

# Scholarship in Nursing: how can Ph.D. education contribute to its development?

M. Grypdonck, R.N., Ph.D.

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## Defining Scholarship

Defining scholarship is not easy and perhaps impossible. Scholarship is not a theoretical construct such as anxiety or coping. It is not a natural entity either. It is a programmatic concept. It is not a concept used not to explain something but to bring about a desired state of affairs. In this, it resembles other concepts such as professionalism.

What constitutes excellence and scholarship can only be defined by agreement. The temptation however, when defining such concepts is to do it in such a way that the definition fits the position one takes or the point one wants to prove. That process is illustrated f.i. in articles about nursing as an art and a science. “Is nursing an art?” is the question seemingly raised. Subsequently art is defined in such a way as to fit nursing and next the author claims to have proven that nursing is an art.

With scholarship, the same is likely to happen. We consider certain characteristics important to the development of nursing, or of nursing science. Subsequently, we define scholarship in a way that it represents these characteristics and next we claim to have proven that these characteristics are important because they constitute scholarship and there can be no doubt that scholarship is important.

Scholarship pertains to intellectual capacities. The origin of the word certainly refers to that. And at present we only use it when these capacities are present in such a degree that the person testifies of having reached excellence.

## Characteristics of Scholarship at Post Ph.D. Level.

When identifying the characteristics of scholarship, we are looking for excellence in (the use of) intellectual capacities. We can identify positive characteristics and negative characteristics. The positive characteristics are the behaviors the real scholar shows. The negative behaviors are the ones he or she does not show. They are the opposite of what one would expect a scholar to do.

An important characteristic of scholarship is thoroughness. The work of the scholar is rooted in and manifests in depth knowledge, in depth search and research. Of every sentence scholars write, of every sentence they speak, they have asked themselves whether it is really true. Scholars have a profound and broad knowledge of their domain. They possess it, is a phrase we use in Dutch. Scholars do not copy and paste. Their knowledge is lived knowledge, embodied knowledge. They know, not only with their head but also with their guts. They live with their domain of study. They wake up with it; they work with it while waiting for the train, when taking a shower. They are busy with it, without being occupied by it. They master it.

The depth of their knowledge enables scholars to make links to other knowledge, to practice situations, to real life events. They make associations from what they see or what is said to what they know, associations based on similarities between concepts, before these have been made explicit. And the associations fit. The similarities are real, not fake. They are based on the implicit knowledge of the characteristics of the concepts that are not immediately obvious. They can jump to conclusions, skipping steps. But they jump in the right direction and the conclusions are correct. They have this presumption of the unachieved synthesis (*la présomption de la synthèse inachevée*) as a French philosopher calls it. Their work does not show signs of superficiality, they do not quote wrongly, they look up original sources. They study cited references, and when the meaning of something is not clear, they go to the original source. (We teach this to our students, but the nursing literature shows that it is often not done).

Real scholars know the boundaries of their knowledge. They know that so much more is to be known, and that makes them humble. However, realizing that there is much more to know does not paralyze them. Their claims are provisional, and they are convinced that there are people who know better. That makes it possible for them to learn from others, to listen and to learn, to colleagues, to students, to nurses and to patients. The scholars know that others know what they do not, not because they themselves know so little, but because different perspectives may lead to discoveries one could not make from another viewpoint. Real scholars know to listen especially to practitioners. They consider practice a source of knowledge with its own character, with its own merits. Not that practitioners are better informed or that seeing things would be more valuable than thinking about them. Practice is a unique source of knowledge because – if properly reflected upon – acting establishes a different relationship to reality than thinking about it.

Scholars never pretend to know more than they do. They do not need to consider ideas deviant from their own as ridiculous, stupid or mistaken. They examine differences and try to interpret them.

Scholars produce new thoughts. They do not limit themselves to what someone else has said or thought. They use theory to advance their own thinking, and not to stay within its limits. They try to discover whether what was said by others can stand up to criticism, to empirical data and want to develop what is already known further. They are not content with conforming what others have written, said or think to have proven.

### **Conditions for the Development of Scholarship**

Scholarship can only develop if certain conditions are fulfilled. These conditions pertain both to the person and to the intellectual climate in which he/she works or lives.

Scholarship requires good intellectual capabilities. Without these, a Ph.D. student will never develop into a scholar. The intellectual abilities are necessary to analyze, to synthesize and to create. In the second place to become a scholar, requires passion. A passion to discover and a passion to contribute. Without both these characteristics, potential scholars will not be able to stick to the matter, to endure what needs to be endured, to make the efforts needed, not to engage in what is attractive but deviates them from their route.

Contribution can be to mankind, as in the case of the scholar who wants to improve the fate of patients, to the profession or the discipline, or to knowledge. I think it does not really matter as long as there is passion. Scholarship requires freedom. Freedom to pursue what is interesting. Freedom to pursue roads before one knows that they really lead anywhere.

Scholarship cannot develop in a climate of production, where the fruit of intellectual work is counted in units of publication, without paying attention to quality, where the doctrine of least publishable units is practiced, reducing what one has thought to (almost) irrelevant messages, where impressions one makes on others is more valued than what has truly been discovered.

### **Developing Scholarship**

Development of scholarship starts long before Ph.D. education. I am convinced it starts in Kindergarten. A friend of my son, at that age, visited with us and asked me something about the clock. I explained it to him and he told me that he had not understood, but that it did not really matter. He would learn it later in school, he told me. I thought that boy will never become a scholar, and indeed, he did not. Already at the age of Kindergarten, his natural curiosity had been curtailed. Secondary school plays a decisive role in the development of scholarship. Intellectual capacities are formed there and students learn to look deeper and to try to understand, or they do not.

When at the end of the sixties it became apparent that the Soviet Union had almost won the race into space, the Americans asked themselves: what does Iwan know that Johnny does not. The quality of secondary education was examined to see how the situation could be changed. Scholarship can only develop in people having the capabilities to do so, and if we want to be effective in developing scholarship in Ph.D. students, we should select them. Classical measures of academic achievement might not be the adequate ones, because they may reflect the desire to do what one is asked to do and be the fruit of external motivation rather than of internal motivation. Really intelligent students often do not get excellent scores in school, because they learn more than they study. They devote their energy to what is important not to what is asked of them. They go off on roads they are not requested to take, and do things that they are not asked to do and hence are not translated in marks.

In Master's and Ph.D. education, teachers who are scholars are necessary. Not all need to be, but there need to be several. There is more involved than role modeling, although that is important too. Real scholars give the students the joy of studying. At real scholars, you can marvel. Teaching by scholars gives rise to esthetic feelings: the beauty of scholarship. Real scholars as teachers impress in the students the consciousness that there is much more to know and that apparently there is a great joy in knowing and in using that knowledge. The students discover the limits of their knowledge; they discover that they are only at the beginning. In several universities in the Netherlands, master classes have been introduced into the Problem Based Learning to achieve that effect.

I personally believe that writing papers may be destructive to scholarship, at least when they are based on literature, rather than on one's own investigations or practice. Information stored in papers seldom becomes living and lived knowledge. Moreover the students learn that there should be a source for everything they say and think, and once this source is found, the fact that someone has said it before apparently is sufficient to consider it as true. Once someone has published an idea, even without adequate argumentation, it becomes warranted to say the same.

In the same vein we need to be very worried about the negative effects of Evidence Based Medicine and Evidence Based Practice may have on the development of scholarship. If one is allowed to say or even to think only what has been proven - not the correct interpretation of EBP, but nonetheless one that is prevalent in certain circles - there is no room for creative thoughts and bold conjectures, necessary for the advancement of knowledge and the development of scholarship.

Role modeling is one of the processes that play a role in the development of scholarship. The students, in observing their scholarly teacher, mentor or supervisor can decide what they want to do or want to become, and what they want to avoid. In order to be a role model, the scholar needs to be valued as a person. Indeed, role modeling requires processes of identification, and a person will not identify with someone exhibiting characteristics or demonstrating values that he or she does not share or appreciate.

One of the necessary conditions and strategies is to allow the Ph.D. student to study in depth a specific domain. How large or narrow it should be is in my view not all that important. The depth is more decisive. To become a scholar, the Ph.D. student needs to feel that he/she has the grasp of a certain domain. A domain in which he/she can discuss with the real experts in the field. That supposes that time for reading and study is allowed and taken far beyond what is needed to complete a Ph.D. thesis. When Ph.D.-ers are approached in a calculative way (what do I invest, and what do we get out of it?) this is one of the most threatened aspects. Developing scholarship requires long discussions with the Ph.D. students, far beyond what is necessary for supervision. The supervisor should give from her own plenitude to the Ph.D. student. She or he will be rewarded when, as scholarship does develop, the discussions with the student become

more discussions between peers than between Master and Student. I do think a supervisor can not contribute much to the development of scholarship if he/she is only supervising the methodology. In Europe, these situations are not rare.

Discussions with supervisors are of utmost importance in the development of scholarship. In my view, they are the most important tools, perhaps because I use it to a great extent. Discussions with supervisors serve several purposes. They allow the Ph.D. candidate to exercise his or her intellectual skills, especially if the discussion takes place at the borderline of what is known. The Ph.D. student needs to use all he/she possesses to further the discussion. In the second place, it provides the student with models. He/she discovers how problems can be approached, how to take them further, what it means to be careful, to *really* examine, to put into question cherished thoughts and to examine whether they can be maintained. A third benefit is that the student, in these situations, can gain self-confidence. They are worthwhile exercises in defending ones ideas not beyond the border of what is warranted, but not giving them up at the first resistance. And the Ph.D. student can also learn that, as a scholar, it is not important to win a discussion, but to come closer to the truth. At least, if his/her supervisor is a true scholar and demonstrates this behavior.

Most important for the development of scholarship, however, is that the Ph.D. student walks through life as if it were an unending qualitative study. In my opinion this attitude and capacity is the most decisive in the development of scholarship.

Walking through life as if it were a qualitative study in the first place implies open attentiveness. Qualitative researchers not only do not defend their ideas against refuting evidence - something no researcher should do. They are also open to the unexpected. What they observe, what is said to them, what happens when they are present, is registered in their minds, and by putting it in context, analyzed, relating it to other observations, and made sense of. Provisional sense. Provisional in that other occurrences can cast doubt on the interpretation. "If this happens it cannot be the case that ..... as I thought."

The occurrences can also demonstrate that one was simply wrong, and a good qualitative researcher or a real scholar does not refuse to see it. "I always thought ... but seeing what happens, that cannot be true." Of great importance to the development of scholarship is the integration of scientific findings ("research has demonstrated that") with real life experiences, experiences from practice, conversations with practitioners, conversations with patients or with "lay" people. This integration, this confrontation guarantees that the knowledge in the mind of the scholar becomes lived, embodied knowledge. It fosters its flexible use.

To adequately apply the technique of Constant Comparative Analysis that this approach supposes, associative thinking is of great importance. Already in basic education – again from Kindergarten onwards – it is necessary that knowledge be used in other contexts than in the one it is taught and learned. Students in basic and master nursing education need to exercise to use knowledge from one course in the other, from

one context into the other, to apply knowledge about one type of situation to other, totally different but in some respect similar situations. Discovering links that are not apparent at first sight is of great value in expanding knowledge as well as in developing the faculty to use it when it is relevant.

Qualitative research requires highly developed skills in conceptualization, and so does the development of scholarship. The breadth of the conceptual apparatus of a Ph.D. student, the number of concepts that he/she can use, the distinctions that can be made between concepts and those that resemble them will define the degree of scholarship he/she can show. The ability to move from concrete instances to the conceptual level and back is an essential feature of the real scholar, and exercising this competence is an essential part of developing scholarship.

### **The European Model: Benefits and Drawbacks**

In the Netherlands and in Belgium as in several other European countries, we still have a system of "Ph.D. by dissertation only". That means that students do not take courses after their Master education and write a Ph.D. thesis, usually more extensive and in depth than in the US. In general, it takes 6 years in half time or 4 years full time to complete a Ph.D. This system has certainly advantages and disadvantages. A great advantage of the system is that it allows the students to develop an in depth knowledge of the domain of their study. They do not have to bother about anything except the domain of study. No other obligations. The students become very self-directed. They choose the educational opportunities that contribute to their goals, and they do not have to participate in required courses. The only requirements come from what they need to become cognizant about their domain.

Students can develop very close relationships with their supervisors. The relationship can become a really collaborative one. The student and the supervisor work together to make the project a successful one. The collaboration gives many opportunities for individual teaching and students can learn a lot from these experiences.

The greatest danger in the system arises when the Ph.D. students are used to do the work, rather than allowing them the time to become a scholar. The dissertation work becomes limited to what the project requires. The output becomes more important than discovering and learning, including the joy of scholarship.

When students have specific deficits, for instance in statistics, it is in most cases relatively easy to let them fill the gap by traditional or less traditional courses. If, however, they do not have specific deficits, but their general level of cognitive functioning is not adequate to develop scholarship, it is very difficult to remedy.

Some students do not enjoy the lack of structure; and some do not flourish in it. Ph.D. students in this system require quite a lot of emotional social support. They need to be given the assurance that everything will turn out right. Indeed, they embark is a 6 year long journey, sometimes even longer,

without knowing whether they have what it takes to succeed. A supervisor should give the student self-confidence but even more the certainty that one is engaged with them to bring the project to a successful end.

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