were your criteria for deciding on a topic?
- What was your experience of writing the proposal? How many hours did it take you?
- What was your perception of the first modules?
- How easily did you adapt to academic thinking?
- Which aspects were new to you and which were you already familiar with?
- What was your experience of doing the first assignment?

Research Question 1: How do researching professionals negotiate the border-crossing between their professional, academic and other life worlds?
- Do both sides benefit from each other regarding knowledge?
- How would you describe any development or changes in thinking, learning, approaches, perception, creativity, awareness etc. since you started the course?
- Do you feel more at home in the professional or the academic world?
- Do you feel part of the academic world?
- Which experience have you enjoyed most?
- Where do you or have you faced difficulties?
- What was most challenging?
- What was your worst experience on the program?
- Do you or have you regretted your decision to embark on the DBA?
- What helps you most to develop your topic and progress with your doctorate?

Research Question 2: How does the DBA experience change professional practice?
- Do you get new ideas for professional practice through academic practice?
- What has changed in your professional life since you started the DBA?
- How has your perception of professional practice changed?
- What impact does the doctorate have on your professional practice and how do you feel about that?
- How does your professional experience help you to do a doctorate?

Research Question 3: How closely does the DBA program replicate conventional educational settings?
- How similar did you find the British and German education systems?
- How do you get on with having to conduct your academic work in English?
- How do you find the timing of sessions and supervisory events?
- Is continuity/discontinuity a problem for your progress?
- How do you feel about the remote aspects of the course?
- Do you feel you have sufficient access to people, materials and information that you need?
- What difference would frequent face to face or local access make to your experience?

Appendix 2

Interviews with 4 tutors (November and December 2013)

Suggested themes/questions (to be used flexibly and added to where appropriate):

- What differences (if any) do they perceive between DBA and PhD students?
- How do they manage supervisory meetings and what are the implications of these arrangements? (phone, Skype, in-person etc.)
- How do they see the role of the DBA in the lives of their students?
- How separate/entwined do they think their students' academic and professional lives are and how do their students appear to negotiate this encounter?
- Are any conflicts evident in this negotiated encounter?
- What kind of impact does each have on the other?
- Which metaphors does the tutor use to conceptualize the role of the DBA in their students' lives (e.g. journey, vehicle, container, knowledge acquisition, practice etc.)?
- From the tutor's perspective, what are the differences between the distance DBA and more traditional classroom contexts?