

Threshold Concepts and Postgraduate Struggles: The Development of a Framework to Support Learners through Doctoral Liminality

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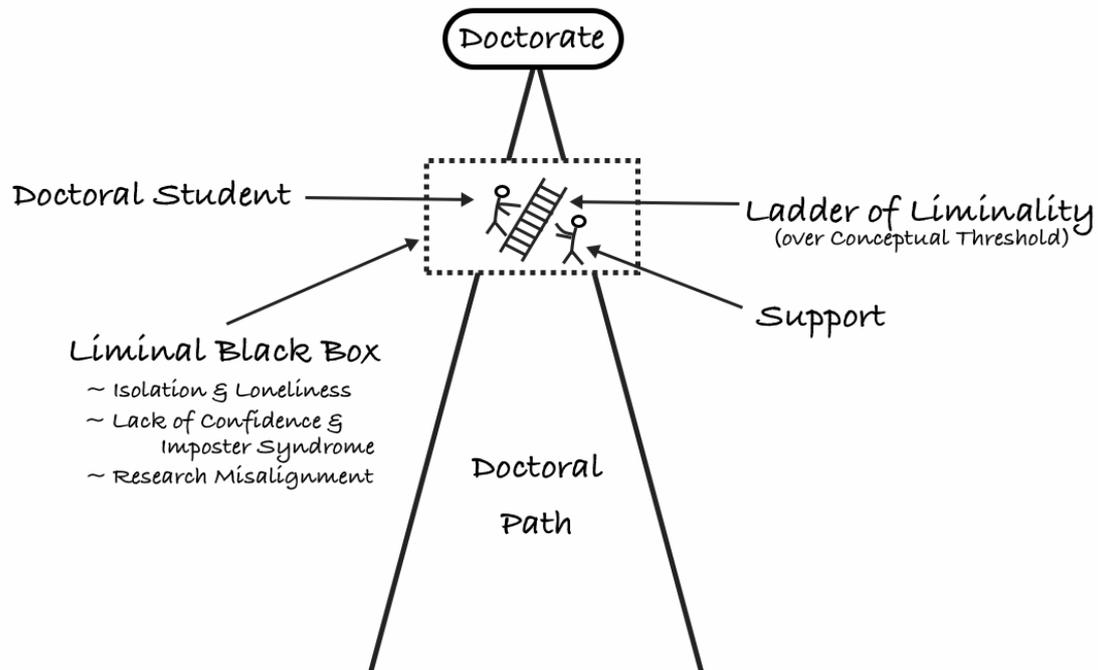
Doctoral researchers, doctoral students, doctoral candidates, postgraduates—whatever term is used for the student en route to the doctorate—there exists a certain similarity in the process of doctorateness, commonly related to making an original contribution to one’s field (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). This at times involves the crossing of a threshold, a “portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” that “represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1). The notion of a transformed worldview commonly accompanying this has developed into the landscape of doctoral education, (Keefer, 2013; Kiley, 2009; Kiley & Wisker, 2010; Wisker et al., 2010). This expansion can include understanding and explaining conceptual framework, the ability to engage in a solid review of the literature, and even the experience of ontological or epistemological shifts while along the doctoral journey.

It was at this junction that the notion of doctoral liminality became the focus of a study in itself (Keefer, 2013). Deriving from anthropology, a liminal state is a period of transition during a rite of passage, that point where an identity shift occurs—the person who entered the rite is no longer the same, nor have they yet transitioned into their new life as a result of completing their rite (Turner, 2011; van Gennep, 1960). While a doctoral rite of passage will be very personal based on the context and experiences of the learner, similarities may be noted. Regardless of discipline, nationality, age, type of doctorate, or any other demographic qualifier, liminal experiences fell into at least one of three thematically distinct, though related, categories. These include a lack of confidence related to impostor syndrome of not being good enough, a sense of loneliness and isolation, and research misalignment between the paradigmatic or methodological perspectives of the learner and institution (Keefer, 2013).

It is striking that the periods of liminality often end suddenly with an Aha! moment—a eureka or metaphoric light bulb of clarity suddenly illuminating the way—enveloping the doctoral learner with a sense that something was different; the threshold was crossed. Each passed through this difficult and murky period, a Liminal Black Box of personal challenges having to be faced in one’s own way. Yet, they did not pass through doctoral liminality all alone. Each one had some support in this dark period, some actant that helped support them through their liminal periods—supervisors, friends, family, and even theories themselves. Of importance to note, none of these could walk the path in proxy for the postgraduate. They could only provide scaffolding for or hold the Ladder; each participant had to navigate their own paths and climb the Ladder of Liminality and in turn complete their own studies.

This theory of Doctoral Liminality, and especially the Ladder of Liminality, may be a useful frame to understand some of the struggles along the doctoral journey, especially the individual’s need to walk the solitary path of original contribution to one’s field, though always with some support along the way.

Figure 5.1 Doctoral Liminality



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