

Doctoral Education, Danger and Risk Management

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Abstract:

This paper examines how risk management is reworking the doctoral supervisor/candidate relationship. We argue that a larger and more diverse population of doctoral students means special challenges for universities worldwide in managing doctoral programs to optimize their productivity and minimize the risk of failure, costliness and/or litigation. An effect of this is that professional and personal relationships in universities, as in many other public and private institutions, are being reshaped in order to be more closely aligned with risk minimization policy directives and strategies. To understand what effects such reshaping is having on doctoral education, we bring together anthropological theorising of risk with pedagogical theorising of power and identity in education contexts. This theoretical cross-over between anthropology and education situates the pedagogic work of doctoral training within a culturally constituted order of professional care and risk management. We utilize this framework to interrogate 'soft marking' as a specific domain in which risk minimization is producing new relational identities for both supervisors and students involved in doctoral studies programs.

Doctoral Education, Danger and Risk Management

It would come as no surprise to anyone associated with universities that the relationship of doctoral supervisor to doctoral candidate could become a dangerous one for both parties. Put another way, the “discourse of the lecherous professor” (O’Brien, 2000) and the “harass-able student” (McWilliam and Jones, 1996) has been widely disseminated within the academy. As academics, we share with other public figures – doctors, priests, counselors - a heightened sense of risk or threat or danger, and this is not simply danger emanating from sex, but from a range of sources and modes of being and doing. The public and institutional calls to be on guard against the danger of a passing computer virus (at the time of writing this, the Code Red Worm), for example, are familiar to anyone who works with the computer that has replaced the typewriter that has replaced the quill. All workers who claim to be professional - as academics must - need to be informed not only about policies and practices that safeguard against sexual harassment and computer virus contamination, but a great deal more. Our interest in this paper is not to reiterate these familiar stories, nor to put the reader on guard against a wider range of potential dangers in academic work. Rather it is to highlight the ways in which risk management policies and procedures are currently reshaping academic knowledge as *professional expertise*, and to explore the implications of this phenomenon for doctoral education.

In broad terms, our thesis is that risk management has now achieved the status of a high priority, institution-wide system of communication in all universities, a system into which the local, disciplinary-specific or ‘craft’ knowledge of the academic must be plugged in order to count as the proper knowledge of the truly professional worker. The management of the large and diverse student populations who are now engaging in doctoral studies worldwide requires knowledge that is outside the “unique, informal culture” (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 57) of academics’ traditional work. Consequently, doctoral education as craft knowledge is being reshaped by administrative interventions that work to achieve fair and efficient institutional practice. It is not that academic knowledge is being displaced altogether. Rather it is being made over as ‘professional expertise’ through a process that Ericson and Haggerty (1997) describe thus:

[P]rofessionals obviously have ‘know-how’, [but] their ‘know-how’ does not become expertise until it is plugged into an institutional communication system. It is through such systems that expert knowledge becomes standardized and robust enough to use in routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions by professionals. (p.104)

The idea that doctoral education is being made the subject of “routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions” may well be viewed as a sinister, Orwellian development in higher education (see for example, Lee and Williams, 1999). We are not seeking in this paper to make any moral or ideological judgment of this type. Our aim is to make visible the work of risk management as a system of rules, formats and

technologies for communicating within and across institutions, asking how such a system is being brought to bear on doctoral education and with what effects.

This paper considers some quite specific effects of risk management on the work of developing, maintaining and evaluating programs of doctoral education, drawing attention to unprecedented rules and practices that are an outcome of the meeting of academic knowledge and professional (risk management) expertise. We take the controversial issue of ‘soft marking’ as a case of risk management in action in the production of new ‘expert’ knowledge in the academy. As indicated above, we leave open the question of what *ought to be* accommodated or resisted in this new regime: our interest is in understanding how doctoral education, as a sub-set of the organizational activities of universities, is being impacted by risk management as “a system of regulatory measures intended to shape who can take what risks and how” (Hood et al, 1992: 136).

Theorising Risk

It is not our intention here to provide a comprehensive overview of the sort of theorizing that has been made available around risk and ‘the risk society’ (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992). While we are aware of a number of psychological studies of ‘risk perception’ and ‘risk tolerance’ that date back over two decades of research (eg, Gardiner and Gould, 1989; Slovic, 1987), our interest is in social, cultural and institutional processes related to the management of risk within organisations. It is to cultural theory, particularly studies that draw on the foundational anthropological work of Mary Douglas (1966; 1990; 1992) and Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), that we look for theoretical entrée to the notion of risk. Douglas’s work shifts attention from risk as the probability of losses and gains, to the idea that, in contemporary times, risk now simply means *danger*. She states:

The modern risk concept, parsed now as danger, is invoked to protect individuals against encroachments of others. It is part of the system of thought that upholds the type of individualist culture which sustains an expanding industrial system.
(Douglas, 1990: p.7)

Following Douglas, ‘risk-as-danger’, is generally understood by cultural theorists to serve the “forensic needs” (see Douglas, 1990) of a new and expanding global culture in “politicizing and moralizing the links between dangers and approved behaviours” (Pidgeon et al, 1992: 113). Within the generation of studies spawned by Douglas’s foundational ‘grid-group cultural theory’, there exist lines of inquiry that can be usefully applied to understanding the impact of risk on academic work in general and on doctoral education in particular.

Danger and the university

Academics worldwide would be aware of the fact that universities now have larger and more diverse populations of students and staff than ever before. According to a demographic study of university student populations in business schools in the USA (Coccarri and Javalgi, 1995), there has been an increased enrolment of older students, and a greater variety of minority enrolments in recent years. A current study of doctoral programs in Australia (McWilliam et al, forthcoming) shows that there is a marked growth in non-traditional course offerings that seems to parallel the growth of non-traditional student populations at the postgraduate level.

It would be too simple, however, to assume that larger and more diverse populations are the reason for the move to intensify regulation of postgraduate programs, such as we have seen, for example, in the 'Post-White Paper' era in Australia ie, since Kemp (1999). As the above theoretical developments imply, larger and more diverse populations do not of themselves explain the high priority being given to the management of risk in the structural readjustments that universities worldwide have been involved in over the last two decades. The introduction of 'audit' mechanisms, whether as measurements of 'teaching effectiveness', or 'research quality', or 'accountability', has been for some time now a feature of a wide range of public and private institutions (Shore and Wright, 1999). Whether or not the appearance of these mechanisms heralds "a new form of coercive and authoritarian governmentality" (Shore and Wright, 1999: 1), the fact remains that universities have been perceived by funding bodies to be paying insufficient attention to issues arising from the management of change, people and risk (Gallagher, 2000). This finding of the Higher Education Management Review Committee in Australia (Hoare et al, 1995) has its parallels in the Dearing Report (1997) in the United Kingdom, in that both Committees foreground the failure of universities to develop the sort of management culture necessary to self-regulation in relation to organizational performance.

Following Mary Douglas's theorizing of risk, the notion of performance in a risk society is very much focused on danger – the danger of failing to perform in ways that are morally and politically, as well as organizationally, acceptable. As Beck (1992) argues, risk society is characterized by negative logic, a shift away from the management and distribution of material/industrial 'goods' to the management and distribution of 'bads', ie, the control of knowledge about danger, about what might go wrong and about the systems needed to guard against such a possibility. Such a focus is evidenced, for example, in Michael Gallagher's (2000) summation of outcomes of discussions between the Australian federal government's Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) and senior university executives. He states that these discussions pointed to "a number of failures" (p.38) that he links to the "trial and error dimension" of university management practice to date. What is strongly implied here is that, despite common regulations across the sector, it is the lack of uniformity of practice within universities that is the key culprit in producing failure. "The next phase of development", Gallagher concludes "...can be expected to be more formalized and professionally risk managed" (p.38).

The professional management of risk demands knowledge of risk, and knowledge of risk produces new risks for the organization and its personnel. So knowledge about risk is no escape from danger. Indeed such knowledge *is itself dangerous*. It threatens all professionals because it gives them processes for deciding what action to take and at the same time provides the means by which they can be found to have done the wrong thing (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 89). Thus it is not simply that large populations of non-traditional ‘clients’ have ‘caused’ a heightened vigilance in the university sector, just as it is not simply that the decline of the welfare state has ‘caused’ universities to become more accountable for the shrinking funding that they receive from governments. As necessary professional expertise, risk knowledge itself has within it the seeds of its own proliferation because it is both a means to manage danger and a danger to professionals everywhere.

Central to the ‘negative’ logic of risk management, as we have seen above, is the idea that there must be more self-scrutiny, regularity and control within and across an organizational sector. The aim of is not to ‘overcome’ the diversity that is increasingly a feature of university student populations. Indeed, quite the reverse is true. Diversity is to be welcomed because it means reaching potential markets that have hitherto remained untapped (Coccarri and Javalgi, 1995). So it is not the case that the ‘self-scrutinising’ audit mechanisms of academic bureaucrats are designed to serve the status quo by seeking to ‘normalise’ all postgraduate students as white, middle-class, young and male. Risk managers know that deviation from the mean is, in fact, the norm. The work of the risk manager is not to ‘normalise’ as much as it is to understand how an individual is placed on a continuum of “imprecise abnormality” (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 101). In an “audit culture” (Strathern, 1997), the potential threat for universities as organizations lies not in diversity of student or staff populations but in systemic arbitrariness - in (inappropriate) organizational imprecision in the context of (appropriate) social imprecision. Put simply, the logic is that systems of management need to be uniform because individuals are not, nor are likely to be. Such logic of procedural equity flies in the face of a more perverse reading of audit cultures as intentionally depersonalizing. This is not to argue that such cultures do not have depersonalizing effects. Rather it is to argue that the logic of the intensive bureaucratic monitoring that is a feature of audit cultures is not simply ‘one-size-fits-all’ in terms of the individuals who are its ‘products’.

Auditing academics

There is little doubt that academics have for some time now been sensing the creep - or indeed the gallop - of audit cultures into their offices and classrooms. The unprecedented emphasis on audit and quality assessment, both within and without, has been an unwelcome development in the working lives of academic teachers and researchers (Davis, 1999; Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997; Kenway and Bullen, 2000; Shore and Wright, 1999; Smyth, 1995). In broad terms, the tenor of such arguments seems to be that the instruments of accountability that are being used to define and improve quality in higher education impose models of organization that are incompatible with traditional academic work. Such arguments stress the “unbusiness-like nature” of academic

endeavour, insisting that regulations for business practice are both “formulaic” and “shallow” as mechanisms for verifying academic labour (Davis,1999: 7).

While there is much that can be justified in such critiques of the ‘quality’ agenda as it is being experienced in universities, there is also a sense of forgotten history here. As Marilyn Strathern (1997) points out, the assumption that the practices of audit culture originate with “the commercial world with its protocols of bookkeeping and calculations of resources” (p.308) refuses acknowledgement of the fact that commerce ‘imported’ these practices from education at an earlier time. She describes the ‘re-importation’ of these practices by education as “a beautiful example of cultural replication” in that “values cross from one domain of cultural life to another and then, in altered form, back again” (p.308). So arguments about the “unbusiness-like nature” of academics’ work may well be in danger of overlooking the education-like nature of accountability in their rush to blame an alien force for the university’s ‘ruined’ state (Readings, 1996).

A further concern we would have with such critiques is sense in which such arguments run the risk of becoming tired reiterations of a David-and-Goliath theme – the State-versus-the higher education-sector, the University-versus-the good academic. Such binary formulations do not take us closer to understanding precisely how what we as academics do – how we apply our craft knowledge or ‘know-how’ - has become dangerous to ourselves and others. We may, of course, be able to offer relatively simple explanations for our changed and changing behaviours. For example, we may feel that we know why a doctoral supervisor might decide that s/he will leave the office door open at all times during a student consultation, notwithstanding a decade or more of working respectably behind closed doors. However, we might have more difficulty explaining how it is that an issue like ‘soft marking’ has become identified as dangerous for universities, beyond a lay explanation that the media gained access to information about a particular incident or claim, and the effect of this has been to send university managers running for cover. Or, alternatively, that the practice of inflating marks is proliferating because of unprecedented pressure on academics both to quantify their teaching excellence by way of on-time completions and to meet the needs of full-fee paying students-as-customers.

The risk of soft marking

The cultural theorizing of risk is a conceptual field which allows us to move beyond this somewhat simplistic thinking to investigate the conditions of possibility for such an issue as ‘soft marking’ to become dangerous. Put another way, risk theory can help us understand how ‘soft marking’ can be *thinkable* as a serious danger, and what effect this has on academics and our work. Through such understanding we can come to see how knowledge about ‘soft marking’ has become as much a danger to the academy as the practices which may be argued to constitute this phenomenon.

The conceptual model of “the social amplification of risk” provided by Kasperson et al (1998) is helpful here. Working out of the assumption that the investigation of risk is both “a scientific activity and an expression of culture” (p.149), these scholars fill a gap in risk research by explaining how an apparently minor risk might produce massive public

reactions. They use the term “risk events” to describe “occurrences that are manifestations of the risk and that initiate signals pertaining to the risk” (p.150). A risk event is usually “specific to a particular time and location”, but comes to “interact with psychological, social and cultural processes” in ways that “heighten or attenuate public perceptions of risk and related risk behaviour” (p.150). An allegation of ‘soft marking’, then, gains the status of a “risk event” if and when it interacts with other socio-cultural processes to produce behaviours that serve to increase the perceived danger, triggering demands for “additional organizational response and protective actions or impeding needed protective actions” (p.151). We see here again the doubleness of the play of risk, as it loops back upon itself, thereby proliferating the actions and reactions that constitute its management.

As a risk event, ‘soft marking’ is neither a ‘true’ (absolute) nor a ‘distorted’ (socially determined) risk within the academy. The term ‘soft marking’ is a knowledge object that has been invented, and then discovered to exist in universities as a mobilizer of a range of practices that are potentially dangerous. This is not to say that ‘soft marking’ is entirely fictive – merely to argue that it is a term which arises at this point in history to make a particular kind of sense (about assessment processes) and so to do a particular kind of work in governing academic practices. As a knowledge object, ‘soft marking’ works through a negative logic that mobilizes more efficient surveillance practices in universities which understandably fear negative attention from potential markets, governments, other funding bodies and the general community. When something happens that is alleged to be an instance of ‘soft marking’, a whole organizational culture is mobilized by the naming of this occurrence – it is now a risk event.

The risk of doctoral examination

Allegations of ‘soft marking’ are never more anxiety-producing than when they arise in relation to the examination of doctoral dissertations, because of the widespread acknowledgement that a doctorate represents the highest award for academic excellence that can be given by any university. ‘Suspect’ assessment means a suspect doctorate and a suspect ‘best’ credential is danger indeed for a university’s reputation for the quality of its research, teaching and learning. So the assessment of doctorates, like doctoral supervision, has become “a collective, organizational issue” (Delamont et al, 1997: 3) rather than being about the individual judgments of examiners. As a result, such individual judgments (or academic ‘know-how’) cannot be immune from scrutiny. Thus ‘soft marking’ allegations heighten surveillance around a wide range of assessment practices, some of which may once have been regarded – and still would be defended - as positive discrimination in the service of social justice and equity. For example, it may well be argued that examiners marking the work of ESL students should have been selected for their understanding of the cross-cultural demands of writing a thesis in English and refrain from being overly punitive in relation to technical expression. However, the avoidance of ‘overly punitive’ marking can quickly mobilize its doppelganger, ‘soft marking’ in such a way as to call into question the standards of a particular organization or an entire sector. And so the pendulum swings, and so risk response activity is ceaseless.

This has certainly been observable in the Australian higher education sector in recent times (2001), with ‘soft marking’ making attention-grabbing headlines in the national and regional newspapers. “Failed students make the grade” (*The Courier Mail*, 3 February, p.1), “Universities’ testing times” (*The Advertiser*, 10 February, p.67), “Marking inquiry exposes glitches” (*The Australian*, 6 June, p.23), “Unis get poor marks for evaluation practices” (*The Australian*, 27 June, p.31) – all these headlines frame universities as guilty of suspicion of “perpetuating a fraud” (*The Courier Mail*, 3 February, p.1) and thereby abusing the public trust which is made tangible in government funding.

It is interesting to note how the articles themselves amplify the impact of danger by making connections between a ‘soft marking’ risk event and other issues, some of which have to do with higher education quality, and some of which are to do with larger and more long-term social issues and political debates in Australia, including issues around racism and immigration. The most often reiterated connection is between ‘soft marking’ and “exclusive, fee-paying overseas students” (*The Courier Mail*, 3 February, p.1). The allegation that “Students’ free ride Unis ‘favour fee-payers’” (*Herald Sun*, 16 May, p.29), and that this constitutes a “dark side to export boom” (*The Australian* 20 June, p.34) in Australian higher education, has certainly spawned an outbreak of ‘tale-telling’ about assessment practices on the part of students and academics, and a flurry of activity on the part of universities to show how responsive they are to any potential danger from this quarter. The University of New South Wales, for example, is reported as ensuring that the “enforcement of English language requirements for international students will be tightened”, having “toughened written English requirements last year” (*The Australian*, 6 June, p.23).

While universities have been quick to advertise their internal risk response activities, they are also looking to mitigate the possibility of the accusation of ‘lower standards’ by seeking international accreditation through the OECD or similar bodies (see “Universities’ testing times”, *The Advertiser*, 10 February, p. 67). So individual universities come to produce and sustain an international ‘audit’ economy. The idea of external audit is, of course, embedded in the practice of doctoral examination in those countries like Australia and New Zealand which have adopted the British model of ‘external’ doctoral examination. However, as Margaret Kiley and Gerry Mullins (2001) make clear, there is much more to issues of quality and transparency in thesis assessment than the external location of the examiner. Their study is one of a burgeoning number of studies (eg, James and McInnes, 2001; Johnston, 1997; Tinkler and Jackson, 2000) that seek to make academic examination ‘know-how’ explicit, and so render it amenable to regulation by way of a standards framework. As ‘transparent’ knowledge, thesis examination is rendered less mysterious and more ‘expert’, with all of the strengths and weakness that such regulation of academic (craft) know-how brings with it.

A number of other processes and activities get taken up as the amplification of the ‘soft marking’ danger progresses. ‘Softness’ becomes available to be seen as a more general malaise in universities, for example in admission programs as ‘soft entry’ (see “Med school in pay for entry deal”, *The Courier Mail*, 22 September 2000) and in curriculum

design and delivery as 'soft courses' (see "Universities' testing times", *The Advertiser*, 10 February, p. 67). In some cases, the 'softness' malaise is argued to be responsible for the failure of the international student market to serve the interests of Australia as a 'knowledge nation' (see "Dark side to export boom", *The Australian* 20 June, p.38). The evidence provided for this in media reports is that the number of potential international students doing postgraduate research degrees is falling and so too is the proportion of international students in doctoral and research masters programs (p.38). 'Soft' entry, and 'soft' courses for international students mean scant pay-off in knowledge production, so the argument goes. The issue of organizational 'softness' is further extended to questions of workforce planning in universities. Allegations that markers of student work are increasingly casual staff who are "untrained, undervalued, underpaid, unsupervised and in some cases, inexpert" ("Unis get poor marks for evaluation practices", *The Australian*, 27 June, p.31), foreground dangers in casualization as 'soft staffing' (*The Australian*, 27 June, p.31).

Dissertation marking is clearly ripe for monitoring. Despite the call for more innovative outcomes from doctoral programs (eg, Kemp, 1999), the doctoral product worldwide still seems to be overwhelmingly the thesis-as-tome. Few English-speaking universities have the staffing capacity to invite ESL students to write the tome in their first language. So standards of written expression lurk as a constant and double danger – the danger of failing to demand the highest levels of written expression (thereby risking reputation) and the danger of failing to provide the sort of quality teaching and learning that a 'fail' result implies in an audit culture, especially if this were to occur in significant numbers. The danger is pronounced in those systems of examination that rely solely on a review of the written text, without a *viva* to allow both examiners and students to seek and gain more information.

A further danger of the thesis-as-tome is, of course, the danger of a supervisor's overstepping the boundaries of good teaching by moving into the role of co-author. This puts at risk the requirement that a student's study be their own intellectual and textual property. While the risk of co-authorship for the supervisor of ESL dissertation writers appears at this stage to be 'contained' somewhat within the academy, the matter of academic plagiarism certainly is not. Concerns that "the incidence of plagiarism has risen dramatically" (James and McInnis, 2001: 28) are being linked to new technology in that "electronic technologies lend themselves to the grosser forms of cut and paste cheating...and an industry in internet cheat sites...trad[ing] in made-to-order assignments" (p.28). While undergraduate processes are the key object of interest for James and McInnes, there is little doubt that failure to detect plagiarism is being perceived as a failure of universities to guarantee quality assessment across the board, and this includes doctoral assessment.

It is interesting to note some of the ways in which academics are now moving – and being pushed - to address such 'deficits'. One such move involves a research study of "non-voluntary plagiarism" (McKay and Mazey, 2001) being conducted by ESL researchers at the Queensland University of Technology. These researchers are insisting on a new space for thinking about the sort of plagiarism which has been identified in the

writing of some of their Background Language Other Than English students. They argue that certain sorts of ‘cutting and pasting’ need to be understood as culturally nuanced ie, as the sort of reproduction that can connote respect for the authoritative voice of the scholar being copied, rather than cheating. Their study serves as an example of the way in which risk management as a concern for standards is mobilizing a set of mechanisms for managing student and staff populations, including new research themes and activities.

Conclusion

Our paper has sought to make explicit connections between risk management systems, universities and doctoral education as a subset of the activities of universities. We have linked the worldwide proliferation of procedures for evaluating the performance of universities to a negative logic about risk as danger. Drawing on cultural theorizing of risk, we have indicated how an issue like ‘soft marking’ can mobilize a wide range of practices, all of which carry within them their own potential dangers. We have argued that doctoral education is no less implicated than any other domain in the relentless demand for activity that characterizes audit as a risk response strategy. Indeed, as the most prestigious credential a university can offer, the doctorate is a location of academic practice that is now experiencing greater regulation and control. Far from being the mysterious inner sanctum of academic know-how, doctoral education is now being laid bare on the brightly lit forensic table of risk management.

Along with Strathern (1997), we hold that the audit culture is typically hyperactive in its quest to make explicit all the activities of universities as organizations, including all those activities that were once conducted in private rooms of doctoral supervisors and examiners. As academics, we are being required to add to our in-club know-how a new knowledge for managing risk, knowledge which is designed to enrol us in constant self-scrutiny. In this way we come to mirror the logic of the risk organization, with its unending demands for accountability through self-audit. There will be no safety in the procedural knowledge that academic supervisors and examiners must now engage with, just as there can be no safety in procedural ignorance.

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