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# DECONSTRUCTING THE GRADUATE SEMINAR: CREATING A DESIGN TYPOLOGY

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*Talent development through innovative graduate education is a primary focus of national and international governments and their university funding agencies, and a contested construct. This ethnographic study examines current Canadian English- and French-language graduate seminar design and teaching practices in faculties of education. A series of interconnected discernible characteristics of graduate seminar design and teaching practices are illustrated on a Cartesian plane, where the (x) axis provides a continuum from professor-led to student-led activities and the (y) axis provides a continuum from knowledge advancement to knowledge application. Implications for talent development through innovative graduate education are discussed.*

Keywords: Graduate seminar; Design; Teaching practices; Knowledge advancement; Knowledge application

## CONTEXT

Talent development and creation of robust cultures of innovation in institutes of higher education are key foci in the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's 2013 - 2016 priority plan (SSHRC, 2013). For more than a decade, talent development through graduate education has been a social and economic priority across Canadian and international contexts (Costes & Stalter, 2010; Nahal, 2007). A 2003 European Union (EU) ministerial *communiqué* directed EU countries to 2015. In Preciado Babb, Takeuchi, and Lock (Eds.). *Proceedings of the IDEAS: Designing Responsive Pedagogy*, pp. 1-10. Werklund School of the Education, University of Calgary.

“increase the role and relevance of research into technological, social and cultural evolution and to the needs of society” through increased provision of high quality graduate education (Hopbach, 2010, p. 6). The Council of Graduate Schools work undertaken by 27 Canadian, Australian, Chinese, European, and American representatives resulted in the nine *Banff Principles* for improving the quality of graduate education globally (Nahal, 2007). In 2010 the *Commission on the Future of Graduate Education in the United States* declared that “we must invest in educating more of our population at the graduate level to ensure our capacity to innovate and to secure our intellectual leadership into the future” (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service, 2010, p. iii). As universities across the globe increase their provision of graduate programs, pressure to attract, recruit, fund, and successfully support talent development intensifies; therefore, we need to know more about our graduate teaching practices.

The graduate seminar, despite being a perennial teaching practice implemented on virtually every Canadian campus, has not been sufficiently examined. Even the purpose of graduate education is marked by tensions between knowledge advancement and knowledge application (Auten, 2012; Levkoe, Brail, & Danieri, 2014). Contradictory indicators abound in defining just what graduate seminar teaching is or ought to be.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Our search of relevant literature returned a range of books, articles, and dissertations, almost all of which were researcher-practitioner accounts of studying outcomes of particular interventions in their own teaching practices within a single seminar. In French-language literature we found a single, non-peer reviewed book that included a clear definition of a graduate seminar. Tournier (1981) defined a graduate seminar as being made up of five to fifteen students, their professor, and

possibly an external expert, who collectively explore a given topic. She described the seminar as beginning with a presentation from a recent research project or a synthesis of current research. The purpose of the presentation is to spark a moderated discussion in order to critique received knowledge and advance thought.

Our English-language literature sample returned a single, peer-reviewed typology of graduate activities, and a comparable non-peer reviewed typology (Jaques, 2000). Steen, Bader, and Kurbin (1999) posited four types of graduate seminar activities: (1) professor-led lectures, (2) professor-led discussions, (3) student-led discussions, and (4) student-led read-and-present sessions, which they argue are often enacted in various combinations within any given seminar. Steen et al.'s article appeared in a special issue of *Teaching Sociology* with a series of response articles. Response papers identify inaccuracies (Eisenberg, 1999) and unsubstantiated assumptions (Maurer 1999; Schwartz & Tickamyer, 1999). Each of these critiques address the lack of evidence, or as Schwartz and Tickamyer frame the problem, as having developed a typology grounded no more firmly than on "impressionistic data based on [personal and professional] experiences" (1999, p. 181). These critiques can be held to a similar standard as these response papers also draw upon personal and professional reflections, which are retrospectively aligned with literature. While the typology is problematic, it provides an initial backdrop against which to examine alternatives.

A focus of design theory and practice is purposeful scaffolding of learning activities for knowledge construction, application, and advancement (Parchoma, 2004; Power, & St. Jacques, 2015). It has been argued that the complexity applying design theory to graduate teaching practice can lead to defaulting to "'commonsense' rather than theoretically informed designs" (Conole, Dyke, Oliver,

& Seale, 2004, pp. 17-18). However, there is a dearth of supporting evidence for this claim (Eisenberg, 1999; O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawtham, & Zammit, 2009).

## **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

Diversity in perceptions of purposes served in teaching and learning contexts reflect “fundamental differences in assumptions about the nature of knowledge, knowing, and knowers, and consequently about what matters” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). Gumpert (1990) posits that value attributions of graduate students’ knowledge are made in relation to the enterprise(s) a body of knowledge serves. Graduate students’ engagement in practices that serve particular knowledge enterprises can be valued differently by internal (student, professor, university administrator) and external (society, government, industry) stakeholders (Krause, 2012; Vidovich, 2001). As meaning and significance ascribed to graduate seminars are socially constructed, we situate our inquiry in sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theories of teaching and learning (Engeström, 2009) are underpinned by tenets based on how teachers and learners, as social beings, experience teaching and learning through discursive and enacted practices (Ratkić, 2007).

## **THE STUDY**

In order to understand how two of Canada’s major cultural-linguistic groups organize graduate seminars, our small-scale ethnographic study examined campus-based graduate teaching practices at one western Canadian English-language faculty of education and one eastern Canadian French-language faculty of education. The study included six participants at each site. Our overarching research question was, “What are the current designs and practices of French- and English-language seminar in Canada?” Data included syllabi, seminar observations, and interviews.

Data analysis was conducted in a six-phase cycle: compiling, disassembling, reassembling,

interpreting, visualizing, and concluding. This data analysis cycle allowed us to identify patterns of discernible characteristics of graduate seminar teaching practices.

## **FINDINGS**

As our findings are from a small-scale study, they must be seen as preliminary. Given that limitation, we found evidence of interconnected discernable characteristics of graduate seminar design and teaching practices. Discernable *contextual* characteristics include student enrolments from varied academic programs (for example, PhD, MEd) and professors' associated perceptions of the purposes of specific graduate seminars (knowledge advancement or knowledge application). Discernable *didactique/pedagogical* characteristics include the frequencies of professor-led activities (for example, lectures, presentations, question and answer sessions, etc.), and student-led activities (student-led read and present sessions, student-led discussions, etc.). A third discernable characteristic is continuity (specialization seminars) or diversity (interdisciplinary seminars). Figure 1 presents our findings in a Cartesian plane that illustrates four interconnected patterns discernable graduate seminar design and teaching characteristics.

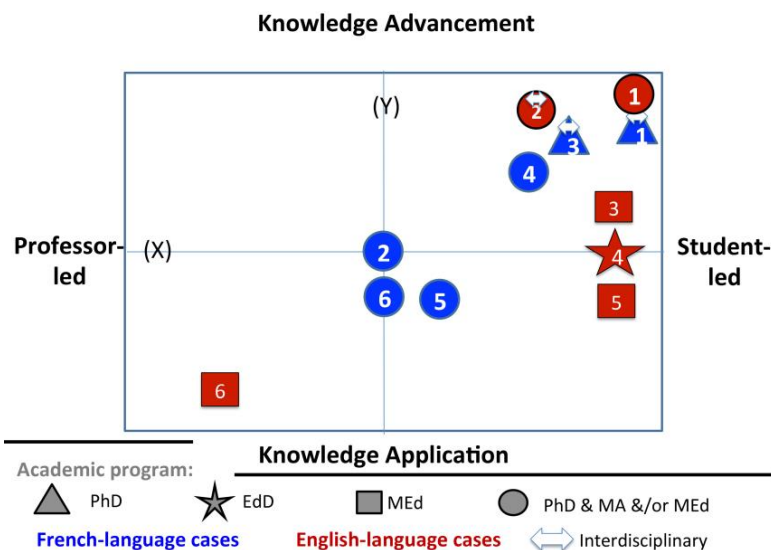


Figure 1: Interrelated discernable characteristics.

## DISCUSSION

While Canadian Council of Ministers of Education (2007) statement on quality assurance has six overarching graduate competencies, it also clearly distinguishes among knowledge advancement and application expectations based on degree type. It was not surprising to find that seminars designed for PhD seminars focused on student-led activities, directed toward knowledge advancement (See also: Fejes, Johansson, & Dahlgren, 2005) or that the EdD seminar focused on student-led activities that acknowledged “the professional turn” (Levkoe, Brail, & Daniere, 2014) through designed opportunities for both knowledge advancement and knowledge application to real-world problems. Interdisciplinary seminars, regardless of enrolment, consistently provided student leadership activities directed toward knowledge advancement.

Notable variations were evident in English-language seminars solely designed for MEd students, where designed activities ranged from a strongly professor-led approach to support students

develop marketable job skills (Auten, 2012) to a strongly student-led approach to both knowledge advancement and application (Levkoe, Brail, & Daniere, 2014). Perhaps, the most intriguing cluster of cases are the French-language, mixed-enrolment seminars nearest the intersection of the (x) professor-led to student-led and (y) knowledge-advancement to knowledge-application axes where professors designed activities that incrementally moved from professor to student leadership. Further research is needed to better understand how graduate seminar designs and practices may be influenced by academic traditions, program orientations, and enrolments.

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