Waikato Journal of Education

ISSN 2382-0373

Website: https://wje.org.nz

Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research
Te Pūtahi Rangahau Mātauranga o Wilf Malcolm
THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

Volume 27, Issue 2 2022:
Special Issue: Navigating unexpected terrain in postgraduate research: Reflections from the field

Conceptualising "unexpectedness" during the doctorate

Hossein Hosseini and Laura Gurney

Editors: Laura Gurney, Hossein Hosseini, Nicolina Newcombe and Kerry Earl Rinehart

Cite this article: Hosseini, H., & Gurney, L. (2022). Conceptualising "unexpectedness" during the doctorate. ***Waikato Journal of Education, 27*****(2), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v27i2.1002**

Link to this volume: https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v27i2

Waikato Journal of Education
Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 27, Issue 2, 2022: Special Issue: Navigating unexpected terrain in postgraduate research: Reflections from the field

Conceptualising "unexpectedness" during the doctorate

Hossein Hosseini and Laura Gurney
The University of Waikato
New Zealand

Introduction: The doctorate as a journey

The final observable product of a successful doctoral programme is typically a thesis that has been critically examined by senior academics and considered to demonstrate a significant contribution to knowledge. However, it is a conviction underpinning this special issue that the doctorate should be acknowledged, explored and understood as a *process* which is expectedly imbued with unexpected challenges for the doctoral candidate. Negotiating these challenges is a necessary part of the process. The doctoral research process has been metaphorically described as a "journey" (Edwards & Mackay, 2012; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009; Rath & Mutch, 2014; Skakni, 2018a, 2018b). While the doctoral journey has the potential to present destabilising experiences, discomfort and cognitive dissonance, candidates bring their own reasons and motivations to the process (Skakni, 2018b). According to Skakni (2018b), "the act of engaging in doctoral studies lies on a set of individuals' desires, intentions and aspirations, which serve as a driving force oriented toward the future" (p. 200). As such, the doctoral journey presents both facilitating and constraining opportunities that help nourish the quest for self, intellectual quests and professional quest (Skakni, 2018b).

The doctoral research literature

There is a growing body of literature on doctoral degrees. While this literature is characterised by a plethora of foci, read together it informs researchers, prospective and current candidates, and academic and administrative staff in universities about the nature of the doctoral experience, its significance, challenges and opportunities, and ways to successfully complete a thesis.

Although there are multiple ways of categorising this body of literature, we loosely organise it into the following categories: prescriptive and instructive, descriptive and identificatory, and narrative and autoethnographic. Prescriptive and instructive work includes guidebooks by authors equipped with on-the-ground research experience working with and as postgraduate researchers. These authors bring knowledge and experience to provide useful tips, information and *dos and don'ts* (Churchill & Sanders, 2007; Denholm & Evans, 2006; Fulton et al., 2013; Petre & Rugg, 2010; Phillips & Pugh, 2010). Descriptive and identificatory literature does not intend to prescribe; rather, it approaches the doctoral experience through educational and sociological lenses – from identifying common practices amongst students to capturing experiences on the ground (Peters, 2014). Finally, narrative and autoethnographic

Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, Te Kura Toi Tangata Division of Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand
ISSN: 2382-0373
Contact details: Hossein Hosseini hossein.hosseini@waikato.ac.nz
(pp. 1–5)

research, to which this special issue contributes, has made challenging and revealing contributions to the doctoral literature by exploring candidates' thought processes and decision-making in depth. A poignant example of the narrative and autoethnographic approach to exploring doctoral research experience is from Carrillo (2007), a Mexican PhD candidate in the USA who withdrew from his doctoral programme when close to completion. Brown (2014) and Gurney et al. (2022) also present narratives of doctoral candidates studying in Australia and New Zealand. These narratives highlight the cultural, academic and intellectual challenges that doctoral candidates experience, as well as the decision-making processes that drive their doctoral journeys forward and the successes they experience along the way.

While much is written about doctoral research, the voices of doctoral candidates make up a meagre portion of the field. Furthermore, there is a tension: doctoral research is *meant* to be challenging, and it certainly is; however, there is significant benefit to unpacking what challenges look like and how they are negotiated, and in a sense "normalising" them, from the grounded perspectives and practices of candidates themselves. We recognise that this takes courage from the authors, who are not simply reporting their findings or discussing the significance of their work within academic fields, but are *locating themselves* within these fields and narrating parts of their lives as researchers. This research acts against the *view from nowhere* by reminding readers that doctoral education (as all other forms of education) only ever comes about as something that is *experienced*, negotiated and lived: that is, it comes about through practices, which are enacted by myriad individuals – candidates, supervisors, librarians, supporters, participants, stakeholders in a professional field, and other scholars.

Transitions during doctoral studies

Doctoral research is characterised in many ways by *transitions*. Candidates engage in processes of becoming and changing relating to their identities, practices, knowledge, languages, and cultural and geographic locations. Transitioning into a researcher identity is a core part of the process. While the success of doctoral education may be measured institutionally through timely completion and reduced attrition rates, Sinclair et al. (2013) posits preparation of candidates to become active and capable researchers post-completion as a more important outcome. To this end, Lovitts (2005) proposes *creativity* as an essential quality of research education. Creativity can be enacted at different levels, from "doing routine things in an appropriate but somewhat novel way" all the way to "doing a significant piece of work that may establish a new conceptual framework or paradigm" (Lovitts, 2005, p. 141). The transition from the routine to the conceptual is initiated at the beginning of a doctoral programme, and research suggests that it is guided by supervisors (Sinclair et al., 2013).

However, for many students, developing their capacity as creative researchers may not present the most immediate challenge. Different conditions, expectations and practices between professional contexts and academia, or between home and host countries, may require more immediate attention. Socialisation also occurs into relevant academic communities – those being the local institution, the disciplinary field in which one works, and even subfields of inquiry within that – involving "interactions between learners and their academic discourse community members" (Ferenz, 2005, p. 335). Seloni (2012) identifies three main spaces of academic literacy socialisation: "initial contact frames", "institutional academic spaces", and "academic culture of collaboration" (p. 51). Seloni (2012) asserts that all three spaces, working with other factors, are important for the development process of doctoral candidates' academic socialisation.

Contemporarily, doctoral education takes place within a hyper-mobile and hyper-competitive academic arena. Institutional agendas associated with neoliberal policies transform academics into mobile knowledge workers in a global knowledge economy (Bönisch-Brednich, 2018; Knight, 2015; Nerad, 2010; Rizvi, 2005). As those transitioning into this role, doctoral candidates may experience

"different types of mobility (geographical, inter-sectoral, interdisciplinary, and social)" (Walakira & Wright, 2018, p. 65), which brings a range of new ideas, demands and experiences.

Narratives and identities

This special issue is all about narratives. To *narrate* is not a simple language function. It is not merely explanatory, descriptive or informative. Rather, narratives *construct* the identit(ies) of the teller, position the reader in relation to these – as an invitation to (dis)agree, contest, interpret and reflect on what is told and who is telling it – *in situ* and through moments in time.

> … stories are constructed by a narrator who chooses from an array of events and orders them in a meaningful way – an order that reflects her own interpretation of that set of events. Narrative therefore is considered to be not so much a reflection of reality as an interpretation of it. (Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000, p. 285)

Identities are formed and negotiated through language choices when we interact with others (Marra & Angouri, 2011, p. 1), whether synchronously in a conversation or asynchronously and with implied distance by sharing our writing. However, identities are *never* simple or singular: they are nuanced and layered, and they shift across interactions and situations (Holmes, 2005; Miglbauer, 2012). Identities crafted through narrative may not be discursively unified. Rather, if we position the self as *always* emergent, depictions of ourselves must necessarily capture complexity and contradiction (Holmes, 2005). Furthermore, *identity building* through storytelling can positively contribute to the connections between past, present and future through doctoral candidatures (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009).

We asked authors in this special issue to reflect on an event, occurrence or discovery in their doctoral research that was "unexpected" to them. Our scope was very broad; we encouraged them to think about any stage of doctoral research, from commencement to conclusion, and any aspect of their research: theory, data, ethics, analysis and so on. Similarly, interpretation of what constituted "unexpectedness" was left up to the authors. For some, it manifested in a shift from certainty in a particular theoretical approach, to the capacity to challenge and think more independently or critically about established theories in their field. For others, it was the ways in which they interacted with the participants of their research as new researchers.

The contributions in this issue step away from depictions of doctoral research as linear or compartmentalised. In their negotiation of emergent researcher identities, the authors grappled to bring together their established skills and experiences with the new requirements of thinking, acting, writing and practising as researchers. As Vásquez (2007) points out, when we are new to a field or role, we are in a state of transition; our reconstructed experiences are likely to reflect some instability as we navigate this transitional period. When and how instability eventually gives way to stability is not really the point of focus. Rather, if we accept identities to be nuanced and layered, with each aspect surfacing differently within different contexts, then we may approach identity as fluid, negotiable, and neither completely controlled by oneself or determined by others (Holmes, 2005; Miglbauer, 2012). It also bears mentioning that the stories we tell of ourselves are not necessarily complete. They may be small, fragmented and non-linear (Bamberg, 2006). While the contributions in this special issue have all been carefully crafted, they nonetheless engage with the messiness and unpredictability of doctoral research; some do so via experiences which are quite small or temporally bound, while others deal with experiences which are more significant or long-ranging.

Conclusions

The doctoral journey always includes complexities, such as how candidates perceive themselves and their work, and how others perceive them, and the process of becoming is always relational (Burkitt, 2008, 2010; Gergen, 2011). Doctoral education is also located within particular institutional, cultural and personal contexts, including personal goals and family expectations. Institutional agendas intersect with these to compound, alleviate, or simply sit alongside them. However, doctoral research is enacted differently by all candidates; while agendas, expectations and contexts may shape candidates' experiences, they do not determine them. Furthermore, there are as many ways of experiencing success as there are doctoral graduates.

An invitation to reflect on the doctoral process provides researchers opportunities to capture how they navigate the journey, including what they consider to be the expected and unexpected aspects. What is considered an unexpected aspect of note at a particular point in time might be outweighed by other significant unexpected experiences further down the path; this is an *expected* aspect of growing as a researcher. While reading through the contributions in this special issue, we encourage readers to reflect on how the authors' experiences and decisions align with their own, and what may be learnt about doctoral education through the narratives presented.

References

Bamberg, M. (2006). Stories: Big or small: Why do we care? *Narrative Inquiry, 16*(1), 139–147. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.18bam

Bönisch-Brednich, B. (2018). Reflecting on the mobile academic: Auto-ethnographic writing in the knowledge economy. *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences, 11*(2), 69–91. https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2018.110205

Brown, J. (Ed.). (2014). *Navigating international academia: Research student narratives*. Sense.

Burkitt, I. (2008). *Social selves: Theories of self and society* (2nd ed.). SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446212769

Burkitt, I. (2010). Dialogues with self and others: Communication, miscommunication, and the dialogical unconscious. *Theory & Psychology, 20*(3), 305–321. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354310362826

Carrillo, J. F. (2007). Lost in degree: A Chicano PhD student's search for missing clothes. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 6*(4), 347–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348430701473553

Churchill, H., & Sanders, T. (2007). *Getting your PhD: A practical insider's guide*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209229

Denholm, C., & Evans, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Doctorates downunder: Keys to successful doctoral study in Australia and New Zealand.* ACER.

Dyer, J., & Keller-Cohen, D. (2000). The discursive construction of professional self through narratives of personal experience. *Discourse Studies, 2*(3), 283–304. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445600002003002

Edwards, B., & Mackay, J. (2012). Preparing for your doctoral journey. In C. Denholm & T. Evans (Eds.), *Doctorates downunder: Keys to successful doctoral study in Australia and New Zealand* (pp. 6–17). ACER.

Ferenz, O. (2005). EFL writers' social networks: Impact on advanced academic literacy development. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 4*(4), 339–351. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2005.07.002

Fulton, J., Kuit, J., Smith, P., & Sanders, G. (2013). *The professional doctorate: A practical guide*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gergen, K. J. (2011). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199846269.001.0001

Gurney, L., Wang, Y., & Barnard, R. (2022). *Narratives of qualitative PhD research: Identities, languages and cultures in transition*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003256823

Holmes, J. (2005). Story-telling at work: A complex discursive resource for integrating personal, professional and social identities. *Discourse Studies, 7*(6), 671–700. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605055422

Knight, J. (2015). Internationalization: Unintended consequences? *International Higher Education* (54). https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2009.54.8412

Lovitts, B. E. (2005). Being a good course-taker is not enough: A theoretical perspective on the transition to independent research. *Studies in Higher Education, 30*(2), 137–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070500043093

Marra, M., & Angouri, J. (2011). Investigating the negotiation of identity: A view from the field of workplace discourse. In J. Angouri & M. Marra (Eds.), *Constructing identities at work* (pp. 1–16). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230360051_1

McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2009). Identity and agency: Pleasures and collegiality among the challenges of the doctoral journey. *Studies in Continuing Education, 31*(2), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370902927378

Miglbauer, M. (2012). "… because I'm just a stupid woman from an NGO": Interviews and the interplay between constructions of gender and professional identity. *Pragmatics, 22*(2), 327–345. https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.22.2.07mig

Nerad, M. (2010). Globalization and the internationalization of graduate education: A macro and micro view. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 40*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v40i1.1566

Peters, M. A. (2014). Foreword: Postgraduate culture and the politics of self-help. In C. McMaster & C. L. Murphy (Eds.), *Postgraduate study in Aotearoa New Zealand: Surviving and succeeding* (pp. ix–xii). NZCER Press.

Petre, M., & Rugg, G. (2010). *The unwritten rules of PhD research* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.

Phillips, E. M., & Pugh, D. S. (2010*). How to get a PhD: A handbook for students and their supervisors* (5th ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Rath, J., & Mutch, C. (Eds.). (2014). *Emerging critical scholarship in education: Navigating the doctoral journey*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Rizvi, F. (2005). Rethinking "brain drain" in the era of globalisation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 25*(2), 175–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790500337965

Seloni, L. (2012). Academic literacy socialization of first year doctoral students in US: A micro-ethnographic perspective. *English for Specific Purposes, 31*(1), 47–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2011.05.004

Sinclair, J., Barnacle, R., & Cuthbert, D. (2013). How the doctorate contributes to the formation of active researchers: What the research tells us. *Studies in Higher Education*, *39*(10), 1972–1986. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.806460

Skakni, I. (2018a). Doctoral studies as an initiatory trial: Expected and taken-for-granted practices that impede PhD students' progress. *Teaching in Higher Education, 23*(8), 927–944. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1449742

Skakni, I. (2018b). Reasons, motives and motivations for completing a PhD: A typology of doctoral studies as a quest. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education, 9*(2), 197–212. https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-D-18-00004

Vásquez, C. (2007). Moral stance in the workplace narratives of novices. *Discourse Studies, 9*(5), 653–675. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445607081270

Walakira, L. K. O., & Wright, S. (2018). 'I'm like a snail carrying my entire house with me': Doctoral fellows' experiences of a mobile life. *The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences, 11*(2), 51–68. https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2018.110204