Scholarly Argument: Linking Doctoral Research to Practice

Article · November 2017

CITATIONS
0

READS
3

1 author:

Olivier Serrat
Chicago School of Professional Psychology
476 PUBLICATIONS **346** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Scholarly Argument: Linking Doctoral Research to Practice

Leveraging the approach to critical thinking advocated by Paul and Elder (2008), this précis makes a short argument for a research topic on linking doctoral research to practice to contribute new knowledge to the field and help address a real-world issue or opportunity.

Olivier Serrat
12/11/2017

Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it. (Serrat, 2010) Leveraging the approach to critical thinking advocated by Paul and Elder (2008), this précis makes a short argument for a research topic on linking doctoral research to practice to contribute new knowledge to the field and help address a real-world issue or opportunity.

What is Happening?

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), more people than ever before are completing doctoral degrees, including in emerging economies. With about 67,500 PhDs delivered each year, the United States produce more than twice as many PhD graduates as the nearest rival, Germany, which awards about 28,000; the United Kingdom comes third with about 25,000 PhD graduates.) About 40% of new doctorates in the OECD area graduate in sciences, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); this percentage increases to 58% of all new graduates if doctorates in health are included. So, what quantum improvements can we expect if all are tasked with—and succeed in—contributing new knowledge in a research topic that will address a real-world issue or opportunity?

What Do We Know? What Assumptions Have We Made?

But what, one might ask to begin, is a contribution to knowledge? Is it sufficient for, say, a PhD thesis to discourse on something no one else has written about before, amplify an argument one has not heard much before, or critique what has been asserted before (whether often or less so)? Does that count as a contribution to knowledge? And, if knowledge means different things to different persons in different fields of study, perhaps even at different times, what body of knowledge is one contributing to? To what ends? Can we all assume, as some academics do with somewhat socio-centric thinking, that knowledge will somehow percolate from academia into society, making it more productive and healthier?

What Point of View Can We Reasonably Hold?

Presumably, at least in the mind of the doctoral student, some answers to these questions must begin to form as he or she sharpens the research question and refines the theoretical framework for the research topic. Still, is the outcome of doctoral studies commensurate with the efforts and other resources that doctoral students deploy towards them? And, what is the impact of the main output of doctoral studies, meaning, the PhD thesis? Paraphrasing Merriam-Webster's definition of impact, what strong effect does it have on someone or something?

Why are Doctoral Studies Important? What Key Concepts or Theories Guide Our Reasoning?

The more traditional purpose of doctoral studies might be to demonstrate a candidate's ability to conduct independent research, possibly on a novel concept, and to communicate the results in accessible ways. From that perspective, the outcome of doctoral studies would be more important than what impact they might have. Still, is there no better use to make of the main output? A bold but levelheaded argument is that there should: too many PhD theses languish unread with barely a scholarly citation as searches for them in Google Scholar demonstrate. (Indeed, the very origins of Google Search trace back to the PhD theses of Google LLC's founders whose intuition—inspired by the concept and practice of scholarly citations—was that a website's relevance (including its contents) could be ascertained by considering the number of pages that linked back to the original site as well as and the importance of these.) But, there is much more: lest we forget, the United Nations strongly expect that science, technology, and

innovation can advance the Sustainable Development Goals its 193-member countries approved in September 2015.

What Might Be the Purpose of a Research Topic on Doctoral Studies? What Data, Information, and Evidence Might the Reasoning for it Be Based On?

The quality of our lives depends on the quality of our thoughts. A research topic that might contribute new knowledge to the field of tertiary education and help address real-world issues or opportunities is how to identify ways to better link doctoral research to practice. Research is about both generation and dissemination of findings. Indeed, some might argue that the failure of researchers to link evidence to policy and practice produces evidence that no one uses, holds up innovation, and so—willy-nilly—contributes to mediocre or even detrimental results. (Serrat, 2008) Therefore, given the numbers cited earlier and the plentiful data in ProQuest's database, it ought not be too difficult to both make the case for such a research topic and leverage clear, accurate, and relevant information in support of it. (ProQuest's repository of graduate dissertations and theses includes 4 million works; it grows by 130,000 each year with deposits from universities in 88 countries; it is accessed by 3,000 institutions with over 45,000 downloads every month.)

What Conclusions Might Be Drawn?

What conclusions might be drawn based on inferences and interpretations from such a research topic would depend entirely on the terms of reference for the research (and of course what data gives meaning to them). At the simplest level, a research agenda might only look at how doctoral students might draw a dissemination plan, a dissemination strategy, and dissemination tactics. More ambitiously, a research agenda might examine how universities could groom policy entrepreneurs (comprising professors and successive cohorts of students) that use outcome-mapping to enrich policy and practice with research. (Pellini and Serrat, 2010) (Outcome mapping entails defining a clear, overarching policy objective; mapping the policy context; identifying key stakeholders; making out desired behavioral changes; developing a strategy; analyzing internal capacity to effect change; and establishing a monitoring and learning framework.) (Serrat, 2008) More ambitiously still, a research agenda might investigate how doctoral courses and related functional domains of education (e.g., curriculum development, library and information services, research and development, teaching and learning processes, etc.) could be modernized en masse as contributory inputs toward the production of high-impact PhD theses.

What Implications and Consequences Might There Be?

Depending on the orientation and scope of a research agenda to identify ways to link research to practice, there might be implications—both positive and negative—and consequences for a multiplicity of relevant stakeholders including universities, students, curricula, professors, industry, and of course sundry groups of "beneficiaries". (A research topic on linking doctoral research to practice would be of the multi-system type: it would require evidence and reasoning within multiple, often conflicting systems, and a good deal of intellectual humility coupled with fairmindedness, among other intellectual traits.) Pell-mell, the nature of these might have to do with products, services, processes, and methods of delivery, as well as policy in the case of government(s). The perspectives that would conduce recommended initiatives might be ecological, organizational, and/or technocentric. Naturally, recommendations would have to be SMART—Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, and Time-related—and of course

politically acceptable since judgments would be passed vis-à-vis the best (or second-best) answers they provide.

References

OECD. (2016.) *OECD science, technology, and innovation outlook 2016*. OECD Publishing. Paris.

Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2008). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools*. Dillon Beach, CA: The Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Pellini, A. & Serrat, O. (2010). *Enriching policy with research*. Manila: ADB.

Serrat, O. (2008). *Linking research to practice*. Manila: ADB.

Serrat, O. (2008). *Outcome mapping*. Manila: ADB.

Serrat, O. (2011). *Critical thinking*. Manila: ADB.