The Cultivation of the Scholar-Practitioner
A Meditation on the Shortcomings of Non-Traditional Doctoral Education

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> *Education is not what some people proclaim it to be. What they say, roughly speaking, is that they are able to put knowledge into souls where none was before. Like putting sight into eyes which were blind.*
>
> Plato, *The Republic*, Book 7

1 Præludium

Doctoral education, I posit, ought to be characterised by three ends: the erudition of the scholar, the perpetuation of learned institutions, and the generation of knowledge. The means to these three ends, although differing in exact nature for each academic discipline and, indeed, at each university, until very recently, have been couched within a similar context: the doctoral candidate being resident at a university and receiving mentorship and supervision from an experienced professor. This model has proven efficacious for centuries since the earliest lectures resounded in the esteemed halls of the universities at Bologna, Oxford, and Paris. Indeed, this model persists to this day. With the prodigious proliferation of distance learning, we have seen, however, the rise of an alternative form of doctoral education wherein the university campus has become virtual and supervision has become an act of gatekeeping. The question I raise in this article (and hopefully answer to the satisfaction of my readers): Is non-traditional doctoral education still a means to scholarly erudition, institutional perpetuation, and knowledge generation.

The *Expositio* that follows is based on my observations as an admittedly, but electively, liminal participant in the doctoral education space. In lieu of being a dissertation chair or committee member in a non-traditional program, I am a dissertation consultant who founded my own coaching community. In lieu of graduating from a non-traditional program, my academic credentials are from University College London and the University of Amsterdam. In lieu of devoting my efforts to attaining tenure, I focus my energies on applying my passion for research and academia in a way that transforms individuals. Some readers might

claim that as a liminal participant in non-traditional doctoral education, I lack the insider knowledge and authority to make the claims that I put forth in this article. Indeed, I cannot construct an argument with knowledge I do not possess nor proclaim truths with authority I do not wield. I ask, instead, of my readers a mere modicum of open-mindedness and to judge the merits of my thesis based on rationalism and empiricism–not on some unmeasurable fount of ethos.

I take it to task in the following section to evaluate the fruits of non-traditional doctoral education along these three ends. I will conclude that non-traditional education does not achieve these ends and instead achieves nominal completion of degrees and the perpetuation of credentialism. Nevertheless, I affirm, unequivocally, that the non-traditional education space is worthy, necessary, and uniquely situated to the formation of the scholar-practitioner, a *dramatis persona* within the realm of academia who can extend knowledge creation outside the precipices of ivory towers, translate theory into informed practice, and transform their professional environs into learned institutions.

2 Expositio

The epigraph that introduces this article is from Book 7 of *The Republic* by the Greek philosopher Plato. In this book, we receive, in splendid Socratic fashion, a dialogue that discusses the nature of knowledge (many readers will, undoubtedly, be familiar with the Allegory of the Cave) and the optimal form of education. Plato (speaking in the voice of Socrates to his acolyte Glaucon) notes that some, erroneously, view education as the mere filling of an empty receptacle or the bestowing of an ability previously lacking. Let us apply this erroneous conception of education to the andragogical context of non-traditional doctoral education. The average doctoral candidate in a non-traditional program is an experienced professional who brings decades' worth of knowledge and experience to the table and often a graduate-level education. He or she is not an intellectually vacuous soul or a blind academic novice. Yet, many non-traditional programs (even if implicitly or inadvertently) have created a structure that assumes these individuals lack the intellectual capacities to conduct doctoral research. What is often true is that non-traditional doctoral candidates lack experience in conducting independent academic research, exerting their own scholarly voice, and making the transition from knowledge gathering (the focus of undergraduate and graduate education) to knowledge creation. Accordingly, these individuals need supervision from a scholar who understands research, is an expert in their field, and understands how to translate all of that knowledge into a mentor-mentee relationship. Often, the supervisory relationship (i.e., between candidate and dissertation chair/committee members) cannot be any more dissimilar.

The dynamic that has emerged is one of gatekeeping and institutional compliance with a litany of prescriptive tools such as templates, rubrics, checklists, and overly-simplistic writing frameworks such as the MEAL plan. To be clear, I am not arguing against program structure, the use of scaffolding to make an unfamiliar academic paradigm more navigable, or the adoption of heuristic tools to

facilitate the learning of writing or academic conventions. The existence of such materials is not the problem–the elevation of these tools as academic Gospel and the intransigent enforcement of the same is the problem.

I understand both the intent and purpose of these tools. As non-traditional doctoral education grows, there is a two-fold exertion on universities. The first involves the meeting of accreditation standards (often assessed by completion rates). The creation of highly structured, scaffolded, and prescriptive doctoral programs is a direct result as it facilitates a replicable process in which an increasingly overworked faculty can guide doctoral candidates to an end point (i.e., defense and graduation). The second involves the demands on doctoral faculty who, with an ever-increasing roster of candidates, are forced to step into the role of gatekeeper at the expense of being an academic mentor who is able to guide candidates in developing the research and academic skills necessary to find their scholarly voice, conduct independent and unique doctoral research, and establish themselves as a knowledge creator. However effective these means might be in achieving the end of satisfactory completion rates, they devalue the process of erudition and the formation of the Scholar-Practitioner. I will give three specific examples from my experience as a dissertation consultant.

2.1 Prescriptive Research Design

In many programs, doctoral candidates must adopt a unified research design for their studies. In a particular DBA program, candidates must adopt a single case study design and in another, the use of a vague pragmatic inquiry design is mandatory. This is a prime example of detrimental prescriptivism in non-traditional doctoral research that undermines the intellectual process in designing a study. A research design should not be an arbitrary choice. Instead, it should emerge from the iterative process of selecting an initial topic, testing it against the extant literature in the field, and identifying a problem that emerges as a result of lacking research. From there, a doctoral scholar can clearly define the purpose or intent of the study, formulate research questions, determine the data necessary to answer those research questions, and select a research design that aligns with the nature of the study. Although requiring all doctoral candidates in a program to execute the same research design lessens supervisory burden, it reduces the academic rigor of the study by replicating the same procedures over diverse areas of inquiry. This is the quintessential "one-size-fits-all" solution that is constantly decried as ineffective across all levels of education, yet at the highest echelon of academia, it is being increasingly adopted. Instead of putting doctoral educators in a position to mentor candidates in refining their methodological skills, they are forced to read from a recipe and apply it to different ingredients.

2.2 Analytical Mismatches

Within the Humanities, especially, a canon of qualitative research designs has been established. Phenomenology has become part of that canon and has been

increasingly adopted in fields far from the Humanities such as healthcare, psychology, and even business. At the same time, a canon of qualitative analysis techniques has been established and Braun & Clarke's seminal (2006) six-phase framework has emerged as de rigueur in non-traditional doctoral education. So many published dissertations have nominally adopted a phenomenological design whilst applying Braun & Clarke's more general thematic analysis method. The mismatch cannot be more egregious.

Without delving into the fascinating philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, it is a singular research design with a very specific aim: allowing the researcher to uncover the essence of a lived experience; and it warrants a much more in-depth analysis procedure beyond the generation of themes. Indeed, the concept of a code (the assigning of a label to a meaningful string of text) does not translate directly into a phenomenological equivalent. Speaking within the procedure outlined by Clarke Moustakas, the equivalent of coding involves identifying horizons (strings of text meaningful to the object of study) and, importantly, these horizons are not given a label, as (descriptive or transcendental) phenomenology places emphasis on the exact words of participants. Moreover, the generation of themes in Moustakas' phenomenological analysis approach is considered an intermediary step as the synthesized essence of the lived experience across all participants is considered the analytic end of phenomenological study. This mismatch betrays a methodological and analytical shortcut that would not be tolerated in the methodologies applied in STEM or more rigorous doctoral programs. Moreover, it denies a doctoral candidate the opportunity to engage with a very rich (albeit difficult) analysis procedure that is aligned with its parent research design. Again, the relative ease, accessibility, and ubiquity of Braun & Clarke's design-agnostic method is adopted to the detriment of the trustworthiness of the phenomenological study being conducted.

2.3 MEAL Plan Fanaticism

A doctoral candidate whom I am mentoring at the time of writing is enrolled at one of the largest and most well-known for-profit universities (an institution notorious for its near-fanatic insistence that all academic writing adhere rigidly to the MEAL plan). The feedback this candidate received from her chair focused exclusively on paragraph-level compliance with this framework, while entirely neglecting a far more consequential issue: the fundamental infeasibility of the proposed study itself.

Without disclosing identifying details, the candidate's research question sought to examine retention, promotion practices, and the financial implications of such practices among Fortune 500 executives. Any experienced researcher would immediately recognize two substantive problems. First, the question implicitly collapses three distinct studies into one. Second, from a purely logistical standpoint, access to Fortune 500 executives renders the proposed population functionally unattainable for a doctoral candidate. These are not matters of stylistic refinement or rhetorical polish; they are matters of scholarly judgment,

feasibility, and research design.

To be clear, this critique is not directed at the doctoral candidate. Her proposal reflected diligent engagement with the literature and the beginnings of several potentially rigorous studies. The failure rather lies in a system that substitutes paragraph-level stylistic compliance for substantive mentorship. The extent of supervision she received was not guidance in refining a feasible research design or leveraging her diligent literature research to refine her study, but instruction to rewrite paragraphs so that they conformed to the MEAL plan.

This example illustrates the deeper failure of such writing frameworks. The MEAL plan purports to cultivate logical and rhetorical structure in writing (which is an undeniable skill doctoral candidates must refine), yet in practice it often achieves the opposite. All paragraphs should be seen as a logical or rhetorical unit in which the writer asserts a proposition, defends it with evidence or argumentation, before transitioning to the next assertion. The MEAL plan instead reduces a paragraph to a topic sentence, a suite of citations, and a restatement of the topic sentence. This is middle-school level writing pedagogy and it denies doctoral candidates the opportunity to construct multilayered arguments and to develop their own scholarly voice.

2.4   The Fruits of Non-Traditional Doctoral Education

The foregoing examples are not presented as a representative sample of all experiences within non-traditional doctoral education, nor are they intended to indict the totality of such programs. Indeed, many doctoral candidates thrive within these structures and complete their studies with competence and confidence. The purpose of these anecdotes is, rather, diagnostic: to render visible a set of systemic tendencies that emerge when doctoral education is optimized primarily for replicability, gatekeeping, and completion. If non-traditional doctoral education is to justify its claim to the formation of scholar-practitioners, then the scholarship it produces ought to bear the marks of that formation. Such scholarship should not merely satisfy institutional requirements, but should extend knowledge in ways that are intelligible, applicable, and consequential within a field of professional practice—be it education, business, healthcare, counseling, or beyond. The question, then, is not whether non-traditional doctoral candidates are capable of producing such scholarship, but whether the prevailing structures within which they operate are conducive to its emergence.

I adopt here a deliberately deductive approach. An empirical content analysis of dissertations produced within non-traditional programs would no doubt offer a valuable corroboration or contestation of the claims that follow. Nevertheless, the logic of the system itself permits a preliminary assessment of its likely outputs. The canonical research trajectory within many non-traditional doctoral programs—identification of a narrowly defined research gap, reliance on a constrained window of recent literature, adoption of a standardized or prescribed research design, expedited data collection, and procedurally correct analysis—privileges efficiency and replicability over conceptual depth and theoretical ambition.

Under such conditions, doctoral research often assumes a curiously attenuated form. Topics are tightly circumscribed, argumentation is sparse, and theoretical engagement is largely nominal. Constructs or variables are assembled into research questions, supported by a tokenized set of recent citations, and subjected to an analysis procedure selected for accessibility rather than epistemic fit. The resulting findings, while often technically adequate, tend toward generality and offer limited insight beyond the immediate context of the study.

The consequences of this pattern are not trivial. Dissertations produced under these constraints rarely yield work that is publishable without substantial reconceptualization, nor do they furnish a foundation upon which subsequent programs of inquiry can be built. If such studies are intended to inform practice, their reach is frequently superficial; if they are intended to advance knowledge, their contribution is modest at best. What remains is a document that satisfies the formal requirements of degree conferral (one characterized by extensive reiteration of problem and purpose statements across chapters or sections, a constrained presentation of results that focus more on procedure than substance, and a comparatively thin critical discussion), yet falls short of embodying the intellectual ambition traditionally associated with doctoral scholarship.

3 Propositio

I shall rest my argument here lest I resort to over-recounting of anecdotes and a maelstrom of deductive proofs. I trust that the discussion I have provided thus far establishes that non-traditional doctoral education is, at the very least, suboptimal when evaluated against the standards set forth and refined over centuries of scholarship that has advanced our scientific understanding of the universe, developed technology that has transformed society, and that has elucidated the nature of human existence. Indeed, this is a lofty pedigree for which to strive. Shall we, nevertheless, have the audacity to hold non-traditional doctoral education to these lofty standards? I will leave that as a rhetorical question for the moment and return to the question posed at the beginning of this article: Is non-traditional doctoral education still a means to scholarly erudition, institutional perpetuation, and knowledge generation. Let us consider each element in turn.

If the end of non-traditional doctoral education ought to be erudition, does it, with its current means, effectuate the formation of the scholar-practitioner? No, it does not. A respected, intelligent, and accomplished professional enters into the current system of non-traditional education; he or she will be considered as a soul devoid of knowledge and that supposed epistemic lacuna will not be filled with the learned expertise, research mastery, and guiding mentorship of a professor. Instead, the years of professional knowledge and expertise will be supplanted by intransigent institutional compliance whose rules are codified in templates, checklists, and rubrics.

If the end of non-traditional doctoral education ought to be the perpetua-

tion of learned institutions, does it, with its current means, produce the next generation of scholar-practitioners who will become stewards not only of these universities, but also of their professional domains? No, it does not. Institutions are perpetuated not merely by conferring credentials, but by cultivating individuals capable of sustaining intellectual traditions, mentoring others in the disciplined pursuit of knowledge, and extending institutional values beyond their formal boundaries. A system that prioritizes procedural compliance over scholarly formation produces graduates who may carry the imprimatur of the institution, yet lack the confidence, autonomy, and intellectual depth necessary to embody its highest ideals. Such institutions may persist administratively, but they do so hollowed of their scholarly *animus*.

If the end of non-traditional doctoral education ought to be the generation of knowledge, does it, with its current means, produce scholarship capable of transforming professional practice or advancing understanding beyond the immediate confines of the dissertation document? No, it does not. Knowledge generation demands more than the mechanical execution of prescribed methodologies or the perfunctory synthesis of recent literature; it requires sustained intellectual risk, conceptual ambition, and methodological intentionality. When doctoral research is reduced to a sequence of administratively sanctioned steps—executed under conditions of time scarcity and compliance-driven supervision—the resulting scholarship is often narrow, derivative, and epistemically timid. Such work may satisfy the formal requirements of degree completion, but it rarely possesses the depth, originality, or rigor necessary to inform future inquiry or meaningfully shape practice.

Non-traditional doctoral education is at a crossroads and doctoral candidates who elect to participate in this education space deserve better. Universities must begin to take seriously the fact that doctoral candidates have the intellectual capacity to engage with doctoral research and, therefore, seek to mentor them in the areas where they lack expertise: research design, data analytics, academic writing. Not with prescriptivism, replicable structures, and formulaic writing conventions, but with a sense of the Ancient Greek *paideia*.

We cannot trust that an institution will act with its own agency against the currents of accreditation benchmarks, financial constraints, and overworked faculty. Any institution is designed to be inert and resistant to change, but the fruits of an institution are sown by the people who comprise it. It is, therefore, up to the doctoral candidates in this educational space to assert their scholarly agency and demand a higher standard rather than be subservient and reactive to intransigent prescriptivism. As the great Roman stoic Seneca wrote, "*Non quia difficilia sunt non audemus, sed quia non audemus difficilia sunt.*" – "It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult." (Letters to Lucilius). And dare we must: doctoral candidates, faculty who are compelled to be gatekeepers instead of scholars, and those liminal actors (such as myself) who can quietly observe the system with the perspective of an outsider, yet the comprehension of an insider.

4 Coda Ultima

It has been my endeavour to avoid polemics and to verbalise what so many already know and think (yet dare not say out loud) about non-traditional doctoral education. The analysis that I have offered represents years of observation and a sincere desire to improve a system in which so many professionals find themselves. Non-traditional doctoral education has become ingrained in our education system and is here to stay. Indeed, non-traditional doctoral education is uniquely positioned to become a positive force in humanity and one that does not simply serve revenue-generation, credentialism, or completion, but one that harkens back to the great classical philosophers, the medieval scholasticism that founded our modern universities, and the ever-present, timeless human desire for knowledge. As we step from the Digital Age to the AI Age, non-traditional doctoral education (and education in general) will continue to evolve in ways we cannot predict. Whether that is for better or for worse is being determined before our very eyes, and I call on all readers to participate in the continued amelioration of this academic space.

5 References

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