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Defining the Doctorate

**Exploring the Multi-Layered Experience of
Undertaking Creative Doctoral Research**

Abstract

This paper explores the emotional and existential dimensions of creative research which are often unacknowledged or unexamined. Its purpose is to deepen understanding about the nature of the non-cognitive aspects of the research experience and explore the implications for students and supervisors.

The paper crosses genres and incorporates academic literature, autobiographical narratives, poetry and a song within the text. Through the use of multiple voices, I have attempted to reflect the substance and emotional intensity of the research experience and to foster an emotional engagement with the data. The paper draws on the literature which examines the experience of research, theories of learning and knowledge creation and epistemological issues of representation in research.

The paper aims to stimulate critical reflection by stretching and dissolving boundaries, in both content and its form. It has been written in the hope that it will play to the edge of the possible, challenging aesthetic concepts and also inviting us to be more fully conscious of ourselves and our practice, both as researchers and supervisors. My intention is to contribute to our understanding of the creative doctoral experience, beyond the cognitive domain, in ways which can ultimately enrich our practice.

Introduction

This paper explores the nature of the experience of undertaking creative research which is often unacknowledged or unexamined. Its purpose is to deepen understanding about the non-cognitive aspects of the research experience and explore the implications for students and supervisors. The paper contains multiple voices, including autobiographical narrative, songs, poetry and academic literature. In this work, I will tell some stories from my own PhD experience, making links with literature which examines the experience of research, theories of learning and knowledge creation and epistemological issues of representation in research.

In describing the experience of undertaking feminist post-doctoral research, Rhedding-Jones (1997) articulates the importance of finding, developing and articulating one's own voice. Her claims are reinforced in the content and style of Angela Brew's recent work on the nature of research (Brew 2001). Both Rhedding-Jones and Brew celebrate the new forms of research which are reclaiming the role of involvement of self. This paper is an example of this kind of approach.

Changing Nature of Research

The nature of research itself is changing. Researchers now have more choices and this is impacting on the nature of the research experience itself, as well as on the kind of supervision needed.

A growing body of literature is challenging the voice of the researcher as omniscient academic observer and advocates for greater reflexivity and subjectivity within research. The epistemological underpinnings of this exploration come from the literature of representation, from the field of ethnography (Richardson 1997; 2000; Haarsager 1998; Banks & Banks 1998; Morgan 1996; Tierney & Lincoln 1997; Jipson & Paley 1997), phenomenology (van Manen 1997; Ellis & Flaherty 1992; Ellis 1997), as well as from the field of educational research (Barone & Eisner 1997; Eisner 1998; Lather 1991; Lather & Smithies 1997). These writers are exploring creative forms of representation which reflect richness and complexity of data and invite new and multiple levels of engagement that are both cognitive and emotional.

The use of alternative discourses is predicated on the notion that there are many different ways in which the world can be experienced and represented (Barone & Eisner 1997). It also reflects the idea that some human experiences are so complex and intensely emotional, that multiple voices may be needed to evoke the texture of the experience.

The post-positivist era, with its 'decline of the absolutes' (Lecourt 1975) profoundly challenges notions of 'fact' and 'truth' as independent from theory (Hesse 1980). Lather (1991) argues that new visions for generating social knowledge are required, which are humanly compelling and which are built on vigorous self-reflexivity that encompass epistemological, theoretical and empirical levels of awareness. Lather contends that the post-positivist challenge to prescribed rules and boundaries has resulted in 'a constructive turmoil that allows for a search of different possibilities of making sense of human life, for other ways of knowing which do justice to the complexity, tenuity, and indeterminacy of most of human experience' (Lather 1991: 52).

The deep questions about the nature of research that have been raised in the post-modern debate about representation (Richardson 1997, 2000; Ellis 1999; Jipson & Paley 1997), have taken the academic world into new and liminal terrain, in which conventional structures may no longer be honoured and the seeds of creativity may be able to grow in potentially subversive ways (Turner 1982; Carlson 1996). The sense of excitement which is generated by the liminal, is closely linked to the discomfort that can emerge from the disintegration of familiar patterns and expectations of form (Broadhurst 1999). It can leave researchers and supervisors unclear about boundaries between self-disclosure and self-indulgence and the appropriate nexus between scholarship and creativity.

Metaphoric Approaches to Research

In her recent national study into the nature of research, Brew has developed four categories to describe the different approaches researchers take (Brew 2001). While acknowledging the variations are not mutually exclusive, she constructs four approaches and frames them through the metaphors of domino, trading, layer and journey. In the domino variation, the researcher is separate from the research and links separate elements to solve problems. The trading approach frames research as an arena for social interaction, while within her framing of the layer variation, changing perspectives is integral, and the integration of learning and

understanding is seen as a key characteristic. In the framing of research as journey, Brew argues that research questions go beyond the intellectual issues and are carried over into all aspects of life and there is an assimilation of research into the researcher's life and understanding. In the concept of research as journey, encounters with the data are viewed as potentially transformative (Brew 2001).

Lee & Green (1998), who have also studied the phenomenon of research itself, contend that the nexus between knowledge and identity in higher education practice is often lost or muted in accounts of the experience. Brew concurs with this, arguing that much of the individual learning generated through the course of 'the research remains private and not spoken about'. (Brew 2001: p. 129).

Theories of learning and knowledge creation provide another perspective on the experience of undertaking research. This includes literature which explores the transformation of experience into knowledge (Merriam & Clark 1991, 2000; Jarvis 1987; Habermas 1987), the inter-relationship of learning to the construct of self (Rogers 1951; Mezirow 1981, 1990), the range of potential responses to experience, including non-learning, reflective learning (Usher 1985, 1996; Jarvis 1987), problem solving approaches (Dewey 1938, Kolb 1984), instrumental and expressive responses (Houle 1961), and the learning experience as a transformation of meaning (Mezirow 1981, 1990; Gould 1980).

Research as Educational Odyssey and Personal Pilgrimage

Hattauer and Broder (1993) explore the concept of doctoral research as a potentially transformative experience from a psychodynamic perspective. They describe a dissertation as both an educational odyssey and a personal pilgrimage and examine the intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions of the research experience. They highlight the significance of the relationship to the supervisor, with its potential for playing out left-over parental feelings, and the complexities of the individuation and separation process. They discuss the myth of the fallacy of the perfect dissertation and connect it with the separation issues ('In order to graduate and separate, I must produce a perfect thesis').

Using a psychodynamic framework, Hattauer & Broder (1993) describe the experience of research as a process of transformation, reached only by learning to separate and individuate. They contend that within this process, a student can come to trust his/her own judgement and abilities and learn to transform the relationship with the supervisor from advisor to colleague. Hattauer & Broder discuss the emotional dimensions of returning to study as a mature age student and the fluctuation that can occur between a sense of inadequacy ('I'll never know enough') and a sense of omnipotence ('This is worthless and irrelevant - I know all this').

Meloy (2001) also recognises the difficulties of returning to study as an adult and beginning again. One of her research participants described it like this:

At (almost) fifty
One of the problems of going back to school for a PhD
Is that it's hard to think
Of doing a dissertation
Just to be done with it – just to get on with my life.

At fifty (almost)
I am already into my life
And my hours are too few to spend without passion

And at (almost) fifty
I am tired of whittling my voice to fit incongruous spaces
And impatient with softening the edges of what I say.

A Reflexive Journey

In my own journey, I came to frame research as an invitation to engage and connect with my own experiences, as well as with the experiences of others. My research gave me an opportunity to reflect, to feel, to learn, to unlearn, to know, to be and to act in the world in a different way.

In this paper, I will describe my research journey through some critical stages along the way:

- Framing Research as a Journey

- Experimenting with Voice and Form
- Getting Lost
- Finding a Way
- Going Public with the Work
- Making Meaning of the Road

In describing my experience of research, I will draw on autobiographical narratives drawn from my journals, and on poetic text from my doctorate. I will also include lyrics from a song I have written about the experience of research. The use of multiple voices reflects the notion that there is no single, correct way to have an experience or transmit knowledge of that experience (Lather 1991; Lather & Smithies 1997). There are multiple ways of experiencing, knowing and communicating. The critical task, according to Wilfrid Mellers, is to discover the amount of felt life in a creative form (Mellers 1964).

Framing Research as a Journey

(Reflexive Narrative)

The process of undertaking my PhD research was both an inner and outer journey. I searched for meaning in my PhD, and I searched for myself. My experiences changed me in ways that I am only just beginning to understand. For me, the experience was intense, exhausting and formative. It felt like long climb up a mountain, bearing a constant burden that became heavier and more unwieldy, the further I climbed. There were also periods of excitement and clarity, when I would stop for a while and see the world from a changed perspective. I felt alive and awake. At other times, I spiralled down into the depths of my fears, about not being able to make the distance, of losing my centre and, at times, my reason. The experience came at a price.

When the PhD was finished, I felt older, ravaged and profoundly tired. Looking back on it now, I see that the experience certainly had its traumas, but that it also had transformative and generative elements. I feel braver now and am beginning to find the courage it takes to use my creative voice in the academy. I have more questions now than when I began. I have become more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty.

I have students of my own now, on their own journeys of discovery. Many of them are also exploring issues of form, voice, meaning and identity within their research and are encountering emotional and cognitive dimensions to their experience. In supervising them, I draw a lot on my own experiences of being a student and of being supervised. I am learning to be awake to the uniqueness of each journey so that I can recognise and make meaning of the signals along the way. If I listen well and learn to read the signs, I can more closely determine where technical or cognitive guidance, emotional support or simply space may be needed.

Experimenting with Voice and Form *(Poetic Text)*

My PhD included two abstracts, one in traditional academic text and an alternative abstract in poetic poem. The second version abstracted the more essential nature of the inquiry.

It began with a content question about transition
And managers and meaning making

It began with managers drawing images
And telling me stories about their drawings

Middle and senior managers
Caught up in the changes that can tear lives apart

It began with me with me straining for respectability
As I learned the trade of academic writing

I wanted to do well
But my early writing was derivative and dull

The research was so rich and multi-layered
Full of emotion

The data spoke in its own creative voice
And my early writing squeezed the life out of it

Managers were describing how it felt
To have to apply for their own job

To compete with their friends
To feel unsafe and unsupported

The managers were happy to talk to me
They needed it even

Their stories were intense and alive
And their images rich with metaphors and symbols

I felt privileged to be told the stories
I wanted to do them honour

So I began exploring their stories through the voices of
Poetry, songs and multi-media

The creative forms had enough ambiguity to live beyond the specific
And enough substance to invite engagement

I was introduced to the academic literature
About alternative forms of representation

I'd had no idea others were experimenting too
It was exciting, permission-giving, liberating

So I explored on
Following creative trails to see where they might take the work

Another question emerged
The 'so what' question

How might this work be used?

How might this work be useful?

I began experimenting with different ways

Of giving voice to our humanity in the workplace

I presented the stories to people in other organisations

They felt it was their stories being told

Research as an invitation to engage and connect

Now there's a creative trail to follow

Getting Lost

(Reflexive Narrative)

At the end of the first year of my PhD, I lost both my supervisors. My first supervisor, Carlene became critically ill, and my second supervisor, Iain, left the university. At the same time, my mother died, losing a long battle with cancer. I found her dying and her death shocking and her absence unbearable. I was devastated and felt completely unanchored. For a while I tried to hold it together. I even had a job interview in a new faculty the day after Mum's funeral. I got the position.

After a few months though, I found that I couldn't stop crying. It was frightening and exhausting. It felt that the well of loss and grief was bottomless. Work was difficult and my PhD felt impossible. Things that had seemed meaningful were now empty. I felt like I was disappearing.

In the early days of my grieving, densely referenced academic text seemed absurdly pretentious, impenetrable and silly. All I felt able to do was to listen to music and read poetry. Music and poetry seemed to reach through the grief and provide sustenance.

Finding a Way

(Reflexive Narrative)

Time passed and slowly, ever so slowly, the PhD drew me back into life. Out of my deep lostness and depletion, a small seed of a creative idea began to emerge. It became a compelling force that was impossible to miss or ignore. The creative idea grew into an organising framework of multiple voices for my PhD. It brought a coherence of form to the vast unwieldy mass of theoretical and emotional data that I was carrying around with me all the time. The framework accommodated a range of perspectives, encompassing the creative and cognitive dimensions of the research. Poems, songs, images and multi-media tracks took their place in the framework alongside the literature review, the methodology chapter and the analytical models.

The framework made room for multiplicity and simplicity. I began to see that there was room for me too. I saw that the creative seed could flower into a denser, richer piece of work and a more integrated sense of self.

I had stumbled onto a new way of being and working in the academic world. There were no rules in this territory and the boundaries were not defined. It was not clear what might be useful and what may be self-indulgent. The dissolution of the boundaries of convention made the exploration possible, but it also generated the risks.

In choosing to use creative forms of expression in my doctorate, I was confronted with many questions. What did the gate into the academy represent? Where did the power of the gate-keepers reside? If we challenged traditional ways of representing data, could it all be challenged? Was it possible to reframe the paradigms of exclusion and adversariality, so characteristic of academic life? Could we question the dominant forms of academia and still actively engage in mainstream academic debate? Was this line of thinking a ticket to professional marginalisation? Did it matter if it was?

The questions formed part of my exploration of issues of meaning and identity. They were a generative process in my own survival and in my development as a researcher.

Going Public with the Work

(Reflexive Narrative)

My first presentation of my creative doctoral material came about six months after my mother's death. The audience was a group of colleagues and fellow research students and I was anxious. I had prepared and distributed a written paper about alternative forms of data representation. I had pages of notes brimming with theory, two completed multi-media tracks, and some overheads of the managers' drawings and some poems.

The audience was sitting in rows in a darkened auditorium. I had checked and rechecked the data show, but the technology was a wild-card. My early proto-types of the multi-media tracks were not reliable and the soundtracks would sometimes slip or even disappear altogether. I began the presentation with Shakespeare's words from Hamlet:

'This above all: to thine own self be true'

I was talking to myself really, but that set the tone of the session. As the presentation went on, I felt more and more comfortable about telling the truth of who I was, and of inviting deeper levels of engagement with the stories of the managers' experiences. Towards the end of the session, I darkened the auditorium and showed one of the multi-media tracks. I could hear people crying in the darkness. I had thought, when the lights returned, we would talk about the issue of data representation which had been the focus of the session.

To my surprise, the discussion centred on the trauma of the experience of organisational change as represented in the data. They spoke of their own vulnerability and crises of meaning. People were sitting in rows in a lecture theatre at a research conference talking about their existential issues. The session lasted forty-five minutes.

Afterwards, I felt exposed but safe. The feedback from the participants after the session was affirming and deeply moving. I knew I was on to something and I realised two things. The work had the potential to trigger something powerful. I also recognised that it needed to be handled with care.

As the years went on, I gradually became more confident. I did more public presentations, and became more familiar with the terrain. I made many mistakes along the way, learning how to pitch the material to an appropriate gradient for the context and the audience.

Making Meaning of the Road

(Reflexive Narrative)

Throughout the journey, even when things were difficult, my relationships with my supervisors were very important to me. Carlene and Iain taught me a lot about what healthy and respectful supervision can look like. It had been devastating and disorienting to lose them both and to have to begin again developing new supervisory relationships. It all took time and energy. Even though Carlene was ill, we stayed in touch. It looked like she would die for sure, at times, but she didn't. The sad irony was that Iain himself died before I completed my work.

Towards the end of the journey, I felt ready to complete earlier than my supervisors did. I wanted desperately to lay the burden down. It was a painful negotiation and I was never sure if it was arrogance on my part or a sense of justified confidence, that led to my impatience. I'm still not sure. At the very end of the road, Carlene recovered sufficiently to take me back on as a supervisor to prepare me for the examination. My gratitude to her will always be profound. She told me she cried at my graduation. We went through a lot together and I think that the quality of care was mutual.

In my PhD, I came to see myself and the world in new ways. I did not expect to get so lost along the way and I did not expect to find what I did. I think I was drawn to my research questions, because there was something in me I needed to know more about. I have more questions now, than when I began. I have become braver about trusting my instincts

I have research students of my own these days, and I recognise that each journey is unique. I know that the experience of research presents an opportunity to learn on many levels and we make choices about where we focus our learning. In my supervision practice, I draw a lot on my own experience of undertaking research and each student has become teacher. The lyrics for this song, 'The Key', have come from the experiences of my current research students and I can hear my own voice in there too.

The Key ***(Song)***

We pay 10(th)8.8(t)t.2(t he)0.7(edg10(th)ence1(nd w))9.1(nd w)6.6(e)-k(ons n)wue. I

Nothing seems so certain anymore

We weave a web of what ifs and whys

Follow tangles of truths and lies

Searching for a line to hold

That might become a thread of gold

We search in the sand for what might grow

Sifting through what lies below

And sometimes deep inside a shell

We find a key that unlocks ourselves

We play at the edges, we lose our grip

We lose our reason in the rip

And all the while in the ground

A shining key lies waiting to be found

Implications for Students and Supervisors

The research experience can be fertile ground for learning about self, context, identity and values clarification. The experience can be both liberating and crushing at a personal level. It can lead to a greater sense of internal freedom and power (Gould 1980) and an openness to experience, and an increased capacity to discriminate and to integrate experience (Mezirow 1990).

If I were starting again as a doctoral student, this is what I would like someone to tell me:

Be passionate and pragmatic

Find a topic that excites you that can take you the distance

Think long and deep and wide and then scope it

Question what lies behind and beneath

Work in the cracks between ideas

Pull things apart and play with new connections

Take the time and space you need

Create a quiet place for writing and reflection

Treat it as sacred

Build a network of support with people who know the road

Listen to the stories of others and ask for the help that you need

Learn to give and receive feedback in respectful and useful ways

Be prepared to get lost

Expect to feel a bit lost and crazy at times

Use the lostness to dig a little deeper to the core

Don't come to closure too soon

Question everything and be open to reframing your assumptions

Be ready to unlearn

Remember your body

Look after your eyes, your back and your neck

Take regular breaks and remember to breathe

Be prepared for seasons of fruitfulness and drought

Give yourself permission to pace the journey

Take time out when you've lost the juice, and rest well

Be willing to finish

Find and hold the focus within the complexity

Consider leaving things out that you've invested in

See the research in its fullness

Recognise the strengths and limitations of the work

Remember the person that you have become

These ideas provide guidance for me in my supervision. As supervisors, I believe we need to have an understanding of the ways in which the research experience can be connected to the structure of the self, both in ourselves, and in our students. We need to be awake to our own ways of interpreting experience to help frame our supervisory practice. This requires an awareness of our own strengths and limitations and a willingness to be reflexive about our own practice.

The act of supervising is a generative process involving productivity, maturity and creativity. Supervision involves mastery of a set of skills and knowledge and the capacity to pass these on to students, along with a sense of agency. It also requires an awareness of the emotional and existential dimensions of the research experience and its potential to be both transformative and traumatic. Acknowledging the multi-layered nature of the research experience requires knowledge, sensitivity and self-awareness.

I think much of supervision is about acknowledging and managing complexity and paradox. It is about supporting and challenging, being present and leaving space. It is about providing useful guidance, and opening a way for a student's own learning.

Ideally, we need systems of reflective learning and mutual support to develop and deepen our practice as supervisors and as students. This need for an infrastructure of support is even more crucial when the research being undertaken is challenging epistemological boundaries.

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