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SURVIVING AND SUCCEEDING: THE FIRST-GENERATION CHALLENGE

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Viewed from the outside, full-time PhD study seems undemanding and it is only once you are engaged in practices such as doing research, reading for and writing your PhD proposal that you start to learn the underlying rules and covert knowledge of academia. But these are not easy behaviours to learn and practice consistently especially if you are a first-generation PhD student. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) define first-generation students as those who are the first in their families to attend university and “whose parents had no type or quantity of postsecondary education” (p. 410). They also state that “continuing-generation students were those with at least one parent who had some type or quantity of postsecondary education” (Lohfink & Paulsen 2005:410). Strictly speaking, following Lohfink and Paulsen’s (2005) definitions, I am a continuing-generation student since my mother left school at 17 to train as a nurse through a hospital training system. However, I was the first person in my nuclear family to attend university and I am the first person in my family to embark on a PhD, so in this sense, I regard myself as a first-generation student. I write this chapter from the perspective of a mid-career professional who worked in online media and who wanted to reskill after 15 years in the workplace. My PhD is in literacy education, and my place in the PhD journey (I am in the middle of fieldwork as I write this) as well as my experiences shape my ideas and what I express.

At universities and in research, the term “first generation” is used mostly to signal undergraduate students whose class, race and gender differ from what is considered the traditional student, namely white, middle class/wealthy, male, single, young and able-bodied. In South Africa, first-generation students may also be English additional or second language speakers. Cotterall (2013) argues that even at doctoral level – after students have obtained various degrees – the notion that first-generation students are disadvantaged is still prevalent. In reality, PhD students have probably

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closed most of the knowledge and convention gaps which is said to hamper first-generation undergraduate students. This chapter speaks to those starting the PhD journey and who are unfamiliar with the range of academic practices. It contains suggestions and ideas on how to balance and bridge individual scholarship with belonging to an academic community. I discuss some of the ways you can build or expand your existing repertoire of skills so that you become an emerging academic. I argue that by using Gutiérrez's notion of "Third Space" (2008:148) and by applying it at the level of identity and social practice, you can value your own difference and diversity, and in doing so, create a hybrid model of being that integrates academic practices without excluding aspects of your identity.

LEARNING IN THE THIRD SPACE

My introduction to the notion of Third Space came via Bhabha (1994) at Master's level where our theory module consisted of what I would describe as cultural studies. We learned a mix of Marxist, post-structuralist, postcolonial and feminist theories using the analytical tools of critical discourse analysis. In this chapter though, I use Gutiérrez's (2008:148) conception of Third Space as a learning space "in which students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond". Gutiérrez's (2008) Third Space is designed and orientated towards empowering first-generation students and via a model of learning that teaches students critical discourse analysis amongst other discourses. Gutiérrez (2008) provides an analysis of an academic programme that consists of curriculum and pedagogy that reposition mainly migrant students as historical actors with a future at a higher education institution. The programme teaches these students to articulate their experiences, to recognise, value and use the resources they have and assists them with bridging the gap between their lived experience and those practices and behaviours required by academia. In the Third Space, the inherited gaps are not treated as a deficit or disadvantage; rather they are acknowledged, historicised, contextualised and treated as missing information. You can learn and acquire what you need to know through guidance or you can teach yourself all the things you need to learn. Gutiérrez's model is not one of assimilation and competition but one of transformation and collaboration where you use your position as outsider and build and maintain a critical lens through which you view your own sociocultural history and context, as well as that of the academy.

Teaching students to value diversity and difference in the South African context is crucial given our apartheid and post-apartheid history. We wish to move away from the subtle but steady pressure to conform to and assimilate into institutional

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practices that involve the erasure of any type of difference, from language and accent to cultural dress and sexuality. Instead we need to – as the New London Group (2000:18) argues – “recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase the different subjectivities, intentions, commitments, and purposes” that students bring to learning. Through embracing the critical discourse of the Third Space, I learned that identities and languages are multiple and part of a repertoire. In the Third Space, seeming conflicting and competing identities can coexist as a subject shifts back and forth daily from a Muslim PhD student to mother, spouse, daughter and part-time employee. Today, for example, I have to rush from fieldwork where I am engaged as a writing mentor for postgraduate students, to fetch my son from school. It is assessment week at my son’s school, so preparing for his assessment is our priority when we get home. I am on the organising committee of a student conference being hosted at my academic institution, and I also have to edit this paper. I am editing a document on Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and I am thinking about facilitating one on language in education for the conference. My PhD identity is thus always a negotiated identity and the role I in which I am least comfortable, because it is an area of transition and growth. I have come to realise though that foregrounding and expanding my identity as a PhD student is imperative to completing the PhD within the allocated time.

CREATING A MENTAL THIRD SPACE

Though I have familial support there are no familial role models to teach me how to deal with institutional challenges. Since I have always worked and studied, I could only do the PhD full-time if it was funded, but I was unprepared for the institutional practices regarding scholarships¹. I was awarded a scholarship, but it was funded by government and only paid out eight months later. Communication from the university around the delay was poor, although I sent numerous emails asking for information. The university has since become more supportive, however, at the time I was one of about twenty-two PhD students who were funded by the same programme. As I felt the financial strain I started doubting my decision to embark on full-time study. I was torn between the tug to return to work and the desire to write and finish my proposal. In an effort to find a space out of this bind, I started to read books on motivation, success and aspiration. Most academics would disapprove of reading motivational books but remain unaware of the thin margin of error and grace under which first-generation PhD and other students exist in South Africa. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Tejeda (1999:286) state that “the use of multiple, diverse and even conflicting mediational tools promotes

1 Also see Chapter 4 by Shakira Choonara that addresses issues around funding.

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the emergence of Third Spaces, or zones of development, thus expanding learning". These books, in seeming contradiction with the academy, created enough relief so I could continue to work on a proposal for a PhD which at that stage seemed like a fading dream. When I read these books, I relied on my natural scepticism and my analytical training to act as a filter and sift through what I was reading. I learned to distinguish between writers who offer new ways and approaches and those who offer manipulative strategies with short-term results which, if continued, would damage social relationships over time. Now, when I find an author whose writing resonates with me, I write down the ideas that inspire me and that I find meaningful. I have also learned to add my own ideas or affirmations. These ideas normally revolve around projects or writing which I am working on. Motivational books have provided me with options on how to become unstuck and how to train myself to think of ways around obstacles and blocks. I had to learn to downgrade problems to minor challenges instead of elevating them to a crisis. When I made mistakes I had to learn to find the lesson and move ahead, instead of wallowing and becoming bogged down with what I could have done. I have recently started reading books on financial planning and money management as well, because I need a reminder that there is life and there are goals to achieve beyond my PhD. The ideas and stories in these books play a part in staying positive, which is an important aspect of surviving the challenges faced along the postgraduate journey.

FROM SOLITARY LEARNER TO EMERGING ACADEMIC

Gutiérrez (2008:149, in reference to Gutiérrez & Larson 2007) argue that "traditional notions of development generally define change along a vertical dimension", for example moving from a Master's to a PhD, whereas "a more expansive view of development is also concerned with the horizontal forms of expertise that develop within and across an individual's practices". To shape this Third Space of learning and expand my academic practices and identity, I realised that I had to move into new spaces. This realisation was shaped by an experience that I had during my Master's degree. I took a drama course, because part of the curriculum involved visits to the theatre to view and review plays. Our lecturer told us how to dress, what to expect and arranged transport to and from the theatre. Until then, neither my class, race nor gender position had allowed me to consider attending the theatre. I also started attending seminars in my department and in my discipline, and even those at other universities. This gave me a better sense of all the major debates, I learned who the academics were in the departments and discovered that universities favour different theoretical frameworks which are also reflected in the content of the library. My supervisor (who is the course co-ordinator for Master's students)

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facilitated our introduction to the department by adding all Master's and PhD students to the departmental events list so that we were able to attend lunch-time seminars. This move was a crucial aspect of my transition from solitary learner to joining a community of academics, and was a way of learning the "horizontal forms of expertise" and of extending my "repertoires of practice" (Gutiérrez 2008:149). At these academic events I found people I could talk to and I used the connections I made to build different kinds of networks with students and academics. These networks are important for sharing resources, giving and receiving advice, encouragement, and starting and participating in publishing opportunities. I talked to people whose comments or questions I found meaningful and sometimes I initiated contact with other students by sending them an email containing details of an event or a useful reference. If they did not respond, I respected that and tried someone else – you will find someone you can work with even though the person or persons may be in another department or discipline or at another university.

ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS

I had to learn to leverage another crucial aspect of Third Space, namely moving from voicelessness to articulation and expression. Attending academic events afforded me opportunities for learning the subtleties of behaviour appropriate to each event such as learning to give presentations, contributing to discussion and practicing asking and answering questions. These practices may seem easy for some, but I grew up in a fairly strict religious home during apartheid, and the way I acted in the world when I was younger was largely shaped by the words "you should" and "you can't". Therefore, learning how to ask and answer questions about my research in a public forum was an important step to finding my voice. A basic building block in creating your academic persona is being able to answer the question, "What is your PhD about?" with knowledge and confidence. You will need two responses: one at a basic level for interested family and friends and one at a complex level for fellow students and academics. Expect to be quizzed by knowledgeable others about your research question, theoretical framework, concepts and methodology. You are already reading in these areas, but a polished response will save you from being tongue-tied and unprepared.

You also need to learn the appropriate way to ask and answer questions in a public forum. You learn to do this by watching those students and academics who manage the questions and feedback at seminars and research events with ease. When faced with a challenging question that they could not answer, they would simply say, "I had not thought of that" or "I'm not sure; I will have to consider that" or "What is your

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understanding of that?”. I saw that this allowed students and academics to keep their composure and gather information because they would write down all the feedback and information they received. Even when they were challenged, they responded by treating the challenge as information and feedback. They would answer by saying, “Thank you for your question”, and then say, “That is something I have not considered”. I learned to preface my questions with statements such as, “Thank you for that interesting presentation”. I learned the practice of conducting question and answer sessions by attending and watching the practice being modelled by students and academics at events.

PUBLISHING AND PRESENTING RESEARCH

Publishing ideas and writing papers are integral to being an academic and it is a means of placing your voice and ideas in the public domain. You need to learn how to choose appropriate journals and it is better to refuse invitations from journals wanting to publish your paper for a fee. You also need to guard against publishing companies that lock you into contracts that allow them to republish your intellectual labour without your consent. You only truly learn the subtleties and rigor of publishing a paper until after it returns from the editor. Then you will learn (like me) that a single paper might go through three or more stages of drafting and just when you thought you ticked all the boxes, you switch editors and you find yourself writing for a person with a different perspective and idea of what is required. This is all part of the learning process and nothing personal I am told. So writing a paper is actually like flinging a boomerang – it will come back faster than you sent it off, and more often than not, whack you on the head to announce its return.

I underestimated the amount of time it takes to redraft and recraft a paper after each edit and to meet deadlines. It can amount to weeks and months of valuable thesis time. You might want to ask your supervisor or fellow students for advice on whether it is wise to write a paper while you’re doing your PhD. Some universities do not allow their postgraduate students to publish until after final submission and I can see why. My supervisor suggested that I publish one paper per year while working on my PhD. To guard against fragmenting my time and to remind myself of my primary focus, I created a timeline for my thesis listing the different stages and dates I committed to in my MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) and put it on my wall as a constant reminder of what I am trying to achieve. I even listed my graduation date to make it an achievable goal.

SETTING UP A VIRTUAL STUDY GROUP²

For postgraduate students who belong to extended families and close communities, PhD research is often a lonely experience. Since my sense of isolation was shared by other first-generation PhD students, we started an online social group using WhatsApp on our mobile phones. Our social group morphed into a virtual study group that has been running for almost two years. This virtual Third Space is characterised by hybrid language practices where we learn to greet and speak phrases in each other's languages, share our ideas, challenges and different theoretical frameworks and tools. This online space allows participants from Namibia, Zimbabwe or anywhere else in South Africa or the world to participate. We use the structure of a writing workshop that my supervisor created where we write in 25- to 45-minute bursts and then take five- to ten-minute breaks. Group members move in and out of the writing or study sessions as needed, and we have no formal system for starting a study session. Someone would just volunteer to start and keep time and then everyone else would join when they are able to do so. Usually the person to lead is the person with the closest deadline. This study group provides an essential support mechanism and is a source of accountability. We went through a stretch where we were getting up at 4 a.m. to do writing in an effort to balance work and family responsibilities. We also exchanged resources and learned to use electronic resources such as *Edmondo* and *Mendeley*. Those members skilled in an application would provide a learning session for the rest of the group. We exchange information on funding and scholarships, offer encouragement and support for projects, and celebrate when a group member hands in work.

CONCLUSION

Being a first-generation PhD student meant that I had to engage in academic practices in order to integrate into an academic community. I had to go through cycles of trial, error and refinement. I had to consciously think about which aspects of my behaviour I wanted to change and which aspects of academia I wanted to learn. I had to find people with whom I could work, which sometimes meant that I had to create a virtual cooperative environment.

Gutiérrez's (2008) Third Space is not only about writing and theory, as she uses a number of modalities to motivate, move and inspire students (such as music, performance art, writing, images and painting). So I suggest that you create a multimodal physical Third Space in which you place objects that inspire you, such as

2 Also see Part 5 of this book where various authors reflect on what postgraduate study as a social practice has meant to them.

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images of yourself, family or authors and people that you find meaningful. If you do not have the resources, write or type inspirational poetry and messages and place them on your bedroom or study walls, behind the door, on your desk or wherever you do your thesis work. I have stopped trying to fit myself into a template of how I thought an academic should look and act. I believe that academe in South Africa can stretch to accommodate your PhD canvas, and that is why my ideas around surviving and succeeding the PhD experience involve embracing the Third Space. As a first-generation student, I find the notions of hybridity, maintaining a critical lens and staying open to learning on all levels useful in making sense of my new environment.

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