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BEING MY OWN COACH: ACHIEVING BALANCE IN THE FOUR DOMAINS OF LIFE

Delia Layton

INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate study is so much more than just a cognitive journey. There are other equally important aspects of our lives. To succeed and, more importantly, survive your postgraduate study, you also need to have a reasonable quality of life throughout the journey. As human beings we are in relationship with and to the world. We have a relationship with our own inner world of thoughts, feelings and ideas, we have a relationship to our own bodies, we have relationships with other people, and with the world we live in. While cognitive competence is certainly important, from my experience, postgraduate study can be greatly supported by having a certain level of competency in all these other key areas of life and relationships as well.

Since completing my doctorate I have come across many people, who were (or still are) struggling to complete their doctorates after many years, and who expressed curiosity as to how I was able to complete my doctorate in three years while working full-time. At the time, I did not really reflect on this achievement and put it down to my hard work and application. It was only later that I realised that I had developed what Murphy (2013:24) called “strategies to survive and maintain wellness” while doing my PhD. Murphy (2013) highlights the importance of finding ways to enjoy the doctoral journey by achieving balance in one’s life. The “kisses between paragraphs” she made sure happened with her husband, were described by her as “one small step in a much larger and calculated strategy to surviving a PhD, maintaining wellness and completing it” (2013:25). Her advice to those on the PhD journey – to avoid negativity and to surround oneself with positivity – reflects a holistic approach to well-being, which is essential if you are to survive and succeed in postgraduate study.

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Finding an integrated way to develop well-being in all aspects of one's life is one of the aims of self-coaching – a self-directed activity in which an individual seeks to gain success in thoughts, actions and outcomes in life. Luciani (2005), a clinical psychologist and author of *The Power of Self-coaching*, developed three basic “self-coaching truths”:

- You must challenge the myth that anyone else can “rescue” you. Professional help can have huge value (and is essential for many struggling with severe depression), but you have to do the work.
- You must accept responsibility for personal change.
- You must be convinced that you really have a choice.

With the understanding that self-coaching involves much self-reflection to develop a deeper understanding of ourselves in terms of how we are in life, I have found the Four Human Domains model, used in the practice of Integral Coaching®, to be a useful way to ensure balance and wellness in life while undertaking postgraduate study. This model was developed by James Flaherty (2016, forthcoming), drawing on the work of the German philosopher, Habermas. It is used in integral coaching to assess what is happening in a person's life by mapping out and examining closely the different areas or domains in which life is being experienced.

The principal idea contained in this model of human experience is that it is important to live an integrated and balanced life that gives equal attention to all of the different domains that constitute our lives as human beings. I was introduced to this model after I had already completed my doctorate, so it was in retrospect, by applying my experiences to the four human domains, that I have come to realise that I was largely supported in all of these different areas of my life, and that this contributed greatly to my ability to survive and achieve success in my postgraduate study, as well as in “maintaining wellness” (Murphy 2013:26).

There has been much research conducted on the implications of work-life balance in the lives of graduate students. For example, Stimpson and Filer (2011:69) concluded that achieving balance with regard to one's family, work, studies and personal life was especially challenging for women¹. While a study by Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, and McFarlane (2013) on how doctoral students strived to achieve school-life-balance found that the predominant need that all participants expressed was for well-being, which included “maintaining their health, managing stress, and creating personal time” (Martinez *et al* 2013:54), and that these doctoral students (of both

¹ Also see the previous chapter by Guin Lourens that focusses on surviving and succeeding your postgraduate studies as a woman.

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genders) were able to achieve this to a large extent by managing their time, roles and responsibilities, managing their stress levels, as well as their physical and mental health, seeking financial and emotional support from various sources both in their institutions and privately, and by making “trade-offs” with regard to time spent with family and time for themselves (Martinez *et al* 2013 p. 44). Furthermore, Harrison (2012:279), whose doctoral study focussed on the development of doctoral identity, argues that the common feature of a successful doctoral journey seems to be “the position of taking the time for oneself, of having the doctoral space as an escape rather than its being an additional burden in a busy life (and) refusing to feel guilty about taking time for ourselves”.

This chapter will discuss these various aspects of human experience with regard to postgraduate study. I will discuss each of the four human domains in turn, providing specific questions that you can ask yourself as a form of self-coaching. The answers to these questions will be different for every person, but they can demonstrate ways in which different life experiences fall into these different domains. In reflecting on the answers to these questions there may be greater levels of support in one domain than in another, and different people may have more interest in or devote more energy to certain areas, giving less attention to or completely ignoring other areas. Awareness of what is happening in the different life domains may enable the identification of where changes may need to be made, such as giving more attention to certain neglected areas or making some adjustments within a particular domain. From my own experience, I believe that gaining this kind of self-awareness can greatly help your ability to survive and succeed in your postgraduate study. It may help, as it did for me, to shift your perspective to adopt a more positive outlook. As Harrison (2012:279) writes, “the most effective position to take is that learning is fun, and that one’s own thinking is interesting”.

THE FOUR HUMAN DOMAINS

According to Flaherty’s (2016, forthcoming) model, all events happen in and impact on four domains of life: the “Inner I” (inside me), the “Outer I” (body and behaviour), the “We” (group membership) and the “It” (the environment). The “Inner I” domain deals with our thoughts, beliefs, emotions, intentions and feelings. The “Outer I” domain focusses on our body and behaviour. The “We” domain has to do with our social context such as the language(s) we speak, the culturally specific practices we engage in, the relationships we are part of, and the history of the groups to which we belong. The “It” domain describes our relationship with the physical environment (including both the natural and the technological). While in life these domains are

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naturally interlinked and overlapping, to become competent in all of them, it is useful to separate them for analytical purposes. This analysis facilitates an awareness of what may be enabling or constraining our ability to succeed. I have found that by asking yourself questions relevant to each domain, it is possible to get a fairly accurate picture of what your world of postgraduate study looks like. For me, this kind of self-questioning and self-reflection has been really helpful in locating how I was positioning myself with regard to my doctoral journey. It has indeed been suggested that this kind of self-reflective activity can enable one “to be reflexively oriented towards improvement, personal or social, through a more realistic and nuanced understanding of a phenomenon” (Harrison 2012:4). The phenomenon here being the development of one’s doctoral identity.

THE “INNER I”

This domain relates to your individual inner experience and consciousness. It is not observable by others and has to do with your private inner world. Questions you can ask yourself here are:

- What are my thoughts and ambitions about my study?
- What assumptions am I making about my study and myself?
- What are my feelings and current emotions about my study?
- What is my predominant mood with respect to my study?
- What are my wishes and dreams about my study?
- What do I picture when I think about my study and the outcome of it?

Feelings tend to be tied in with emotions that may be triggered in the moment by some specific thing and may be quite fleeting. Moods, however, are emotions that may have accumulated and tend to remain more consistent over a period of time. Moods often determine the way we engage in our everyday lives and the actions we take (or do not take). So you may need to explore what your over-arching mood is around your study. For example, are you overwhelmed or anxious about your ability to succeed? In other words, what are you telling yourself about your study, and what are you paying attention to? As Foot *et al* (2014:113) argue, “doctoral students need to investigate their ways of being in the world and how this influences their daily practice”. This study found that there was great benefit in self-reflection as a way to address self-doubt and fear of failure, which the findings highlighted as common themes related to a sense of “self-inefficacy” (Foot *et al* 2014:111-112). For me, even though I was able to complete my study in a relatively short time, I also had the occasional voice of doubt and even sometimes asked myself why I was doing

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a doctorate. It was therefore useful for me to become aware of this voice, because the more I was able to tune into it, the more I could consciously engage with it rather than just letting it negatively impact the quality of my thoughts and ability to take action.

THE “OUTER I”

The notion of the “Outer I” relates to your body and outer observable behaviour. This domain asks you to assess how doing your postgraduate study is affecting your body, behaviour and well-being. Questions to ask yourself are:

- What is my relationship to my body generally, and how aware of it am I in my day to day life?
- Where do I hold tension in my body?
- Which part of my body do I tend to react from?
- How is my study impacting my body?
- What physical sensations do I experience when I am busy working on my study?
- How is my posture and breathing when I am working?
- What is my daily study routine?
- How am I taking care of my body?
- What physical activity am I doing?

In this domain, you would think about your awareness of and your relationship to your body generally. Your study may be impacting your body in various ways, such as affecting your sleeping and eating patterns, for instance. You may be holding tension in certain places in your body because of the way you sit at your desk or the length of time you spend at your desk. You may need to pay attention to this domain because it is easy to forget that you have a body as well as a brain, and you can become quite trapped in the cognitive space while working hard on the concepts and complexities related to your study.

During my doctorate I realised the importance of finding a balance in life and engaging in some form of physical activity – even just stretching or taking a walk. A change of scenery and pace would often give me the energy boost that was needed to release a feeling of being “stuck” and at the same time give a feeling of “re-charging my batteries”. Getting enough sleep and exercise should help with your ability to think and be creative. A lack of sleep not only impacts on your productivity, but also negatively affects your mood and emotions. When I was tired or feeling physically or emotionally stressed, it was easy to start feeling irritated or overwhelmed. However,

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I found it was really worthwhile addressing the tensions I was holding in my body by making frequent visits to the physiotherapist, massage therapist and chiropractor. In addition, my daily practice of meditation, while often “thought-filled”, brought much-needed time for me to be still.

THE “WE”

This is the domain that comes into play with regard to your membership to groups or your relationships with others and the community. Your background and upbringing, history, culture, religious affiliations, social and familial relationships, as well as relationships with colleagues at work all have an influence on you and your postgraduate journey². Questions you could ask yourself with regard to this domain are:

- What language do I most typically use when I talk about my study?
- What sorts of conversations do I have around my study?
- How is my upbringing and cultural history impacting my study and how I see myself?
- How does my role and obligations as a parent, family member, member of a community, or religious group impact on my study?
- Who is supporting me with my study?
- What requests do I make of others?
- How is my study impacting my relationships and my ability to be present to others?
- How am I taking care of my relationships while focussing on my study?
- Which relationships are supportive of me and my study?
- Which relationships are unsupportive of me and my study?

The kind of language you use and how you generally speak about your study can often bring into clear focus the way you view yourself in relation to the study itself. For example, if you find yourself often saying in conversation, “this study of mine is such a pain” or “I’m sick of my study” or words to that effect, it might be that you are really doubting your ability to succeed or you are finding the study is taking up too much of your time and affecting your relationships. Issues from this domain can link directly with your inner world in domain one (the “Inner I”). In my study, for

2 Various chapters in this book highlight the importance of postgraduate study as taking place within a larger social realm. See, for example, the chapters by Shakira Choonara (Chapter 4), Soraya Abdulatief (Chapter 6), Andre van der Bijl (Chapter 7) and Guin Lourens (Chapter 9).

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instance, I recall using a fair amount of negative language about a particular theorist whose writing style I was initially finding to be rather impenetrable. This impacted negatively on my engagement with the theory and my ability to gain the necessary conceptual understanding of the work. It was only after I became conscious about how negatively I was speaking about this issue that I was able to take a different approach and eventually find a way around the initial blockage.

Perhaps you find that in your culture or family, postgraduate study is not valued much or perhaps is seen to be taking too much of a priority in your life at the expense of your other social roles such as being a parent, family member, or member of a particular community. Alternatively, your success or failure with regard to your postgraduate degree may be putting you under strain because it means so much to your family. It may be worth looking at the level of support you are getting from others with whom you have a relationship. This could include members of your family, your friends, your supervisor or even work colleagues. Do you feel, for instance, that others are giving you the kind of support or the space you need, or do you feel your study is having a negative impact on your ability to be present and available to them? What requests are you making of others? What requests are others making of you? Do you even think about the impact on you agreeing to the requests made by others? What offers are you making to others that no one is even asking for? These are really important questions to be asking yourself, because doing this kind of study is demanding and it is important to find balance in your life. If you're not being conscious about making requests and thinking about your capacity, it could easily add to your feeling of being overwhelmed if you are not creating enough space for your own needs. Also important to ask is which relationships are nourishing you and which ones are being unsupportive or undermining of you and your study?

I am well aware of how fortunate I was in that I was well supported both at home and at work in my "being-on-the-doctoral-journey". This all-encompassing kind of support played a key role in my ability to successfully complete my PhD. Of course, the relationship and support of your supervisor cannot be underestimated. In my case, I had a productive and supportive relationship with my supervisor. I am also grateful that I was able to form a connection with a group of postgraduate scholars doing their doctorates and regular contact with this "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991) certainly made the journey a less lonely one³.

3 See also chapters 15, 16 & 17 in Part 5 of this book that positions postgraduate study as a social practice.

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THE “IT”

The “It” aspect relates to the external world and asks how does your relationship with the natural and technological world impact your study. Questions that can be asked of this domain are:

- How do my physical surroundings impact my study?
- What are the systems, processes and procedures that I am using for my study?
- Am I making optimal use of the resources I have?
- What additional skills might I need to make better use of systems and processes?
- How do I manage my time?
- How do I go about learning new things?
- When I am working, how much do I connect to the natural world?
- Where do I find beauty and meaning in my life while doing my study?

Is your physical environment (where you work or perhaps your office) conducive to your study? Sitting on an uncomfortable chair at a cluttered desk could result in physical discomfort and irritation. Similarly, working in a noisy place with constant distractions can affect your capacity to concentrate. This domain also has to do with systems, processes and procedures, and you may need to ask whether you are using these systems, processes and procedures in an efficient way or whether you could improve your skills to make better use of them? You may need to learn how to better use a computer program or some other technology to assist you with your study. Are you managing your time well? Are you making the best use of the resources you have at hand? The “It” domain also relates to the natural environment, so it may also be useful to look at how you are interacting with the natural world while doing your study. Do you take time to connect to nature, even spending just a few minutes in your garden or outdoors?

In my doctoral study, taking time out to commune with nature often provided a much needed respite from the busy-ness of my internal world of work. Technologically, I was fortunate to have easy and reasonably reliable access to the internet, and found that email and Skype conversations with my supervisor could be conducted without too many problems. However, I had to learn how to use certain types of technology as I went along, for example how to use a software program to help me analyse parts of the data that I had transcribed from interviews. There were also some rather heart-stopping moments when I forgot to back up the latest or correct version of my drafts, or when I got confused over which saved version was the “final”, “very final”

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or “absolutely final” one. Having reliable systems can be useful in being organised and meeting deadlines, as well as reducing version anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Bandura (2006:165) argues that “most human functioning is socially situated” and so we are affected not only by our own self-reflections but also by the people we interact with and our environmental context. The concept of the four human domains, by situating a person in terms of both the inner and outer aspects of individual and group life, as well as that of environmental influences, can provide a useful way to self-coach by getting a comprehensive view of how you are living through your postgraduate study. If you are able to reflect (by giving your own honest responses to the various questions that I have posed), there may be areas receiving too much or too little attention. Being aware of possible imbalances can be a first, but crucial, step towards surviving and succeeding.

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