

Beyond blockages to ownership, agency and articulation: liminal spaces and conceptual threshold crossing in doctoral learning

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Previous research into doctoral student learning has focussed on stages of the learning journey (Wisker et al 2007-2010), communities (Wisker et al 2003), troublesome encounters (Vikkaila and Phylto 2013; Wisker and Morris 2010; Holbrook et al 2003) and doctoral 'orphans' (Wisker and Robinson 2012). Building on that earlier work, this research is concerned with how doctoral students identify and deal with three kinds of blockage in their work: grappling with finding the appropriate methodology and methods; undermining by the supervisor, and a struggle with articulation. Students report silencing, loss of confidence and paralysis in their work with each of these blockages.

The paper then focusses specifically on ways in which doctoral students deal with such transitional and troublesome moments in their learning journeys considering their awareness of how and when they identify and engage with transformational knowledge, challenges in the supervisory relationship and writing blocks. It focusses on their recognition of these troublesome, transitional moments, and the ways in which they take ownership and agency, cross conceptual thresholds, articulate their research projects and the contribution of their findings, often through the supportive work with supervisors, and sometimes through engagement with the research literature..

Re-scrutiny of the data from three earlier projects (2007-2010, 2009, 2012) and new data gathered for this project involving face to face and email interviews leading to two case studies, offers insights into the ways in which doctoral students identify, meet and cross these conceptual thresholds in their work. It indicates how they evidence and articulate their awareness of moving forward to the achievement of their doctoral learning journeys and identities as researchers and writers, through ownership, agency and articulation.

Some of the threshold crossing seems to come from dialogue through engaging with reported research. As one of the case study participants indicates:

'Your note re survival was the really important part that I took from your article as it enabled me to understand and make sense of my experience relating to a confidence that I didn't realize I had and a determination that appeared out of anger (implicit!) that has enabled me to move forward with a new mindset that 'I can do it' rather than a feeling of despair and fear.'(A)

Hi Gina

I just wanted to thank you and Gillian Robinson for writing up your recent study. "Doctoral 'orphans': nurturing and supporting the success of postgraduates who have lost their supervisors". I have been reading your article for my literature review and it just mirrored an experience I have recently gone through.

Great article that has given me hope!

Best wishes

Margot (EdD student)

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Hello Margot

I'm glad it was helpful! but sorry you had the experience - however note that the ones who survived really owned their projects-

There is a companion piece called 'picking up the pieces' which is about supervisors and doctoral orphans- there's a lot of this about.

best wishes Gina

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Hi Gina

Your note re survival was the really important part that I took from your article as it enabled me to understand and make sense my experience relating to a confidence that I didn't realize I had and a determination that appeared out of anger (implicit!) that has enabled me to move forward with a new mindset that 'I can do it' rather than a feeling of despair and fear. I experienced the stuckness confusion and loss of time you mentioned like I have never experienced before. This is due to a recent consequence of having to "realign with the changes in research learning support offered by a new supervisor"(p.305) which had such an impact.

I am sorry if my experience sounds a bit dramatic.

Thank you for your advice and your support.

Best wishes

Margot

Hi

no it is familiar and it is actually very hard to shift to someone else's conception of what you are doing and should be doing and it depends how they present it some of the time - the upside is that by the time you've worked out what you are really doing and can defend that , whether it has shifted or not, you are really at a different level of ownership and conceptual work and the viva is much more straightforward since that confident ownership is what you defend-

and it's actually quite hard to take someone on half way as you don't want to stomp on what they did and have to try and understand it -because it would be so naively easy to say 'oh my goodness this is awful! aren't you lucky you have me to set you right? Let's get on with totally changing all of it in the shape of something I'd write myself-' which would utterly disempower and probably be wrong anyway.

I'm going to copy Gill in shed like this conversation! best wishes Gina

Hi Gina, Hi Gill

Initially I was doing a PhD and investigating disaffection in schools systems. Over this time my first supervisor disappeared from the education department and the administration people phoned me to ask where he was, as if I would know. I was in shock that he just left without warning.

My second supervisor, who I felt very close to as he was so adaptable in terms of me having to bring my children to supervision on occasions, died and I received a message by email with the words "your supervisor has just died" which was such a shock as I had been on the phone to this supervisor the day before about my research. I was so upset.

My third supervisor who became my new anchor phoned to say "you can't go on" and put the phone down which was followed by administration phoning me to say that she had done this to other students and not to take any notice. This supervisor was amazing but had to go on long term sick leave.

The supervisor that took over from the above supervisor came in at the write up stage after I had analyzed my data collected on placements at a London secondary school and a New Zealand secondary school over seven months. This supervisor did exactly what you said in your email below, she wanted to totally change my research in the shape of what she wanted to write causing me to feel so confused... my mum then got sick, my child got sick and everything just blew apart in front of me after five years of working so hard...

However, one of my supervisors (the very supportive one) phoned while I was shopping to say that she would deny that she had phoned but wanted to tell me that she was aware that I had been bullied by my last supervisor and explained that my reason for given up was not my fault. She then suggested that I take what I had learnt from my research forward into another research project. I was so relieved that someone actually saw what was happening.

I looked into Universities and then started my EdD at Stirling. I am in my fourth year of the research with only one supervisor team change so far! I really miss my last supervisor who left to go to another University last year.

The reason for telling you my story is because the impact of my historical experience has had an impact on my present experience as a doctoral student. I think supervisors need to be aware of what they bring to supervision in terms of their own historical experiences personally and academically and the impact on doctoral students. What I experienced could have destroyed any belief I had in myself but that one supervisor who had the courage to phone gave me the courage to go on. My message to supervisors would be that it is a bit like getting irritated with learner drivers in front of me and then realizing that I was once a learner driver myself and therefore need to change my attitude towards the person in front that I am getting irritated with.

That is why your article was is so important.

Margot

Wow goodness this is so rich! Thank you for sharing it-

I am so sorry you had the roughest of trips with your work so far but I know you'll be safe at Stirling they have a good reputation and we must just get the best we can from the people we work with then also have ourselves to rely on -

Your tenacity and perseverance through all of this will be very useful to you in life - and also as a supervisor if you do that yourself because you'll never believe it is a simple road related to the ability of the student to get on with their research - its way more complicated than that.

The full stories of the participants in our research need to be told in full too as some of them were dogged by the most incredible local politics where supervisors fought their loathing of each other

over the students - and one very difficult issue here is that you don't always know yourself if your work is OK - so it is easy to be undermined by that.

I'm sure it wasn't just the one person believing in you that got you through - what characteristics do you think you pulled out of the bag for yourself?

I like the learner driver analogy - and also maybe as supervisors we also get so tied up in the identity of the role and of the students' work that it's too personal a journey for us - in some cases-

Your troubles were exacerbated by persona problems too but for mid career researchers I am afraid they are also part of the experience- you might like to look at some work Charlotte Morris and I did for the education subject centre of the higher education academy website it is called 'troublesome encounters' and is all about horror stories and wellbeing issues and has a toolkit for wellbeing as part of it - lots of quotes -

I know you know that I'm going to ask if I might quote some of what you've said - should we write about this again - which I know we will - all confidential and not in a large discoverable chunk - I am sure it could help others - but before it does you'll find it useful to determine for yourself what is making you strong enough to finish -

???

'belief in myself' is one thing - how and what does that mean?

I had a few mishaps (not a supervisor change though luckily) - marriages, jobs, change of location, and I think it was because I persevered for the 6 1/2 yrs based on having had to do a similar thing or A levels when my parents/me too moved countries 4 times-----

Gill had children throughout this period- so taxing times come in many shapes - thoughts??

enjoying talking to you, hope it is useful for you too.

Best wishes Gina

Inbox

19 December 2013 15:41

Yes I am finding this useful as I am writing about student experience and also it is great to be in touch with you again. I am also very fortunate as I have a really good first supervisor who just seems to know everything! My second supervisor is also good but I do not see her as much. This is an email I recently sent them after my first supervision. The reason I am showing you this is because it relates to my new found confidence and what has happened since starting the EdD.

[Beginning of email] *"I found supervision, for the first time, very difficult today. I think this is partly because I was missing bits of the communication due to Skype difficulties and partly because I found receiving feedback from two supervisors, in the same supervision, confusing. I was not able to take a lot of the information in and missed some information. I am unclear why I am having supervision with two supervisors which from my experience today, I realize is not going to work for me. I appreciate that it is important to get on with the write up but since I started the EdD I have been going at a pace that suits me and it has worked. I have never had a problem with supervision or feedback which I have always used constructively.*

To recap on my experience, as a part-time doctoral research student since February 2010 - I have worked, moved three times, had a hysterectomy, been in hospital on several occasions with my son who has been critically ill, had my gallbladder out, my son died on the 4th December 2011 and grieving is unstructured. Despite this I have continued to conduct my research, gone through a difficult ethics committee moment, collect my data, analyze my data and write three drafts of my methodology chapter and two drafts of my theory chapter, presented at several conferences, won 3rd prize for a conference presentation and continuously over the last nearly four years, done lots of reading and writing. This doesn't take into account the trips to London to look after family new born's and care for sick family members.

The purpose of the recap is just to let you know that the events above is the reason I am going at a pace that suits me. Up until now I have found the EdD an amazing challenge that I wouldn't change for anything. Supervision with you [1st supervisor] works for me and when I have finished my chapters feedback from you [2nd supervisor] will work for me. But today just didn't

I hope I have not offended you." [The end of email]

Doing my doctorate at Stirling has been an amazing experience because as you mention below they do have a good reputation for taking care of their students and I am lucky to be part of that as I am one of the student counsellors in student support. I am doing an EdD to deepen my professional understanding as a psychotherapist, counsellor and supervisor and certainly my experience as a doctoral student informs my work as a student counsellor.

Your last email also got me thinking about the relational aspect of supervision and how charged and complex the doctoral supervisor student relationship is due to the complex nature of our histories.

In answer to your question "belief in myself"? What I mean is belief in my ability to write academically and achieve my outcome which is a doctorate. How I am developing that belief in myself is through the challenges that I continue to come up against in the doctoral process personally and academically. This belief in myself however did not start at the stage of the doctoral journey, it started in childhood and continued through my fraught and fragmented educational and life experience as, from what I read in your email, it did for all of us. It seems that the doctoral journey is a place to fall apart and put ourselves back together in a different way, that is, supervisors and doctoral students.

Yes it is fine to use what I have said. Thank you for offering to use my experience to help others.

Best wishes

Margot

Hi Gina

I have been thinking about the other questions that you asked in your email for example, the characteristics I think I pulled out the bag are in the form of parts of me. For example, the part as a parent that manages to push a pram/my son's wheel chair while going up a step, holding a door open and balancing shopping at the same time. The part that got told at school I was going to end up on the streets or working in Woolworths. They were right about the first prediction but the second

one was what I strived for however, after gaining two degrees and three professional qualifications Woolworths closed down so I never got the chance to attain that prediction in the end. The part that loved to read and write but as a child was so naughty at school got mistook for a delinquent rather than a teenager with potential. The part that was the determination in my battle with education and the NHS to get the education and health care my child needed in order to have the best quality of life ever.

What is making you strong enough to finish?

This is a difficult one as I am scared to say I am strong enough to finish in case I don't. However, I hope it will be my resilience, management, determination and ability to stand up, brush myself down and fight to the end!

Your journey and Gill's journey, I assume, is what has determined your writing and studies? It is good to hear that it took you 6 ½ years Gina and that Gill was negotiating the child element of doctoral studies. My thoughts on "taxing times come in many shapes" is that I know if I hadn't been through the taxing times I may not have got this far.

Best wishes

Margot

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you will finish tho theres no doubt

its about focus and strength and you clearly have these.

I went to 11 schools and in each one had to prove i had something or other as I was always ending up outside the door - interesting way of controlling people who ask questions/have no idea of the embedded rules

determination is a transferable skill!!!

actulaly I have found this discussion very helpful -and not (just) because of my research .

I think that my own journey which I only begin to realise as unusual - means Im more interested in enabling other peoples journeys when they dont look straightforward- including my own kids - neither of whom have been straightfrward.

keep going !

Best wishes Gina

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I just can't imagine what the transitional process through 11 schools must have been like...no wonder you recognize determination as a transferable skill...and what you say about control is so familiar as the more curios I became the more trouble I got into. Your kids may not have been straight forward but they are certainly lucky to have a mum like you that understands other routes.

I really appreciate the encouragement you have given me today and I will keep going!

Thank you again.

Best wishes

Margot