

## **Desperately seeking fixedness: Practitioners' accounts of 'becoming' doctoral researchers**

### **ABSTRACT**

We draw upon the concept of liminality to explore the experiences of practitioners enrolled on a UK Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programme. We analyse twenty practitioners' reflective journals to detail how the DBA liminal space was negotiated. More specifically, we describe how practitioners deal with their struggles of identity incoherence or 'monsters of doubt' which are amplified in the DBA context owing to the complex nature of the separation phase of liminality. We identify three broad methods deployed in this endeavour: 'scaffolding'; 'putting the past to work' and 'bracketing'- which evidence practitioners 'desperately seeking fixedness'. We make three contributions – first, we provide empirical insights into the experiences of the increasingly significant, but still under researched, DBA student. Second, we develop our understandings of monsters of doubt through illustrating *how* these are negotiated for learning to progress. Finally, we contribute to wider discussions of 'becoming' to demonstrate the simultaneous and paradoxical importance of movement and fixedness in order to learn and become.

**Keywords:** becoming; DBA; fixing; liminality; monsters of doubt

## INTRODUCTION

We draw upon the concept of liminality to explore the experiences of practitioners enrolled on a UK DBA programme, and undertaking a journey to become researchers. Liminality is a state of in-between-ness where individuals embark on transitions from one status to another (Turner, 1979) and one which presents particular challenges for the enactment of identity (Ybema et al., 2011). Accordingly, liminality is a concept that has received increasing attention in the learning literature (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015; Meyer and Land, 2005; Simpson, et al, 2010; Wright and Gilmore, 2012, Yip and Raelin, 2011). We build on this work and respond to calls from Hawkins and Edwards (2015) for research which explores the experiences of different types of students: Here we make our first contribution and suggest that liminality provides a particularly useful lens to examine the increasingly significant, but still under researched, DBA student (Banerjee and Morley, 2013). We suggest that the DBA student occupies a space in-between two identities as they journey toward becoming a doctoral researcher: the competent practitioner and the competent researcher. This liminal journey is especially challenging since DBA students are never fully *separated* from previous ways of being, amplifying struggles of identity incoherence associated with liminality (Douglas, 1966).

More specifically too we shed light on *how* students negotiate these struggles of incoherence or what have been termed ‘monsters of doubt’ (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015; Turner, 1979). These arise from moments where students can become stuck within the liminal space- what Meyer and Land (2005) name ‘threshold concepts’. In so doing, we make our second contribution by detailing just *how* the liminal space is negotiated to allow them to move forwards, and here, become researchers. Paradoxically too, we suggest that this critical form of movement is facilitated by practitioners’ endeavours to ‘seek fixedness’, to which our

analysis, outlined shortly, leads us to add the emotionally infused descriptor of ‘desperately’. We illustrate three broad methods deployed by students in this endeavour: scaffolding; putting the past-to-work and bracketing. All three methods enable the fixing of a coherent sense of self which mitigates uncomfortable emotions arising from the ongoing ontological flux (Chia, 1995) *just enough* to allow one to ‘go on’ (Giddens, 1979). Our third contribution is to wider discussions of *becoming* arising from demonstration of the simultaneous importance of movement and fixedness in our efforts to learn and become.

Our paper is structured as follows. We begin by outlining the study’s wider context- DBA programmes. We then explore the literature on liminality in general before considering how this is especially relevant to the DBA context and draw attention to the complex nature of the separation phase of liminality for the DBA student. This we suggest amplifies encounters with monsters of doubt. We then describe the diary method utilised and which practitioners draw upon to produce their ‘written up’ reflective journals to be submitted as one of two final assessments during a particular UK DBA programme. Next, we present our analysis and empirically illustrate practitioners’ encounters with ‘monsters of doubt’ and, crucially, offer insight into *how* these are handled. Through doing so, we fleetingly glimpse a sense of practitioners’ attempts to ‘seek fixedness’ allowing them to move forwards and become researchers. Finally, we consider the implications for our understandings of liminality in particular, and for learning and ‘becoming’ more generally.

## **THE DBA**

The DBA programme emerged in the UK in the 1990s and has grown steadily since (Bourner et al, 2001). Banerjee and Morley (2013) now observe that it is offered by some 37% of UK

universities. The DBA is one of a number of professional doctorates which developed in response to the perceived need to provide an alternative to the traditional PhD to serve careers outside of academia (Bareham et al, 2000). Indeed, Bareham et al's (2000) analysis suggests that DBAs have been designed to provide research-based career development for senior professionals in management. Of note then, most practitioners have already established their careers before commencing on a DBA and it is suggested that they hold 'intrinsic personal' motivations for study (Scott et al, 2004). A key characteristic of the DBA is a focus on enhancing professional practice with an aim to develop 'researching professionals' which stands in contrast to the PhD's aim to develop 'professional researchers' (Bareham et al, 2000). Typically students research their own work based problems and are expected to produce contributions to the professional knowledge-practice couplet. Accordingly, it is deemed necessary for students to possess significant managerial experience as well as holding a relevant Masters qualification (ABS, 2005).

The DBA is mostly offered through part-time delivery, completed over 3-6 years to enable students to continue to work full time (Bourner et al, 2000), and is classified as a research degree. While some variance is found, training in areas such as research design skills, research philosophy and methodology is provided alongside action learning sets to facilitate dialogue between students, in addition to the appointment of a supervisory team (Bourner et al, 2000). Assessment usually occurs throughout the programme via a number of specific documents with later documents assessed through a viva voce (Ruggeri-Stevens et al., 2001). Notably, one key outcome is the development of the critically reflective practitioner (Sambrook and Stewart, 2008).

The DBA programme of focus here began in 1998 and now has around 150 graduates. It is a

part-time programme, which is usually completed in 4-5 years but can be extended up to eight years to accommodate varying circumstances. Consistent with the broad aims of DBA programmes described above, a key aim is the development of the critically reflective practitioner. Students are supported through: a series of workshops providing knowledge and skills in the design and conduct of research; action learning sets formed within each cohort; and the allocation of two supervisors. Assessment is through six documents which are submitted at spaced intervals over the duration of the programme. The documents consist of a research proposal (5,000 words), literature review (15,000 words), two empirical studies, (one qualitative and one quantitative-each 15,000 words), and a final thesis of around 40,000 words together with a reflective piece on personal and professional development (circa 5, 000 words).

While the literature has identified a number of common features and aims, there remains a paucity of work which develops understandings of DBA programmes, especially from the student perspective (Banerjee and Morely, 2013; Sambrook and Stewart, 2008). This paper begins that process and suggests that liminality offers an especially useful lens to examine the DBA student experience.

### **Liminality: Being Betwixt and Between**

Liminality originated from anthropological studies concerned with the rituals of passage between one social status/identity and another (Turner, 1995; Van Gennep, 1960). Van Gennep (1960) identified three phases of the rite of passage: separation (characterised by detachment from previous ways of being); transition (characterised by a state of limbo which has few or none of the attributes of the previous and coming stages); and incorporation

(characterised by entry into a new group and life). Turner (1995) provided further insight into what, for him, was seen as the sacred transition phase and suggested that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner, 1995:95). Importantly, liminal individuals thus find themselves ‘temporarily undefined’ given that existing social structures and orders are disrupted in the transitional phase.

This ‘limbo of statuslessness’ (Turner, 1995: 97) provides both possibilities and challenges for individuals occupying the liminal space (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Turning first to the possibilities, Turner (1979) suggested that significant opportunities for transformation are presented where new ways of doing and being are played with: It is a ‘time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen’ (p. 465). Such playfulness is facilitated by a freedom from the constraints of existing ways of being and doing (Garsten, 1999; Sturdy et al, 2006; Tempest and Starkey, 2004), and provides possibilities for enhanced creativity and originality (Simpson et al, 2010; Turner, 1995). Turner (1995) also contended that liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. Possibilities for comradeship are also presented since individuals experience a heightened sense of belonging and togetherness with others who occupy the space (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Turner, 1995).

However, while liminality may offer a free and playful space it simultaneously provides threats and challenges to its occupants. It can also be deeply unsettling since uncertainty, ambiguity and the unknown gain significance and present new challenges (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015; Simpson et al, 2010; Turner, 1987). For Douglas (1966) there were dangers associated with the indefinable and incoherent, while Turner (1987) conceptualised these dangers as encounters with symbolic ‘monsters’, highlighting the emotional and embodied aspects of the liminal space (Garsten, 1999; Kupers, 2011). Moreover, these challenges were further exacerbated by the individual’s low status position where they had few rights over

others and therefore “must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint” (Turner, 1995:95).

This conceptualisation alerts us to the challenges for the enactment of identity as the liminal negotiates the possibilities and challenges of the in-between space to become ‘other’ (Ybema et al, 2011). As Beech (2011) contends, liminality significantly disrupts one’s sense of self and requires work to ensure that identity is meaningful for the individual and their community. Being liminal is therefore to be caught up in intensive identity work (Ybema et al, 2011) - that is- efforts in “forming, repairing, maintaining or strengthening or revising constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165). While process philosophy (Chia, 1995) reminds us that identity work is a continuous process in which we are all involved, analytically, liminality’s heightened moments of identity work provide opportunities to further develop understandings of processes of becoming. As Borg and Sorderlund (2015) suggest, to-date research has paid limited attention to *how* liminality is negotiated. Here, we do so in the context of DBA programmes to understand the process of becoming a competent researcher *and* as reported by the students themselves in their reflective journals.

### **The DBA as a Liminal Space**

Studies that have applied the lens of liminality to learning include Simpson et al (2010) who explored the experiences of international students who travelled to study on a UK MBA programme, with others such as Wright and Gilmore (2012), and Hawkins and Edwards (2015) conceptualising the undergraduate learning process as a liminal passage. As noted earlier, Hawkins and Edwards (2015) also called for research with different students who might face distinctive challenges and in responding to this call, we focus on the DBA

programme: This we suggest has a particular resonance with liminality given the nature of the students' journey and the challenges faced.

The DBA student occupies a space in-between two social states - or identities - as they journey toward becoming a researching professional: that is, the competent practitioner and the competent researcher. Arguably, the eventual conferment of the title of 'doctor' also indicates a movement from a lower to a higher status position. While a student, they are positioned in Van Genep's (1960) transitional phase which lies between phases of separation and incorporation. Clearly, when attending classes, students are physically *separated* from the familiarity of their daily organisational practices and often their home country. There is also an ongoing symbolic *separation* given their student status. Perhaps too, in simple terms, we can say that on completion of the programme students are incorporated into a research community. However, in contrast to Van Genep's (1960) linear passage through these three phases - and often seen in the case of full time students who have been the subject of previous studies discussed above- we find that the DBA student's experience is arguably more complex since the separation phase is never fully accomplished. Unlike, for example, Simpson et al's (2010) full time students who separate from earlier lives to embark on an MBA, DBA students are never completely separated from previous ways of being since they move back-and-forth between the unfamiliar classroom context and the familiar workplace and home contexts. Moreover, this oscillating movement extends over a prolonged period since the part-time DBA programme takes many years to complete.

In the research reported here, the fluctuating conditions of *separation* were found to amplify struggles of incoherence associated with the liminal space, as we shall see shortly (Douglas, 1966). Indeed, as Sambrook and Stewart (2007) observe, the highly competent and effective high status practitioner 'self' from within the workplace is contrasted sharply against a less confident and lower status 'self' in the classroom. The analysis suggests that difficulties in

accomplishing a neat separation makes the passage through the liminal space more challenging for the DBA student amplifying encounters with symbolic monsters (Turner, 1987) and thus moments of being stuck. Paying close analytical attention to these moments provided us with enhanced opportunities for understanding how they are negotiated, and which, as Wright and Gilmore (2012) contend, are shown to be central for the effective passage through the liminal space.

In an education context, such moments of being stuck have particular resonance with Meyer and Land's (2005) notion of threshold concepts: these are places in the curriculum where students get stuck but when grasped, allow students to access new understandings. They can be likened to a 'gateway' through which a student must pass in order to progress. Specifically such concepts are deemed to encompass five characteristics: being troublesome (unsettling); integrative (raising new patterns and connections); bounded (establishing boundaries of knowledge areas); irreversible (unlikely to be unlearned) and; transformative (shifting perception and action). Crucially too, they are associated with paradoxical qualities - they are both troublesome and potentially transformative (Wright and Gilmore, 2012). Threshold concepts, then, are initially troublesome since students perceive them as counterintuitive or alien (Perkins, 1999) and are therefore associated with unsettling feelings of confusion, doubt and frustration (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015). Put differently, they generate what Hawkins and Edwards (2015) termed 'monsters of doubt'. A key question which arises is *how* do students move beyond encounters with monsters of doubt to unleash threshold concepts' transformative promise? As Yip and Raelin (2011: 348) propose, "threshold concepts by themselves are but a catalyst for learning" and they call for research which examines *how* learners engage with threshold concepts to move forwards. Similarly, Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) observe that while threshold concepts are important, they are yet to have significant impact on management education. In the specific context of the DBA, understanding how

students' passage through the threshold can be facilitated is important since, if successful, possibilities for enhanced management practice also exist. Equally, today, success rates for DBA programmes remain an ongoing concern (Banarjee and Morley, 2013). The forthcoming analysis of students' own accounts begins to contribute to understandings of how monsters of doubt are handled within the DBA context and set against the unique challenges faced since separation from earlier ways of being is not clear-cut. We now turn to outlining our research approach before moving onto the main findings and selected illustrative quotes.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

This study draws upon the experiences of students enrolled on the UK DBA programme detailed earlier. Both authors had been heavily involved with teaching and supervision on the programme for many years and had noted numerous conversations with students suggestive of a rite of passage and challenges faced. This was further reinforced when reading students' reflective journals produced for assessment purposes at the programme end. With the permission of the students, this study draws upon 20 of the reflective accounts selected at random. They were authored by 18 males and 2 females, from a variety of countries including UK, USA, South Africa, and Greece. The students were practitioners holding a variety of senior management positions spanning private and public sector organisations.

### ***Diary method and limitations***

The reflective journals themselves 'rest' on a diary that students are expected to *begin at the start* of their DBA. Consistent with methodological understandings of diaries, a regular record of personal observations and experiences relating to their progress throughout their DBA studies is kept (Travers, 2011). Students are instructed to record events, thoughts, incidents and so on that appear important to *them and* as close to the time that they occur as

possible (Denzin, 1989). Further, guidance from faculty is minimal. Hence, they maintain qualitative forms of diaries which are of an open and unstructured nature and which privileges their own words (Ohly, et al 2010). At the end of the programme, they review and draw on these diaries to produce the final critical reflection of their development.

On one level, such diaries can be seen as meeting the interpretivist position which seeks “to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994: 118). Hence, we could suggest that these diaries provide researchers with one possible route for getting closer to capturing ‘life as it is lived’ (Bolger et al, 2003) and, in doing so, allow the scrutiny of unfolding processes so that we can consider questions of ‘how is that done?’: here, how does one negotiate the liminal space to move forwards and become a researcher? Equally, given that there is the intervening move whereby the students select material from their diaries to produce a final coherent account of their learning journey, we are granted a glimpse into what *they* deemed significant as they journeyed through their DBA.

However, we are also aware that the use of such empirical material potentially raises various issues. First, while students’ diaries record events as close to the time of occurrence as possible, they still report experiences after the event and not as lived (Author 2, 2003). Second, and as has been observed by others (Balogun et al 2003), DBA students were also often initially uncomfortable in their role as diarists which then presented other, associated issues and questions: For example, how open and engaged were they in producing their accounts? Discussions during the series of workshops, for example, found them expressing unease in writing in a more personal style. We feel we must accept this variance in openness and ease with reflective writing and linked to this issue we must also acknowledge that students may inadvertently self-censor material- here, it is an issue which is further complicated given that the final reflective piece is subject to formal assessment. Third, in the

production of their final reflections here, students select according to what they deem important at the end of the journey: this post-event rationalizing process may potentially gloss over the turmoil and challenges faced within the liminal space. Yet, as we shall see, it was also often just *these* experiences that they recorded and quoted from – indeed, their selection and reproduction of quotes from the original diary often conveyed a sense of depth or rawness of the experience at that moment, and which led us to initially ‘see’ a desperation on their part to grapple with a range of issues and challenges. Hence, while acknowledging these issues and potential limitations, the students’ reflective journals nevertheless provided extremely rich accounts of their own selected key moments of particular DBA experiences – with quotes from their original diaries offering salient insights into processes of becoming. Indeed, we would emphasise that observations made by the students themselves within their submitted journals also indicated the seriousness of effort applied to, and subsequent value attached to, the process of keeping a journal.

*“I think the most valuable use of the creative journal was its use as a therapeutic tool, where feelings and commitments were logged and used as a point of reference between experience and outcomes at certain times. The journal was catering to a useful way of letting off steam and freeing my mind”.*

### ***Analysis***

After an initial process of reading and re-reading the reflective journals, and set against our concern to privilege matters important to the students, themes emerged in a manner consistent with a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In our initial readings, we were struck by students’ repeated use of journey metaphors but importantly, this was often allied to references where they had become lost or stuck. Both authors not only independently noticed this but also a resonance between the journey metaphors and a sense of being in-between,

later formally conceptualised as journeying through a troublesome *liminal* space. Clearly too, what we notice and theorise is framed by what we bring to the empirical materials before us (Author 2, 2010) – here, it was our conversations with students noted earlier and a familiarity with the anthropological literature. Using the lens of liminality, then, the accounts were subjected to greater systematic analysis with our analytical interest geared upon understanding *how* students negotiated moments of being stuck in order to move forwards to become researchers. We later deployed NVivo software to formalise and organise our analysis. From this analytical process, three dominant *methods* emerged as being deployed by the students. When taken together, these methods enabled them to establish a ‘sense of fixedness’ so that their passage – movement - through the liminal space could proceed. So too, while we aim to remain as close to the accounts as possible, in line with our constructionist stance, we must acknowledge that the analytical work offered here is, of course, our ‘construction of the constructions of the actors one studies’ (Schwandt, 1994:118). Yet, we add that recent presentations of our analysis strongly resonated with our current DBA students and, in one small way, seemed to help them to make sense of their DBA experiences: This perhaps also provides a form of assurance of the credibility of the analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We now turn to this analysis.

### **Understanding the DBA as a Liminal Space**

*“My overall perception about the DBA is that it was exciting and influential, but was also a difficult renovation of my personality and a lonely journey to the world of knowledge.”*

As mentioned earlier, the journey metaphor littered students’ accounts of their DBA experiences and this is concisely illustrated in this opening quote. It also resonates with Ybema et al (2011) where this journey seemed to centrally involve intensive identity work as they travelled to a new place, depicted as “the world of knowledge” by the student above.

Further, and consistent with anthropological understandings of passage through a liminal space, the journal entry also highlights the simultaneously liberating and threatening nature of the space these students now occupy. Indeed, the accounts were found to evidence these rather paradoxical qualities as the next quote illustrates too:

*“The journey of the Doctorate was both richly rewarding and incredibly frustrating in equal measures...the... ‘journey’ has been rewarding, stimulating and challenging. There have been a number of false starts and wrong turnings along the way”.*

Clearly, the liberating opportunities of the DBA passage triumphed since all students had successfully completed their journey and become researchers, yet this was only made possible by the negotiation of numerous ‘wrong turnings’ or moments of getting lost or stuck along the way. It is here that we noticed and then systematically analysed the simultaneously troublesome or monstrous *and* transformative properties of threshold concepts. Indeed, supporting Wright and Gilmore (2012), the reflective journals suggested that the negotiation of moments of being stuck were critical to the successful passage through the liminal space. As the quote below succinctly illustrates, when students moved beyond encounters with monsters of doubt, possibilities for transformation of the ‘self’ were seemingly unleashed:

*“It [the reflective piece] records some frustrations which, with the benefit of hindsight, some of which the researcher would now like to see as key turning points in both professional and personal development.”*

Also consistent with Meyer and Land’s (2005) properties of threshold concepts, the accounts conveyed a strong sense that such changes in ‘self’ were both irreversible and transformational too:

*“Doing the research into diversity, I never thought or even looked at myself to be part of the problem....[now I understand] in order for the social organizations to move forward with*

*diversity, everyone has to first eliminate their own bias. This research helped to eliminate many of the biases that I still carried around with me over the years, by presenting new challenges to me at every turn. So, by [my thesis], I no longer wanted to prove that something existed, or explain why minorities still faced difficulties in the office, but instead, I was more concerned with trying to find a solution that would get everyone to coexist”.*

Set alongside their thesis- where the findings are detailed and substantiated- this comment is illustrative of a transformation, here, into understandings surrounding diversity which affects one’s sense of ‘self’ and which, we suggest, are unlikely to be easily unlearned. But *how* does such a transformation unfold? The next section offers a glimpse and identifies common moments where students became st(r)uck by monsters of doubt in the DBA liminal passage before outlining just how –through three methods -these were dealt with in order to move forwards to become researchers.

### **Being st(r)uck by monsters of doubt**

The moments of being stuck and where DBA students stood on the threshold of new understandings were varied and often very personal. Yet two broad threshold concepts were easily identified as particularly significant in the DBA context. Consistent with the troublesome qualities of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2005) both evoked significant negative emotion and thus gave rise to ‘monsters of doubt’ (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015). The first threshold concept related to research methodology, supporting Kiley and Wisker’s (2009) identification of facets of research knowledge in doctoral programmes as threshold concepts. As we see below, encounters with unfamiliar methodological perspectives and allied language elicited strong feelings of fear:

*“I recall the first seminars where the lecturers discussed different methodological perspectives – I was absolutely lost in all of the new terminology they were throwing at us. I*

*could not even pronounce some of the words which were pure tongue-twisters, let alone understand what they meant. This had to be one of the scariest times for me where I really felt well and truly 'lost' in it all."*

The analysis further suggested that the failure to grasp a threshold concept, here, research methodology and in particular a social constructionist understanding (which is encountered in preparation for Document 3), was made more difficult by the fluctuating conditions of *separation*. That is, an incoherence between a competent and successful 'self' in the workplace context and a less competent and failing 'self' in the DBA context. This is more explicitly illustrated next and where the latter context comes to be foregrounded and proved to be deeply unsettling:

*"The most interesting experience was when I submitted document 3.... marked as a fail. How could this be? My world collapsed as I had never had a fail in my whole career and I thought it was the end"*

When turning to the second threshold concept, as this quote also eludes to and which the next quote makes more explicit, intense emotions were also an inherent component of troublesome encounters with the allied need to *reflect critically* on practice, a central thread of this DBA programme:

*"I had a major shock during my first meeting with my DBA supervisors when one of them in response to my research proposal said 'I think you're racist!' I thought 'Me...racist?...I'm a British [ethnic minority group] myself who has experienced racism...how can I be racist?...how could he say that to me?'. I left that meeting feeling totally embarrassed and distraught".*

This student's highly charged and defensive reaction to a question posed in a supervisory meeting to stimulate reflection on current diversity practices suggests that the question was

interpreted as it may have been in the workplace context: as criticism or a failing (Sambrook and Stewart, 2008). The analysis suggests that often an incoherence between the workplace and the classroom context – and closely tied to a sense of identity - arose in such subtle and fleetingly glimpsed ways and which threatened their passage through the liminal space. This is also concisely illustrated in the following quote from another student, also indicating the central role of critical reflection:

*“Work and reading very soon provoked the surfacing of a dissonance between attitudes and behaviours: beliefs and actions at work, simply became incompatible with those beliefs and actions incorporated as a result of a deeper conceptualisation of the concepts of my study.”*

For the DBA student then, encounters with threshold concepts – here, methodology and critical reflection - were especially challenging given the peculiarity of movement in-and-out of the liminal space. Unlike more conventional encounters with liminality where earlier identities are relinquished in the separation phase (Turner, 1995), here various obligations also remained and hence, facets of those other identities required ongoing attention too (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Indeed, given our analysis, life before the DBA proved troublesome since it amplified incoherence between the developing researcher identity and other previously stable facets of the individual’s identity as we see in the next illustrative quote:

*“Personal difficulties,... played a role in encouraging reflective practice. Life events such as [referral to personal situation], a low grade on Document 2, adjusting to a new city, becoming a parent, tended to focus energy on internal processes of self-reflection. In addition, my personal difficulties with anxiety, doubt and struggling with one’s professional choice or not feeling competent stimulated a desire to be increasingly aware of one’s*

*approach to other managers with a deeper understanding and empathy for the difficulties presented.”*

For some, dealing with this incoherence and the challenges arising from the lack of a neat *separation* phase simply proved overwhelming and decisions to exit the programme arose. However, as is also evidenced in the example below, for others this incoherence stimulated heightened moments of reflection which seemed to manifest into key turning points during the liminal passage:

*“The fail and referral of document three was an awakening for me. It was an opportunity for me to reflect and decide whether I wanted to continue with the DBA process”.*

A crucial question which arises then is, *how* do encounters with monsters of doubt, evoked by threshold concepts, enable practitioners to become ‘other’, and to successfully passage through the liminal space when, as the quote below concisely indicates, monsters could simply prove overwhelming?

*“I thought that I had gone past my “human limits” after the submission of Document 2; however, the result was “Pass with substantial changes”*

### **Desperately Seeking Fixedness**

Our analysis highlights that successful negotiation of the monsters of doubt centred upon attempts to seek and establish fixedness, albeit momentarily. Put differently, to avoid being overwhelmed by monsters and hence move forwards across the liminal space to become researchers, paradoxically, students sought to stabilise/fix the ‘self’ and ultimately to (re) establish identity coherence. Three broad methods were found to be deployed in this endeavour, often with one or two being foregrounded: scaffolding; putting the past-to-work and bracketing.

## ***Scaffolding***

Our analysis suggested that scaffolding was an apt descriptor given students' reported accounts where they sought to steady the self (see also Author 2, 2005; Wood et al, 1976) by turning to key others also occupying the liminal space. Both supervisors and fellow students provided critical, if temporary, forms of such support. Yet, this was not without tension owing to the challenges of the DBA liminal space. First, and unsurprisingly as glimpsed below, supervisors provided an important form of scaffolding since, in their role as a 'host', they 'are one who has gone before' (Hawkins and Edwards 2015) and have faced similar monsters themselves during their own transition to a competent researcher. They were thus able to provide guidance through the dangers and uncertainty that were encountered when students became stuck as the next two typical illustrations indicate:

*“Downbeat and disheartened I convened an urgent meeting with my supervisory team and as a consequence inadvertently reached another important milestone in my doctoral journey”.*

*“I had to take these discussions to my specific area of research by discussing with my supervisors. The fear would subside as I understood their explanations which showed a lot of maturity and experience. I could move forward to the next stage with confidence and with a positive frame of mind”.*

These quotes enable a fleeting glimpse of how supervisors were deemed able to dispel monsters of doubt arising from threshold concepts and which subsequently facilitated their movement forwards. The first quote also conveys an urgency or *desperation* in turning to the supervisors suggestive of difficulties in managing that 'felt' discomfort. This kind of discomfort and allied desperation to resolve matters, if effective, also – momentarily – fixes a coherence across relational networks in order to go on. Yet, while supervisors were leant upon to lessen the discomfort, there were a number of instances where the support provided

actually ran counter to perceived needs. Indeed, some efforts to stabilise the 'self' through scaffolding actually enlarged monsters of doubt, and seemingly also caused further paralysis:

*"I believe now that I experienced anger and hostility because I felt that my identity as a friend, fellow worker and researcher was at stake. I remember that I attributed blame to my supervisor for this goal incongruence but I had to realise that this change was not intended to harm my identity; and as a result of this rational thought, my anger was muted and often directed elsewhere".*

In this instance, the form of scaffolding offered to build a viable 'self' by the supervisor was pushed against since it amplified feelings of incoherence which were projected back onto the supervisor. In one small way it exemplifies the struggle students face in living at the margins of the liminal space where 'rights' are few and expectations to obey others high (Turner, 1995). This is, arguably, exacerbated by students' higher status beyond the liminal space resulting in further struggles of identity incoherence. Indeed, it is because separation is not clear-cut that such struggles arise. In response to such incoherence too, as also highlighted by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003), the students often developed a heightened sense of belonging and togetherness with each other. Thus, their efforts to fix a viable self to 'go on' (Giddens, 1979) also frequently involved the mobilisation of fellow students as a second form of scaffolding:

*"The road travelled together was much easier to bear. As my eyes move to the top shelf in my office, the picture of my cohort [number] family smiles down on me as its members keep constant vigil".*

*"It was very reassuring to know that fellow members of the cohort experienced similar problems albeit that they were investigating very different areas. Knowing that a member of*

*the set was ploughing ahead was certainly encouraging and spurred me on to complete the relevant documents”.*

These were two typical quotes from two students which illustrate a comfort and reassurance generated from a turn to cohort members. Reading the journals, the comradeship of fellow students provided a *constant* in the *flux* of the liminal space and which, crucially, offered a scaffolding for the liminar ‘self’ and thus, provided the impetus for the student to move forwards. It is one taken-for-granted ‘method’ to fix while simultaneously embarking upon *becoming* ‘other’. Yet, the accounts also revealed a number of *early* instances where the scaffolding provided by these same peers was shaky and which enlarged feelings of inadequacy. Hence, deploying this method in the early days of the programme was not so seemingly straightforward:

*“At the beginning of the programme, I had the feeling that my fellow students had something additional; they were a step in front of me. This feeling stemmed from the fact that most of my fellow students were English and could visit the University and supervisors more often.... What is more, my active participation in the learning sets was not always unimpeded, since I was not feeling positive about my adequacy in the English language as well as methodological issues.”*

Consistent with Simpson et al (2010), the quote also highlights that liminality can be experienced differentially, and structures *outside* of the liminal space, here, nationalities were also at play. This points to the complex and contextually embedded aspect surrounding the use of such methods too. Indeed, historically and culturally established social structures for example - and when observed - reach into the liminal space and come to disrupt notions of egalitarianism thought to characterise the in-between space (Turner, 1995): Hence, particular

others may, or may not, provide the necessary scaffolding. Consequently, alternative methods to fix or stabilise the self were therefore also important as we see next.

### *Putting the past to work*

The analysis identified frequent referrals to individuals' histories in terms of deeply held beliefs, previous educational experiences and occupational episodes. In many ways they were engaged in 'putting history-to-work' (Author 2, 1996, 2003) and crucially, this offered an important means to steady the 'self' since they fixed *a* sense of coherence *across time* whereby the 'past', albeit, in selective and textual form, was *integrated* into *this moment* (present/liminal space) and with the prospect (future) of emerging as a fully-fledged 'doctor'. It is another taken for granted *method* which allowed the student to deal with the incoherence of liminality:

*"Due to my scientific background I originally took a positivist view of events and considered that research could or should only be empirical. I liked to be able to reduce everything to numbers – you knew where you were with numbers. Numbers never lie."*

*"I do feel passionate about diversity, it's a topic that I often discuss with friends and family, and more importantly it's a topic that I am mature enough to discuss now. I'm passionate, because I feel cheated by the way I grew up in [country] and this passion has fuelled me to move forward in life, and pursue my current research."*

As glimpsed in the two student extracts above, this 'work' invited the past into the liminal space and creatively drew upon 'it' to fix coherence. As we see here too, aspects of the past which evoke positive feelings, for example a sense of security or passion, are mobilised and in ways which seemingly help to settle the 'self' and propel the 'self' forwards: A history recast for present purposes provides assurance amidst the flux of becoming. Drawing on

aspects of the past, then, offers a ‘substance’ and thus a means of fixing the self which paradoxically, was necessary in order to move forwards.

We come to glimpse the ways in which our past ‘is immanent in the present...[and where] each situation or state always necessarily incorporates or absorbs events of the past” (Chia, 1999: 220) and here, the ways in which our past, creatively mobilised, *enables* our becoming. We suggest that it is through our abilities to use our past as a ‘flexible resource’ (Author 2, 2003) in the present which allows for new possibilities to become ‘other’ but also here, mitigates the absence of neat separation. The illustrative quote below further conveys this complex work through using this taken-for-granted method: It suggests that selection of aspects from a ‘past’, here in terms of ways to discover definitive answers, provided initially a form of ‘safe’ guidance but when flexibly set against new thinking in the present could then provide ‘endless possibilities’. Hence, while seemingly *separating* from previous ways which “shr[ank] the world”, there is a sense of connecting to it too:

*“Growing up we build a mental map of rules, norms and assumptions to guide us through life and keep us safe, but in doing so inadvertently shrink the world.....An interpretivist, or phenomenological paradigm could bring research to life as it opened out endless possibilities and removed a deep rooted school-taught psychological fear of not finding the right answer.”*

Yet while undoubtedly the past enabled students’ passage through the liminal space in ways glimpsed here, it also simultaneously could ‘work’ to *constrain* their becoming. So while Chia (1999: 220) has observed too, the “past...creates potentialities for the future [it]...constrains it” as well. This therefore gave rise to a third method deployed by the students: ‘bracketing’.

## ***Bracketing***

Bracketing we found to be a contextually fine-tuned judgement where students made *absent* specific elements of the past in order to fix a sense of coherence to allow them to move forwards. Indeed, it was due to the lack of a neat separation in the DBA context which necessitated such work. More specifically, the analysis of the reflective journals suggested that students sought to deliberately and temporarily suspend or *bracket* identity work on certain aspects of the ‘self’: This then mitigated the apparent experienced discomfort of identity incoherence evoked in the liminal space as the next two student quotes convey. In sum, in order to fix the emergent researcher identity - they needed to make absent other facets of their past identity:

*“I had to give up a lot to complete my DBA. Working full-time and being a newly-wed whilst trying to complete the DBA was just proving too difficult and it was taking its toll on me. That is where [my partner] really saved me and said ‘Look, just give up working full-time and I’ll support us while you finish this’. I just see [my partner] as a true God send for me in every way. To allow me to quit working full-time to realise my dream of becoming a doctor was the most generous thing ever.”*

*“I was doing this study in my own free time sacrificing other personal activities and family obligations as a brother, husband and father”.*

Here we glimpse a sense of a desperately sought and cherished ‘space’ which needed to be created and which was undertaken through bracketing: It was one method which allowed a foregrounding of intensive identity work to assemble and fix a researcher identity. Notably, they needed to be given permission to bracket other *obligations* - which are the cornerstones of ‘doing’ identity- so that they could concentrate on fulfilling their obligations as a researcher. So, to do so, they bracket what they once did or were and in this small way, a

*form of separation* from the past is underway. We explicitly glimpse this in the first of the two quotes above and is further illustrated below where efforts to fix a coherent sense of self relied on being able to ‘bracket’ and thus carve ‘space’ from those outside of the liminal space. Here, they are working to separate from spouses and employers:

*“A key factor in my progressing this far with the DBA has been the active support of my family and my institutions. My family have created space for me to pursue this area of study and research by giving up time with me and in my partner’s case putting on hold a number of developments she wished to follow.”*

As our third taken-for-granted method, bracketing enabled them to suspend established relational webs and thus, obligations. This notion of obligations and the inherent ‘gifting’ or being given permission to bracket also resonates with anthropological studies: Rites of passage rest on suspending some obligations and evoking others. Yet, here, these suspensions were not passively given but had to be actively created. Furthermore, such suspensions were ontologically *illusory* since life goes forward - an understanding which students were only too well aware of since they noted that suspensions could also potentially evoke new monsters in terms of what might ‘become’ of those facets of their identity which were now bracketed.

*“Although I tried not to let study encroach on weekends, there have been Sundays when I have guiltily left my family to their own devices, while I spent a day in my office, working on the documents”.*

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Accomplishing coherence within ‘the self’ during and at the close of the DBA journey we see as a mammoth undertaking where efforts to ‘fix’ actually furnished the basis for movement to learn and become ‘other’ – here, a competent researcher. The empirical materials analysed

offered us one rare source of insight into the experiences of the increasingly significant and yet still under researched DBA student (Banerjee and Morley, 2013). This forms the basis for the first contribution: through drawing on reflective journals generated by students themselves, the analysis discerned that the passage through the DBA programme had particular resonance with liminality's notion of being 'betwixt and between' identity positions as practitioners journeyed towards becoming researchers. We therefore add to the growing body of literature which draws upon anthropological studies of liminality to elucidate understandings of management learning (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015; Simpson et al, 2010, Yip and Raelin, 2011) by offering insights into the DBA context. Notably in this context, the journey of *becoming* was made more difficult since the student was never completely *separated* from previous 'ways of being' since they moved back and forth between the unfamiliar classroom context and familiar workplace and home contexts over a prolonged period of time. While the literature conceptualises linear movement between separation, transition, incorporation phases of liminality, for our students this movement was never clear-cut or linear, notably between separation and transition phases. These fluctuating conditions of separation amplified struggles of identity incoherence associated with liminality (Douglas, 1966) and, importantly demonstrated the ways in which the pre-liminal 'leaks' into the liminal space. Fundamentally, it reinforces a position that *becoming* is a continuous rather than discontinuous process. These initial analytical observations then gave rise to two further contributions.

Our second and related contribution lies in developing understandings of moments of being stuck or 'threshold concepts'. The amplification of struggles of identity incoherence noted above allowed us to extend understandings of threshold concepts in three ways. First, our empirical analysis sheds light on the relationship between threshold concepts and monsters of doubt by illustrating that monsters of doubt are an integral and embodied aspect of threshold

concepts. This stands in contrast to Hawkins and Edwards (2015) conceptual analysis which proposed that threshold concepts are tools which can be used to grapple with monsters of doubt and which suggests a separation of the two notions. Second, our analysis illustrates the ways in which engagement with threshold concepts in this context are inherently linked to identity work. This suggests that threshold concepts can extend beyond transformation in academic discipline to transformation in identity. This broader conceptualisation of transformation seems especially pertinent in this context and supports work which sees management education as an identity workspace (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010; Warhurst, 2011). Indeed, the inherent links to identity work make negotiation of threshold concepts especially challenging for the DBA student and, for some, failure to pass through the threshold means programme exit- arguably a more serious consequence than a lack of deep learning identified in other learning contexts (Davies and Mangan, 2007).

Third, and perhaps most crucially, our analysis identified *how* monsters of doubt so integral to threshold concepts are negotiated, here in terms of the three taken-for-granted methods- scaffolding, putting the past to work and bracketing. These, while found to be given differential emphasis, were nevertheless deployed by all the students in this study. All three methods, uniquely combined and emphasised, worked to mitigate monsters of doubt by stabilising the self - a momentary fixing - in order to move forwards to become researchers. We suggest that these methods used in combination and fleetingly glimpsed across their reflective accounts here, enabled the students to refashion a coherent sense of self during the ebb and flow of the DBA programme. Crucially, it enabled them to deal with their unique condition where they *never fully separate* from their past as such. Through scaffolding, students seemingly steadied the 'self' through fixing a sense of coherence *across* their relational networks; Next, through flexibly and creatively putting the past-to-work they further fix this coherence *across* time and; through 'bracketing' they also simultaneously

suspended particular aspects of their past identities so that they could fix a workable- for present purposes- liminal identity. Doing so, produced a coherence *across* other various 'live' facets of their identities. These emergent coherent senses of 'self' were, of course, necessarily temporary but ones which worked to reduce the discomfort of incoherence, allowing the student to 'go on' and learn (Giddens, 1979).

Turning to our third contribution, this relates to wider discussions on processes of becoming: we suggest that the three methods identified here and which allowed students to negotiate monsters of doubt and hence move forwards, all centrally enable fixing a coherent sense of 'self'. This suggests that paradoxically in order to move forwards and become 'other', we need to fix, even if momentarily. Processual accounts of identity work which draw upon a *becoming* ontology have gained prominence but in developing their position they have arguably tended to overemphasise movement and change. For example, Chia (2010: 35) proposes that 'change is not an exception or transitional stage and stability the norm; rather, the opposite is true'. We would agree but add that we should not underestimate the importance of individuals' needs to fix- make stable- the ontological flux (albeit temporarily) in order to continue the movement forwards. Fixing mitigates uncomfortable emotions or monsters- arising from the ongoing ontological flux *just enough* to allow one to 'go on'. While monsters may re-appear in different forms in the future (Thanem, 2006), fixing temporarily tames current monsters *enough* to facilitate becoming.

Our work also has a number of implications for management educators. The insights into the specific nature of the 'monsters' faced in the DBA context provides an important starting point for educators. As Land et al (2005:8) suggest, educators cannot "second guess where students are coming from or what their uncertainties are". We have also illustrated the ways in which students attempt to negotiate these monsters by seeking to fix and have drawn attention to three taken-for-granted methods utilised. Critically, at moments when students

are seeking to fix, external attempts to move students forwards may prove counterproductive and heighten moments of being stuck. Educators might seek to consolidate such students' taken-for-granted fixing efforts through, for example, the simple notion of framing the DBA as a passage through a liminal space. Indeed, perhaps, in one small way and given our own personal experiences of doing so, sharing empirical research such as that reported here can constitute one 'resource' to draw on and to understand they are not alone, and to reconceptualise what they are facing. Consistent with Hawkins and Edwards (2015), this can normalise the inevitable difficulties of learning which can bolster completion rates.

One other final point, when stepping back even further, is that the reflective journals are themselves an important artefact *and means* of fixing a coherent sense of self both during the DBA journey and at its conclusion. Indeed, as others have noted, reflective writing offers one means through which we become (Richardson 1997) and clearly, for the DBA student, the sense of 'self' – a competent researching professional - which they seek to fix in the final reflective account is only granted legitimacy through the formal assessment process which then allows the student to go forth and be incorporated into a research community. Yet, as the comment below illustrates, students are only too aware that such fixedness- while desperately sought- is necessarily temporary too:

*“Despite the slightly giddy feeling of relief and exultation, as I near the end of this particular stage of my journey, the DBA has taught me a sense of personal and intellectual humility and an acute awareness of the fact that my personal learning journey is actually far from over”*

We too are not beyond this ontological 'work' and acknowledge that this paper is our attempt to not only advance an understanding of students' efforts to 'fix' in order to progress through the DBA but also to simultaneously 'fix' our own identities as researchers. So too our own “personal learning journey” continues and given the issue of low DBA completion rates, what

of those who began their journeys with similar feelings of hope and trepidation, but did not complete the programme? Are there, for example, unique monsters which threaten particular individuals/groups given their gender and ethnicity?

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