

# Crossing Over to Education for Ph.D. Study: Liminality and Threshold Crossing

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## Abstract

A doctoral degree is increasingly a required qualification for university teaching in South Africa. Having a high percentage of academic staff with PhDs is likely to raise the profile of an institution in relation to delivery on its teaching and research agendas and in its positioning on the rankings tables. Hitherto, the doctoral requirement for teaching in higher education was less stringently observed in disciplines that serviced certain professions such as accounting, law and some of the health professions. Mid-and late-career academics in such disciplines, under pressure now to complete a PhD, often elect not to pursue discipline-focused PhDs, but instead to research aspects of their teaching practice, opting for a PhD in Education. These cross-over students experience educational research for the first time at PhD level. The critical issue that this paper addresses is how students with minimal or no formal qualification in education or with limited formal exposure to educational theory and methods negotiate their experience at PhD. Drawing on the tenets of self-study methodology I reflect critically on my own practice as PhD supervisor. I analyse what I do as a supervisor when I attempt to induct novice education students into doctorate-level study in ways that will, hopefully, improve their PhD experience. The paper highlights some of the special challenges which novice education PhD students encounter in making the cross-over to Education from their specialist home disciplines. Insights are offered for supervision practice as it relates to ways in which students transcend conceptual thresholds and negotiate liminality.

**Keywords:** doctoral degree, research, supervision, liminality

## **Introduction**

One of the listed strategic goals of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is to be a research-led institution. One means to realise this goal, arguably, is to increase the percentage of academic staff who have a doctoral qualification – an objective which is now prioritised as key performance area for all levels of management, from vice-chancellor to cluster leaders. The message to academics without a PhD is clear: PhD completion and research production is as important as teaching. While the institution has not instituted formal punitive sanctions against individuals who have not registered for PhD study, subtle, (and sometimes not so subtle) warnings are regularly articulated in one or another of the various forums at the university. This drive for PhD completion and research production is widely recognised as a manifestation of the globalising and neoliberal tendencies that increasingly shape the strategic direction of universities (Brew & Lucas 2009; Shore 2010). In this schema, macro-level (institutional) factors and policy make it obligatory for university academics to develop identities as scholars and researchers, hemming them in through often stifling contractual protocols for performance, accountability and surveillance (Maistry 2012). There are endless ramifications to this state of affairs, but my particular concern in this paper is the pressure on university academics to raise their level of qualifications.

One consequence in recent years has been an increase in the number of academics from traditional disciplines at UKZN who elect to pursue a PhD study in the specific discipline of education (henceforth referred to as ‘cross-over’ students). This in turn has created multiple challenges for the School of Education, most particularly in its capacity to effectively service such students. Enhancement of institutional research profile cannot happen unless suitably qualified and experienced academic personnel are already in place who are equipped to deliver theoretically grounded research supervision (Abbidin *et al.* 2009). The 2010 report of the Academy of Science of South Africa warns that high attrition and low throughput rates in postgraduate studies in South Africa are directly related to the level of competence of supervisors. Supervision of students who cross over into education for the first time at PhD level certainly presents challenges both for the PhD supervisors (whose experience may hitherto have been confined to supervising traditional ‘home-grown’ education students) and for the cross-

over students. Not that academic border crossing is a new phenomenon: Becher & Trowler (2001) argue that fundamental geomorphic changes in higher education have altered the relationship between ‘academic tribes’ (academic cultures) and ‘academic territories’ (disciplinary knowledge), with increasingly frequent boundary-crossing across previously impermeable borders. Academics who cross over from traditional disciplines to education to undertake PhD studies signal their new vested interests. It is thus important to understand the particular intentionality of doctoral students so as to better respond to their needs (Van Schalkwyk 2014).

Supervising the disciplinary novice education-research candidate for a PhD who is embarking on this disciplinary transition calls for a distinct shift in what is more usually required of the postgraduate supervisor. Manathunga & Gozee caution that the changing nature of the higher education context means that the assumption of an ‘‘always/already’ autonomous student and effective supervisor’ can no longer be taken for granted (2007: 309). Supervision thus becomes a matter of managing the tension between the instrumentalist dimension (helping students acquire the qualification needed for tenure) and the affective dimension (nurturing what Wisker (2012: 6) refers to as the ‘self-development, academic identity, self-worth and growth’ of the student). Van Schalkwyk cautions that doctoral studies must be seen as a complex investment that is likely to serve multiple agendas. Similarly, Lee (2008) argues that while a functional approach to postgraduate supervision has value it is also important for the supervision to incorporate a conceptual approach that involves enculturation into a disciplinary community, critical thinking, and emancipation through self-development

Bitzer & Albertyn (2011) point out that, with the unprecedented increase in postgraduate enrolments in South Africa, students embarking on senior research degrees now come with a wide diversity of undergraduate experience, and also with widely varying levels of preparedness for the task. In these circumstances, the authors advocate a shift to alternative models of supervision from the traditional Oxford model of one-on-one supervision – more akin to individualised apprenticeship (see Wisker *et al.* 2007). Similarly, Grant (2014) argues that effective supervision of students with diverse needs necessarily requires a wider research supervision support base: a shift from traditional supervision practice to supervision within a scholarly community of practice. This implies what Clegg (2014) refers to as multiple

knowledge practices at work in doctoral education, coupled with a fresh conceptualisation of doctoral education as pedagogy – going beyond a narrow, technicist understanding of research in the direction of a more holistic understanding and supervising of postgraduate students. Thus conceived, doctoral studies are to be envisaged as an affective practice, a layering of affect across doctoral writing, given the precariousness of the doctoral writing enterprise (Burford 2014). To this end, Wisker *et al.* (2007) support the idea of holistic, community-of-practice approaches to supervision in which guardian supervisors work with appointed supervisors in postgraduate cohort groups – a strategy more likely to resonate with the special needs of novice education-research students for whom isolation and alienation may be defining factors, even when student and supervisor are both employed at the same institution (as is the case with novice PhD education students at UKZN). There is thus a need for an approach that is very tightly focused on the tenets of thesis writing in education (Larcombe *et al.* 2007) – an area which, I suggest, would strongly repay further exploration and research at my own institution (UKZN). An area worth particular investigation is how thesis writing in the sciences or in commerce disciplines differs from thesis writing in education.

### ***Supervising the Novice Education-research Student at PhD Level: A Narrative Vignette***

Like many academics, my early experience of postgraduate supervision was with Master's-level students in education. While no formal policy existed on whether a PhD qualification gave one an automatic licence to supervise PhD students at UKZN, an unwritten principle guiding the allocation of supervisors for PhD students in the School of Education was that to earn the right to supervise PhD candidates one first had to show competence through successful graduation of Master's candidates. Having earned the 'right of passage' (De Beer & Mason 2009) in 2008, I decided to join the School of Education's PhD cohort supervision programme as an 'apprentice' supervisor to senior academics, two of whom were founder members of the PhD cohort model. My first successful PhD supervision (student graduated) was a co-supervision with one of these senior colleagues. I remained in the PhD cohort programme for two consecutive three-year cycles up until 2013. I

found the programme to be a rich, fertile learning space for research supervision. I also soon discovered that supervision is poorly understood as a dimension of pedagogy – an impression corroborated by Grant, who characterises it as ‘a complex and unstable process, one filled with pleasures and risks’ (2003: 175).

As the only academic in the Faculty of Education with a PhD in economic education at that time, and with a background in commerce (Economics, Accounting and Business Management), I found that potential Master’s and PhD students having *any* link, however remote, with commerce education were directed to me as possible supervisor. Of significance for this paper was that the pressure on academics working in commerce departments to register for PhD study produced a sudden surge in Education PhD registrations in the broad field of commerce education by candidates both from UKZN and from other tertiary institutions in South Africa and abroad. In the period from 2009 to 2014, 15 students registered for a PhD in various aspects of commerce education. Thirteen of these had a Master’s qualification in disciplines *other than* education. Another significant push factor has been local UKZN performance and promotion imperatives in terms of which individual academic staff members must exhibit high-level pedagogic competence, to be reflected in elaborately maintained teaching portfolios that include a relatively sophisticated account of one’s philosophy of teaching, coupled with strong theoretical arguments for the pedagogic choices one makes as lecturer. In addition, expanded access and the enrolment of so-called ‘non-traditional’ students in post-apartheid South Africa has forced higher education institutions to re-consider who their students actually are (Cross *et al.* 2009); increasingly pragmatic responses are pressured by the need to improve retention and throughput rates. With university academics seeking ways to improve higher-education teaching in the light of new demands on their pedagogical expertise, a developing scholarship of teaching has thus led a number of traditional discipline experts to undertake formal PhD educational research projects.

The question then, is how do students without education-specific formal qualifications, or with limited formal exposure to educational theory and methods, negotiate their experience in education-specific research?

## **A Methodological Note**

In venturing on a rigorous and systematic reflection on my own practice as a PhD supervisor, hoping thereby to enhance my research students' experience of the student-supervisor enterprise, I propose to invoke the tenets of 'self-study' (see Kosnick *et al.* 2006; LaBoskey 2004; Lassonde *et al.* 2009) as criteria for self-assessment, for taking the measure of the critical supervision spaces that present themselves in the research supervision enterprise. Although the concept of self-study, as field of research and as a methodological approach, remains for now at an embryonic stage and needs therefore to be regarded with caution, I nonetheless see in it a potentially liberating opportunity for a creative self-problematisation – or 'reframing' (Lassonde, Galman & Kosnik 2009:5) – of my practice in the interests of student learning. In particular, I subscribe to the self-study tenet that the self is intimately and intricately implicated both in the research process and in educational practice, signalling the perspectives of 'the self in teaching', 'the self as teacher' and 'the self as researcher of my teaching' (*ibid.*) as primary perspectives for self-examination. I put special emphasis on the self-study notion of making the 'experience of the teacher educators a resource for research' (Feldman 2009:37). Data for self-study research can be generated from a variety of sources, including curriculum documents, student reflections, interview transcripts and personal reflections; for this paper, I draw on thoughts captured in a reflective journal in which I document my experiences with my PhD students, recording critical incidents that may occur from time to time in the supervision enterprise as the student and I engage with the research learning agenda.

A particularly appealing aspect of self-study research is the way it can spur the development of a personal and constantly evolving pedagogical theory – consonant, in this respect, with Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) notion of rhizomatic theorising which will potentially disrupt and discourage thinking that defaults to existing pedagogical canons.

I now move on to consider some of the key issues that my students and I experience as we negotiate this unfamiliar territory.

## ***Liminality and Conceptual Threshold Crossing***

Liminality is a concept that was coined by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep

and later developed and given prominence in the literature by Victor Turner. Derived from the Latin word *limen* (threshold), the concept is indicative of a period of uncertain transition, a process of temporarily removing limits – a phase in which a person is likely to experience anxiety and conflict and depleted self-esteem as they come to terms with the new competences they are expected to master (Szakolczai 2009). Individuals in the state of liminality endure a painful separation from their existing identity; as they negotiate this rite of passage, they are likely to show obedience and humility and simply fall in line with the expected new conduct and behaviour. During this phase, individuals are likely to engage with concepts and new issues superficially, mimicking expected behaviour – their understandings remaining incomplete or partial, causing discomfort and emotional trauma (Land *et al.* 2010).

For cross-over students, liminality is a lived reality. All my new PhD students that crossed over into education experienced the ambiguity and uncertainty which liminality entails, and multiple issues are at play for both me (the supervisor) and my students during this period. As a relatively novice (or emerging) supervisor, I found myself having to deal with my own insecurities about my confidence and competence to supervise at PhD level: in effect, experiencing my own liminality. To compound the supervision challenge, I had no experience of supervising (or co-supervising) cross-over students. My cross-over students comprised experienced lecturers from professional commerce disciplines (including chartered accountants), some of whom were in higher-ranked posts than mine. While I welcomed the opportunity and affirmation that came with these colleagues seeking me out as supervisor, I had not fully comprehended the risks and challenges that would accompany this high-level intellectual contract. As supervisor to individuals whom I considered to be quite powerful and accomplished in their disciplinary fields, I felt the need to project (or even just mimic) a competent and confident demeanour. I was fortunate in having worked concurrently with a range of experienced supervisors who supported me in multiple ways (in particular through the School of Education's PhD cohort programme) to make the transition to a higher level of research supervision competence. My learning curve continues indeed to remain fairly steep, since each new cross-over student that I take on presents with a fresh set of challenges and opportunities for further refinement of my craft as supervisor. I must emphasise that a meta-cognitive awareness of the liminality that cross-

over students are likely to experience did not come to me immediately; it was only after carefully observing and reflecting on what my students said and did that I began to develop a sharper sensitivity to what my students had been experiencing. I am now more aware of the way my own insecurities relate to my shortcomings in knowledge and experience of supervising this type of student, more conscious that I need to resist any empty desire to appear competent and confident. As a novice supervisor of cross-over students, I tended to come on too strongly and aggressively in initial supervisory sessions, often 'over-speaking' about issues and concepts and over-elaborating on the high cognitive competences expected at PhD level, much of which was foreign to my novice cross-over students. I gave far too little credit to the existing knowledge base of these high-calibre students, belabouring instead the 'enormous' gaps in their knowledge of educational research. I now have to acknowledge that much of this positioning was done in an attempt to assert myself and win student confidence in my ability. The learning point I had then to reach was that while establishing student confidence in one's ability as supervisor is important, it should not be done in ways that construct students in terms of deficit. Ongoing self-reflection on my supervision practice has brought a deepened appreciation of the need to scaffold cross-over students in their transition to educational research.

A salutary instance that radically altered my approach to supervising cross-over students occurred when my very first cross-over student was unsuccessful in the oral defence of her PhD proposal before a sub-committee of the School Higher Degrees Committee. This was indeed a most traumatic time for me and for my student. Subsequent reappraisal brought me to see that I had misdiagnosed and misjudged the student's fundamental inclination. I had enthusiastically helped the student craft a study that was located in the critical paradigm and had exposed her to the relevant literature. However, while the student was able to read and summarise the gist of the ontological, epistemological and methodological principles applicable to this paradigmatic orientation, the examining panel's assessment from her oral presentation and the subsequent question and answer session was that her understanding of the tenets and discourse of the chosen paradigm went no further than superficial mimicry, not congruent with who she really was. There was a happy conclusion to the story in that she did subsequently make a successful defence of her proposal and complete her PhD study in regulation time, but at that initial stage I experienced the full spectrum of



anxiety, depleted self-esteem, identity crisis and dismay that I know my student also endured.

A useful pointer to the significance of this incident is provided by Gina Wisker (2012: 9) in her discussion of ‘conceptual threshold crossing’, where she identifies ‘core threshold’ concepts that educational research students need to acquire in order to conduct advanced educational research. In this context, ‘conceptual thresholds’ are ‘crucial moments in the research journey, ... ways of identifying when students start to work conceptually, critically and creatively, and so are more able to produce breakthrough thinking’ (Wisker 2012:9). For PhD students whose academic home and Master’s studies have not been in the field of education (i.e, cross-over students), conceptual threshold crossing is likely to differ from that which is undergone by ‘home-grown’ PhD education students. Wisker identifies two kinds of threshold concepts: discipline-specific threshold concepts and generic postgraduate-level conceptual thresholds. Threshold concepts are to be seen as ‘distinct from core concepts’: ‘troublesome’ because they disrupt established ways of thinking, and ‘transformative’ in that internalising them is likely to result in altered perceptions of the object under study (Wisker 2012: 14).

For cross-over students, discipline-specific threshold concepts are thus complexly layered. In the new research field of education (which they now encounter for the first time) key existing knowledge which they need to master concerning the identified focus of their educational research project could include topics (and topic variants) such as teaching, learning, assessment, curriculum and pedagogy. While cross-over students would certainly know *of* these concepts, they soon acknowledge that their conceptual grasp of such topics is problematic in that their encounters with such concepts will not hitherto have extended to any theoretical dimensions. Jansen (2011: 140) refers to this disciplinary depth as acquisition of an ‘intimate knowledge of the subject’, a necessary precondition for authoritative engagement with the significant focal issues. He suggests that the way to remain at the cutting edge of knowledge in one’s discipline is to be on the ‘research alerts’ mailing list of the journals in one’s field, to be actively connected with one’s subject librarian, to regularly read ‘reviews of literature’, to attend (and present) at national and international conferences and to subscribe to key journals in the field. All of these are effective ways to help the new cross-over student develop an authoritative voice and a solid

base from which to argue for the significance of one's research study. Reflecting on my own experience of engagement with cross-over students, a particular issue that stands out is the importance of carefully weaning new cross-over students as one steers their access to the network field. Although failing to heed the necessity of this disciplinary depth can have perilous consequences, as I have already illustrated, pressure to meet the set institutional timeframe for defending research proposals too often means that prerequisite knowledge of the subject (theory and foregoing research) is neglected, with consequences which are likely to surface in the later stages of the research process. In my supervisory experience, when defence of a research proposal that is inadequately informed by theoretical and conceptual knowledge of the targeted phenomenon does nonetheless succeed, the sequel tends to be that the student generates weak data, has difficulty 'seeing' data, and drifts into superficial analysis and theorising.

A closely related issue, equally ripe for further investigation, is the question of what constitutes an adequate literature review at the proposal defence stage. The PhD proposal template of the UKZN College of Humanities suggests a 400-word maximum for literature review, which can be misleading for both novice research students and their supervisors. Some students see this as a comparatively simple task and set about 'filling up the space' with references picked somewhat at random from literature and not well argued for. Particularly in relation to supervision of cross-over students, I am increasingly convinced that students should be encouraged to construct an extensive literature review at the pre-proposal stage much as they would a draft literature review chapter. The first step that I recommend is developing an annotated bibliography. Already a substantial undertaking given the very restricted research background that many of my cross-over students arrive with, bibliography compilation plus annotation gives students a powerful thrust in learning how to harness relevant literature, requiring deeper critical engagement with the sources that goes well beyond initial summaries of key findings. These skills thus acquired are then used to abstract, critique and synthesise the literature for capture in the abbreviated research proposal template.

A second layer of complexity exists for those of my cross-over students whose exposure has hitherto been confined to the dominant scientific paradigm (in which I have no capacity to supervise). But although I make a practice of declaring this incapacity up front to new students and encouraging

them to shop around for suitable supervisors, the real problem is that students from professional disciplines often have very limited research experience. Some have come through Master's programmes that had either just a very minor research component or none at all, so that, quite aside from whatever exposure they may have had to the dominant scientific paradigm, the acquaintance they have with any research methodology is very thin. As a consequence, they do not appear to be wedded to the scientific paradigm, nor, unsurprisingly, do fundamental constructs like paradigm, epistemology, ontology or methodology form any part of their lexicon. 'Paradigm', Kiley & Wisker (2009) remind us, is a key threshold concept that PhD students need to master, and reflection on my own supervision practice has brought home to me the crucial importance of covering this aspect with my cross-over students, since they often find it difficult to grasp how crucially it serves as a grounding for educational research globally and for their own educational investigation in particular. Very often they are so intent on identifying a research topic and developing their research proposals that issues of this order fall by the wayside. The means by which (and extent to which) PhD supervisors may help to acquaint students with this philosophical knowledge base in the pre-proposal stage and ascertain students' readiness to proceed further is another area that needs further study. There is, however, general recognition that a crucial aspect in the learning journey of PhD research, which must underpin the conceptualising of methodology for the study, is deepened insights about epistemology (what counts as knowledge) and ontology (what counts as truth). As Archer (1995) reminds us, methodology without ontology is blind and ontology without methodology is mute; it is very important for research students to understand this connection at the outset of their studies.

Cross-over students in the School of Education at UKZN are encouraged to enrol for introductory educational research courses offered to Master's students (with no compulsion to meet the assessment requirements) and to read available texts that deal with these issues. The extent to which students make use of this opportunity and how this learning is integrated into my supervision practice is an aspect of my supervision pedagogy that will certainly merit further critical reflection. While PhD students are encouraged to immerse themselves in educational research literature, especially educational research textbooks, there has been much criticism of the recent proliferation of textbooks (or 'advice books') offering recipes for doctoral

studies, many of which project unhelpfully reductive notions of linearity in the PhD process (Kamler & Thomson, 2008). It is much more appropriate to understand doctoral writing as a dynamic, discursive social practice involving interaction between colleagues rather than as a master–protégé relationship (Kamler & Thomson, 2008). This is one corrective perspective that I have found particularly valuable in reconceptualising my relationship with my cross-over students.

### ***Disciplinary Dissonance***

Cross-over students who are university academics also have to deal with a set of tensions and pressures emanating from their disciplinary home departments, to whom they may need to justify their chosen focus of educational research. Deans in traditional disciplines understandably encourage their staff to become discipline specialists rather than pursuing a PhD in education; developing and extending expertise that keeps one at the forefront of knowledge in one's discipline is always an imperative for university academics. Nor is being at the forefront a static situation; it is dynamic and constantly moving objective. University academics who choose to cross over to education for PhD studies forego an opportunity to build identity as a disciplinary knowledge producer, risking relegation to mere consumers of knowledge in their discipline. Undoubtedly, too, a PhD in Economics, Mathematics, Geography or Physical Science has more snob value (and more market value) than does a PhD in Economics Education, Mathematics Education, Geography Education or Physics Education. So is crossing over to education in fact a 'dumbing down'? Is education even a real discipline? – legitimate questions insofar as education has historically struggled to establish itself as a discipline in universities and has suffered the condescension of disciplines with a longer pedigree. In fact the full assimilation of education into the university only came about in the latter half of the 20th century and has been criticised as lacking consensus and coherence (Furlong 2013). This has largely to do with the long-standing connection with teacher training and to fact that education research has tended to have a heavily pragmatic focus rather than a 'commitment to *episteme*: fundamental research and scholarship' (Furlong 2013: 12). In South Africa, a similar context exists in which educational research is dominated by

teacher-education research. There is thus understandable pressure from ‘purist’ discipline heads and sceptics regarding the currency of educational research, and of higher-education research in particular.

The consequence is that these cross-over degree candidates have decided in effect to alter the trajectory of their scholarship. Academics in research-led higher education institutions are expected to demonstrate research expertise and competence in clearly defined and articulated fields. Choosing to do a PhD study in education thus becomes an explicit shift of scholarly allegiance: a decision, going forward, to research and publish in the field of education rather than in one’s disciplinary home field. The gravity and extent of this life-changing move is often not fully appreciated by university academics who cross over to education.

A matter of especial concern for academics who put themselves in this position relates to their own capacity and competence for supervising postgraduate students in their home disciplines. With a PhD qualification being regarded a necessary ‘licence’ to teach and supervise in higher education, the question then arises as to whether the ‘licence’ obtained by cross-over students is ‘valid’ in their home disciplines as a recognition of expertise required to supervise discipline-specific Master’s and PhD studies. Colleagues who have become educational research specialists now find themselves in a new predicament in that their competence to supervise discipline-focused PhD studies comes into question and they must seek to maintain credibility in the eyes of both students and peers. A good research supervisor must be able to induct high-level research students into the knowledge structures, values, and conventions (the discourse) of the discipline (Wisker 2012) – guide them into the community of practice (Wisker et al. 2007). Competence, as Wenger (1999) reminds us, is more than ability to perform certain actions or possession of certain narrow pieces of information; competent membership of a community of practice includes full accountability to the enterprise and full negotiation of the repertoire, the discourse, of the discipline.

Cross-over academics are likely to experience a high degree of academic vulnerability in transitioning to a new identity in a different community of practice. Negotiating a dual identity – in their disciplinary department and in new intellectual project of their educational research – is very likely to present its own set of challenges and frustrations. Wenger (1999) sees building an identity as member of a community of practice (such

as that of an academic discipline) as a process of negotiating the meanings of one's membership experiences, with a deep connection between identity and practice. In developing a practice, members engage with one another and acknowledge each other as bona fide members (Wenger 1999). For cross-over students, achieving a PhD in education translates into a feeling of inclusion (bona fide membership) in the educational research fraternity. As supervisor, I attempt to facilitate this process of induction into the educational research community by exposing cross-over students to educational conferences, co-presenting papers and co-authoring articles for educational research journals. While I may be able to help students move from peripheral membership of the educational research community to full membership, on reflection I also realise that I need to factor into my supervision enterprise discussions on how to manage a transforming identity.

## **Concluding Comments**

Supervising the cross-over student at PhD level is an aspect of research supervision that I continue to struggle with. Research supervision itself is fraught enough, with continuously emerging complexities in a developing context such as South Africa, and working with cross-over students is always likely to present with its own challenges and opportunities. There is a significant element of liminality in the experience of cross-over students as they transition from relative security to high-level vulnerability and insecurity and later find new security (and insecurity), and supervisors need to be sensitive to the trauma and uncertainty that such students may experience as they move from the familiarity of their home disciplines into the new zone of educational research. And while there may well be an element of initial fragility that needs to be managed, it must also be remembered that these are students who already have high-level conceptual abilities; novice supervisors, who may still be coming to terms with their own liminality, need to temper their exuberance in seeking to instill student confidence.

What the enabling conditions are for threshold crossing, and how to create them, should be a key area for further enquiry. Kiley & Wisker are very suggestive on generic threshold concepts for postgraduate research success, but more needs to be understood about what the basket of threshold concepts might be for novice PhD education students and about indicators of their attainment.

My further concern in this article has been the identity dissonance which comes into play when cross-over students take the ‘transgressive step’ in the direction of research and scholarship outside of their disciplines. A key concern here is the credibility of a new doctoral graduate in Education as potential supervisor of PhD studies in their home discipline. Wenger reminds us that membership of a community of practice translates into an identity as a form of competence. In a community of practice, participants learn certain ways of engagement with each other. Identity emerges as a form of individuality defined in respect to a community; as a learning process, identity is a ‘trajectory in time that incorporates both past and future into the meaning of the present’ (Wenger 1999:163). I suspect that useful insights may emerge from more extended systematic enquiry into potential interdisciplinary transference of ‘generic’ research skills – transference taking place in the kinds of connections Wenger alludes to as ‘brokering’ within communities of practice.

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