Unravelling an Archive: historicising ‘doctorate’

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the creation of an education historiography that allows what has been known as ‘history’ or ‘the past’ into a ‘spacious present’ for re-examining what ‘doctorate’ may be. Unravelling ‘doctorate’ as it has been written in the past and bringing these stories into a present, offers the opportunity for re-thinking the concept ‘doctorate’ and re-figuring process.

Keywords:
Doctorate; education historiography; postmodern history.

Perhaps if the future existed, concretely and individually, as something that could be discerned by a better brain, the past would not be so seductive: Its demands would be balanced by those of the future.
Nabakov, Transparent Things, 1972

The idea of ‘doctorate’ has survived many iterations since the first parchment was handed to that unknown first recipient eight hundred or so years ago in a cathedral in Europe. A change in focus in the early 1800s allowed the PhD to become the first research degree along with Von Humboldt’s new idea of the research university in Germany. The last twenty years has seen a further escalation of interest and subsequent directives. In Australia the directives in the Kemp reports (1999a) and (1999b) led to major activity that resulted in the re-vision of pedagogy, practice and outcome for ‘doctorate’ based on funding, quality of research and research training and workplace outcomes amongst other things. In some respects the idea of ‘doctorate’ was appropriated from university to government. ‘Doctorate’ could claim to have become a new industry within the industry of Higher Education with a set of demands, rules and a subsequent consensus placed upon it that are different and yet maybe the same as they were 800 or 200 years ago.

One current consuming demand, ‘timely-completion’ may be something to investigate more fully at another time, however just a brief glance at Australian university websites and documents can tell us that this demand strongly affects university funding as well as other internal and specific matters regarding course structures, research training and supervision in 21st century. However, in Mediaeval Italy a ‘no-show’ or ‘non-completer’ meant the lecturer would not be paid by that particular student, maybe the lecturer went without his dinner and that was the end of the story (but we might assume his reputation and therefore his meal ticket could be on the decline). Or we could look at the current requirement in some
universities for academic staff to hold or be working towards a doctorate and see that this is
the same yet different from the situation that Master Jacobus de Farneto found when he was
appointed to teach grammar at Bologna in 1384 at a stipend of fifty pounds Bolognese
conditional on ‘take(ing) his doctor’s degree or at least the licentiate before next Christmas,
otherwise he is to receive no salary’ (Thorndyke, p. 256). How similar and how different? If
many statements from different ages about a specific issue were placed together, what could
they tell us? Is there one truth or are there many? Can the past affect what Nabakov goes on
to describe as ‘a spectre of thought’ – the future?

To historicise ‘doctorate’ requires investigating histories, statements and pictures written
about doctorate in the past, and from the writing make a ‘critical and effective’ history (Dean,
1994). Through looking at the past this way may allow us to better understand present
dilemmas with the concept ‘doctorate’. However to historicise ‘doctorate’ is not to re-invent
a wheel of traditional linear history or historical anecdote about a cause and effect
development of doctorate, from the first named doctorate to the last. To historicise is to undo
or unravel what is in the doctorate archive and to interrogate what is found. A useful start is
to look at Foucault’s idea of archive (Foucault. (1989. p. 147),
‘… cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence I is unavoidable. It emerges in
fragments, regions, and levels, more fully, no doubt, and with greater sharpness, the greater
the time that separates us from it: at most were it not for the rarity of the documents, the
greater chronological distance would be necessary to analyse it. And yet could this
description of the archive be justified, could it elucidate that which makes it possible, map
out the place where it speaks, control its rights and duties, test and develop its concepts – at
least at this stage of the search, when it can define its possibilities only in the moment of
their realisation.’

In placing some of the known, forgotten or lesser seen artefacts, pictures / palimpsests from
the archive into a space where ‘doctorate’ may be seen as familiar yet unfamiliar, is to allow
it to speak for itself or as Paulson (1988) has argued, allows doctorate to ‘make its noise’ and
so open up the ‘medium of its possibility’ or as Foucault says, ‘define its possibilities’
(Foucault, p. 147).

The concept ‘doctorate’ and its possibility however are not in this space on their own. For
the concept ‘doctorate’ and its allied beliefs to have being, it has had and has collaborators or
co-conspirators, and those of us who work in a university environment with postgraduate
students or who are undertaking doctoral study are equal partners in creating this current
‘story’. We collaborate to create the current ‘doctorate’ discourse, we make it what it is now
and what it has the possibility of becoming. This consensus of what the doctorate story is, is a fundamental agreement or set of agreements and is the heart of the matter in hand. Because it is consensus it is difficult to see, invisible and also difficult to ‘say’. The consensus has continuing ‘invisibility’ because it is so functional in practice. We do it, believe it, without noticing. This is what I call ‘weasel beliefs’. Weasel beliefs pervade a discourse allowing little conscious awareness by those who are part of the discourse. It could be however that now we are ‘in the moment of their realisation’ and some weasel beliefs about ‘doctorate’ from now and from before now are ripe for contradiction.

One weasel belief about ‘doctorate’ that has recently enjoyed some exposure is useful as illustration. This weasel belief says that a doctorate is the pinnacle of academic achievement. Many of us know it, think it and assume it. In the archive there are also other statements in relation to the doctorate being a pinnacle of academic achievement that may throw the belief into disarray. These statements have flagged trouble for the idea that doctorate is the pinnacle of academic achievement - ‘Honorary doctorates for Bee Gees’ (BBC, May 2004), and from 1986, ‘Joh Bjelke-Petersen … his doctorate conferral was a memorable one. Awarded an honorary doctorate in Political Science by University of Queensland’ (Crikey.com ND), or examples of serious and rigorous research degree projects reported in the media under headlines such as, ‘Super PhD Loses out to Blondes and Vampires’ (Sun Herald, 2003) and ‘Thesis preaches gay gospel on Jesus’ (Hobart Mercury, 2003). All these items in the doctorate archive contribute to the on-going doctorate discourse, and the understanding of what doctorate is and it’s potential for ‘becoming’.

‘Becoming’ in an historical context upsets the conventional and traditional idea of ‘history’. History in its traditional sense has already happened – it has been a sequence of events motivated by causalities that are unseen (often weasel beliefs) although they still operate. ‘Before’, the way that history has been practiced, has been dictated by what Elizabeth Ermarth (2001) calls a myth of a past that is reiterated in many presents, she suggests ‘the unified vision seems almost a dream and its founding subject largely a myth’. This could be a liberating concept when re-looking at ‘doctorate’ and its subsequent practice.

Alan Munslow (1997, p.1) poses a core question when he asks ‘the extent to which history, as a discipline, can accurately recover and represent the content of the past through narrative’. This is narrative is seen as an on-going story, and includes the notion of one historical truth
and a continuing chronological time-frame. Within a traditional approach to history the ‘true’
story is arrived at through rigorous, objective, disinterested methodological research using
primary source documents and frames the discovered material within linear chronological
time that relies on ‘cause and effect’ to produce an accurate reconstruction of events that
‘happened’ in the past. While the rigour of historical method for extracting ‘doctorate’
material from the archive is both necessary and scholarly, the use to which we put the
material and the framework chosen to display is of concern.

A linear chronology invites the opinion that history is a ‘process of ‘advances’ towards a
sophisticated present from a primitive past’ (Bentley, 1999) and is essentially non-
problematic and representational. It says that ‘the real intentions of the dead can still address
us today’, (Munslow, 2003). This linear approach to understanding history is seen in the
imagination as re-breathing life into the past and is evidenced by the increasingly popular
television and film re-enactments of historical ‘events’. It says the ‘truth’ is out there waiting
to be discovered and re-discovered as a visitable place and that time is its ‘keeper’.

That said however, it is useful to look at a chronology of ‘doctorate’ - for example Ian Rae’s
paper A False Start for the PhD in Australia offers impeccable evidence for the beginnings of
the doctorate in Australia, but what we see here is an unproblematic account that tells a safe
story. It does not seek to undo or to unsettle or to make trouble for the concept and this is
something to bear in mind for further along. If there are too many repetitions of the same old
stories, we are in danger of creating further weasel beliefs which are in themselves alibis for
something else.

A more useful ‘history’ approach for historicising doctorate can be found with some of the
postmodern historians. They alert us to openings for the possibility of ‘doctorate’ through a
different relationship with before now and can signal a way of seeing that can give a broad
set of ‘clues’. For example Bentley’s (1999) notation of the characteristics of postmodern
history includes:

‘… a rejection, philosophically of the self as ‘knowing subject’ … an allied rejection of the
possibility of finding a singular ‘true’ picture of the external world, present or past; a
concern to ‘de-centre’ and destabilise conventional academic subjects of enquiry; a wish to
see canons of orthodoxy in reading and writing give way to plural readings and
interpretations; a fascination with text itself and its relation to the reality it purports to
represent; a drive to amplify previously unheard voices from unprivileged groups and
peoples … a dwelling on power and lack of it as a conditioner of intellectual as much as
political configurations within a culture.’(p. 140)
Suddenly, history looks as though it may become strange, unsafe and without the boundaries offered by a traditional true knowable version of what has happened in the past. What has been understood as true might be problematised so it is no longer recognised as it was before. The way of seeing and understanding the past is disorientated. History, what has gone before, has the chance of being shaken up to reveal different possibilities. Acting on possibilities however can be challenging.

One major problem is that it is not necessarily the accessibility of a ‘real’ past that is at stake, but that there are a wide variety of ways of viewing ‘past’, that can be recounted differently. The acceptance of different viewpoints hinges on the business of truth about the past. Ankersmit (2001) tells us that ‘each phase of historical writing can nevertheless be seen as the form in which a culture expresses its consciousness of its past.’ This echoes Foucault’s, ‘a history of the present’ must avoid the ‘writing of the past in terms of the present’. (Foucault. 1977. p. 31) That is to say, apart from what the historical writing produced in a period may say about the past, it can also be seen as the expression of how this period related to its past. This demonstrates that the telling of the telling of a history through time reveals that history stories are set within an ever changing present and open to constant retelling and re-interpretation. Each iteration has its own truth.

Jenkins, ‘a disobedient thinker’ (2003 p. 2) problematises the concept of history, when at first sight he seems to be declaring history dead,

‘In terms of critical and empowering thinking, my argument went, historians may no longer have much to say to a culture that now seems too late still to be modern and which is arguably so ahistorical in its practices such that modernist ways of doing history, whether in ideological…or academic … modes, may well be coming to a close.’ (Jenkins, 2003, p. 2)

However rather than killing what is known as history entirely and once and for all, a new field of exploration for historicising doctorate that casts off the shackles of weasel beliefs about what history is, is now seen as entirely possible. To explore the opportunities offered through seeing with postmodern eyes requires thinking and attitudes to scholarly history that are brave enough to dispense with the traditional basis of history (there is one truth, one history, one closed chronological time frame, one way of writing historiography) and to try out the attitudes outlined in Bentley’s notation of postmodern history. This postmodern exploration stands in what Jenkins calls, ‘critical disobedience’ to the mainstream norms of
traditional history (or any other discipline) and ‘gratefully accepts and celebrates … the inevitable failures of historical representation / presentation,’ p.3.

Jenkins is not the only academic scholar to suggest that it is time to look outside the centre of cultural habits of dominant discursive practices when considering the thinking and questions to be applied when interrogating subject matter. Richard Rorty (1989) in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* offers concrete suggestions in his discussion about language which he describes as ‘an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises new things’ by asking ‘try thinking of it this way or more specifically try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions’, and methods ‘to re-describe lots and lots of things in new ways’ (p.9). Rorty’s re-descriptions then also assumes that what is described is never ending, which fits well with Jenkins’ idea of openness, Rorty’s refusal of ‘a final vocabulary’ (p.73) and Paulson’s ‘medium of possibility’.

While Jenkins acknowledges that most historians now embrace an interpretation of interpretive pluralism in their work, it is different to that embraced by postmodernism, and he considers that most historians still effectively create ‘interpretive closures’. He proposes that history could take an entirely opposite route –

‘… that in the name of interminable openness and unthought possibilities we ought to have an implacable opposition to every type of closure on at least two counts. First because at the level of the historical text it just happens to be the case that interminable openness is logically unavoidable: there is no way that any historical closure can ever be achieved ….. And second, because such unavoidable openness allows for new disrespectful contentious, radical readings and rereadings, writings and rewritings of the past (the before now) to be produced – and this is excellent.’ (2003, p3)

Jenkins does not claim to have answers. He says ‘its refigured ways of figuring things out will never have been good enough’ (5).

He continues by saying that it is impossible for historians to ever discover and write a truthful history – and that this is the best one can hope for. Postmodern historians may now breathe a sigh of relief. At last a well respected academic historian has enunciated what all postmodern historians have thought secretly. No longer bound by the rules of traditional history, ‘we might want to stop doing those things and do something else...’ (Rorty, 1989, p.9) it may now be possible to look at ‘the before’ (Jenkins, 2003) with openness and not strive for
impossible outcomes. As Nietzsche said, ‘So I willed it’, it now appears that it is the time in history when more people are willing it.

Jenkins’ book *Refiguring History*, demonstrates interpretive free-play, and argues that traditional history cannot ‘shut it down’ (p5). This statement could sound alarm bells on several counts. The interpretation of an idea labelled ‘free-play’ especially in academia could suggest a ‘let it all hang out and blow the consequences’ approach that has no intellectual rigour and no scholarship. However the reverse is so. Jenkins demonstrates in *Refiguring History* arguments and knowledge that can only be arrived at through perceptive understanding and informed interpretation of the history of history of history, and the history of the theory of theory. His term ‘free-play’ perhaps does not explain adequately in itself the nature of a different way of viewing the world, although to look at the whole of *Refiguring History* does, and attests to the scholarly application of the principle. However the phrase does hint that to refigure the history of anything, the historian or educator would do well to see researched material through new eyes, or with an informed yet questioning naivety.

McWilliam (1999) in discussing the ‘within reason’ aspect that the concept of play or ‘in play’ might bring to the academic table, says that,

‘It is a way of refusing to settle finally on the account, the formula the set of principles … Moreover, as with all humour, irony depends on knowing how something works. … This means using reason for the very purpose of unfixing reason.’ p.178

In other words, play, irony, is a tool to be used and an attitude to adopt, because as Rorty says cited by McWilliam, (1999, p 178) to face our central beliefs it is required that we have ‘abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance’.

Through this questioning naivety and with an ironic sense of ‘play’ historians could get on with the liberating of creative imagination directed towards the types of questions used to interrogate the researched material. If this were possible interpretative closures might become genuinely a thing of the past and the openness that Jenkins advocates could reveal rather than anticipate. It is in the failure of the traditional ‘epistemology’ that this postmodern invitation to radical otherness emerges and where the ‘before now’ might be more generously construed. By beginning again – or by as Jenkins says bringing a ‘disobedient disposition’ to historical (or any other) thinking, this opens up an opportunity to
create the ‘post modern historiography’ that Bentley considers will not be written for 30-40 years. The situation that Jenkins (and other post modern historians) offers is a template / blue print free zone and suggests the idea of ‘favourable dispositions’ towards different ways of imagining – or a ‘relaxed attitude to creative failure’ (2003, p. 6) it,

‘…seeks no resolution or agreement about historic problematisations but which celebrates the failure of each and every one of them: what is being advocated throughout is an attitude that disregards convention, disobeys the authoritative voice and replaces any definitive closure with interminable openness, any exhaustive ending with an etcetera, and any full stops with an ellipsis …’ p.6

and reveals entry into a different way of approaching history and in this case, the historicising of doctorate.

Through making a mix of Foucault’s archaeological examination and genealogical strategy and some aspects of postmodern history, the researcher can be airlifted immediately out of a traditional viewpoint and into a disorientated, never ending research area that has no interpretative closures and where the material in the doctorate archive can be seen to behave differently.

Suspending weasel beliefs about time when formulating the framework into which we place the ‘doctorate material’ might be a useful space for re-orientating this aspect of education. Ermarth (2001) says that the idea of historical time ‘took hold after 1800 and remains for most of us an almost automatic pilot. This kind of time has become the only conceivable kind: homogenous, infinite, unproblematic, unconfigured by exotic influences like furies, gods or wormholes in space.’ (p. 204). This idea of time if it were used for examining ‘doctorate’ assumes that doctorate will ‘produce results, explanations, knowledge, capital’ it relies on cause and effect and can reconcile ‘present lack for the sake of future completion’ (p.205). If this is the case, then in a space with no time where statements from the doctorate archive are placed, there will be the possibility of a different notion about the ‘ideas of results, explanations, knowledge, capital’ and an audacious hope that there is union, success and completeness and a different type of network or inter-relationship between the items will emerge in the archive.

This would be most disorientating event that could happen to traditional history and historiographers if the concept of time, with all its chains of events and chronologies disappeared, if the notion of time were suspended.
What would remain would be a *spacious present*. The ‘spacious present’ would not provide space for judgement and material from the doctorate archive could be examined and interrogated within it in the interests of interrogating doctorate differently to see what is there and how different it is when viewed differently. The spacious present allows ‘doctorate’ to speak.

Into a spacious present, researched / found doctorate objects or events at ‘the first *surfaces* of their *emergence*’ (Foucault, 1969. p. 45) from before now could be placed. These found objects, events or artefacts might be removed from their old habits, problematised, ordered or dispersed in any way, and examined in all their faces. By creating splits and fissures different ideas could work to subvert and remove any constraints and provide toe holds for plurality (Jenkins. 1995. p. 95).

In a spacious present it might be possible to describe and re-describe the regularities and the irregularities of doctorate however ‘disreputable’ the origin of the material and however unpalatable it is, be it in archives, or newspapers or record offices. There could be discomfort where once ‘doctorate’ has been either comfortable or mildly uncomfortable. What will be revealed may well disturb a comfortable continuous ‘doctorate’ narrative, there may be no reconciliation and a lot more questions. These questions however unsayable may be revealed as sayable in the spacious present. It is certain that there will be disparate texts, pictures and statements about doctorate. What is re-written or re-figured may skim some surfaces that can contribute to an overarching moment. What is certain is that there will be no resting place and there may be no ending.
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