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THE PHD PROCESS: DOCTOR OR DOCTORED?

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INTRODUCTION

The doctoral journey has been the most profound and intense intellectual and emotional engagement I have had in my academic life. It is fitting that the PhD graduation ceremony, which is the culmination of years of intellectual endurance and perseverance, is filled with tradition and ceremony. The four-year doctoral journey is similar to the four-minute walk across the stage to be capped and hooded. Stepping onto the stage is like stepping into the doctoral space. Walking across the stage requires that you are mindful of the audience – as you have to be with the reader of the thesis. Being acknowledged by the university through its conferring of the degree is synonymous with academic peer review. Finally facing the academic community is like coming through the examination process. All these physical movements during graduation embody the stages in the doctoral journey from conception of the research question, to the final submission of the thesis for examination, and then to graduation.

Standing there, finely kitted out in academic gown and regalia, the more pressing and immediate task was walking across the stage. What if I tripped over myself in my eagerness to make it to the other end as Doctor Behari-Leak? I had just completed an intellectual marathon to the finish line, so the short “walk to freedom” could not be that involved, could it? As I made my way to the chancellor to be capped, I faced a huge dilemma. If I knelt down onto the low stool, would I be able to stand up again given that I was wearing a saree, which is a traditional Indian outfit? Would my cultural trappings result, literally, in my downfall? If my saree did get caught, would I be stuck there, frozen in time, half capped, not hooded? The weightier issue was that submitting or kneeling down to anyone was not something I did very well, so how would I succumb and humble myself before this esteemed chancellor of the university?

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Although initially annoyed that these questions had found their way into my celebratory minute of fame, this challenging of your assumptions is the very skill needed in a doctoral project. Through this, you learn that it is important to insert and assert your own questions, voice, beliefs, values and attitudes into the process of *becoming* a doctoral scholar and researcher. After all, who you are and what you as researcher bring to the doctoral endeavour influence and shape the type of research questions you ask and the rigour with which you carry out your investigation. The whole thesis, by its very nature, does not simply emerge by itself. The research question itself is driven by your own passion, commitment and engagement with a topic that has come to mean something important to you. It is born out of your immersion in a field that you have *mastered*, and from which you have identified, after deep reflection and thought, a unique research problem for your doctoral study.

In this chapter, I share how I navigated and negotiated this terrain and how I chose to respond to particular challenges that contributed to my own unease and resistance, but which pushed my boundaries in many positive ways. It is important for doctoral scholars to insert themselves into their research in meaningful ways, and claim the doctoral space for themselves.

DOCTORAL TRADITIONS AND CONVENTIONS

In embarking on your doctoral study, you have to be aware that the doctoral process has power to shape and mould you in different ways, as it should. You step into an academic space of “doctoral natives” who have paved the way by creating strong traditions and conventions of doctoral writing and dissemination, which have come to be accepted as the unquestioned model for this kind of research (Denzin 2001; Hanrahan, Cooper & Burroughs-Lange 1999). Your status as “doctoral immigrant” is highly dependent on your ability to charter your own course in already well-established waters. The challenge is that the standard chapters, such as the introduction, literature review, findings, discussion and conclusion, tolerate few variations on the traditional theme. Even in this digital age, the dissemination of research findings is confined mainly to conventional paper-based versions, and research excellence is measured through monographs or academic journals (Carrigan 2013).

Such boundedness to conventions and traditions begs the question: whose conventions, whose traditions, and to what end? There seems to be little space for emerging researchers with alternative research methodologies to illustrate their findings in creative, unique and mysterious ways that are considered legitimate scholarly research. You might find, like I did, that the presentation of the PhD thesis using the traditional, canonical, westernised format can be limiting and limited in

allowing you to express yourself creatively, as it does not capture the emotional labour (Zembylas 2007, 2012; Ahmed 2004) involved in the project. Your final PhD product, like mine, might not be a fair representation of the sensory, emotional and kinaesthetic aspects involved (Jones 2006); nor will it necessarily enable the cultural expression that allows the text and audience to come together easily and inform one another (Denzin 2001).

You might find that the traditional scientific and social science doctoral model gives an “over-simplified picture of how learning happens and what knowledge is, since it presents learning as a more or a less linear, impersonal and individualistic process” (Hanrahan *et al* 1999:401). The actual process is far from the rational, deliberate and clinical one it appears to be. It is a highly creative project, which involves false starts, readjustments, redefinition and uncertainty (Scrivener 2000). Because the traditional doctorate is embedded in a problem-solving rather than in a creative production approach (Berridge 2008), it cannot fully capture the scope of approaches arising from different views of the world which may embody alternative understandings of how knowledge is created (Haberman 2009). The conventions of doctoral theses are also “detached from the personal, cultural and historical context of the researcher” (Hanrahan *et al* 1999:401) and the nature of “scholarship” is not receptive and representative of scholars who are not of western tradition. As a doctoral scholar writing in the “Global South”, I have found the traditional thesis to have limited scope for grey areas or creative space for expression through the use of colour and shape, for example. There is little room for speculation, hearsay, gut feel, intuition, mystery or transcendental wisdom that may be borne by bearers who are natural researchers through their deep experiences of life.

You also might find that the accepted conventions of academic doctoral research do not always accommodate the scholar’s cultural repertoire or style of writing (Canagarajah 2006). The limitations and boundaries of the printed page may offer little space for exits and entrances characteristic of creative writers in any discipline (Berridge 2008). Despite these conventions being upheld, there is evidence of shifts in reporting academic work. Texts that mark cultural shifts (such as those used in social justice research) have succeeded in challenging assumptions and practices regarding writing within academia (Richardson 1994). These shifts include alternative methods such as narratives, autobiography, auto-ethnography, and photo-elicitation to generate deep and rich accounts of research participants’ views and insights by *showing*, rather than only *telling* (Phelan 1998:13). If you are interested in adopting alternative approaches, you may contribute to transforming doctoral study – provided that your work still upholds the benchmarks of scientific rigour.

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Most self-help manuals on the doctoral journey (Sternberg 1981; Rose & McClafferty 2001; Kamler & Thomson 2008; Oliver 2004; Hochschild 2003) claim that the scholar's greatest achievement is adding an original contribution to the existing body of knowledge, but I would argue that this is a vital by-product of an even greater accomplishment. A more tacit outcome is the development in the scholar, of a particular way of interacting with knowledge and with the world. If you are consciously involved in the process of being and becoming the doctoral scholar, your own traditions, practices and ways of seeing the world will alter and transform you in ways that are irreducible to the outcomes achieved in the thesis. If more of us do this, the greater the potential is for the boundaries to be extended and for more creative expression and dissemination to be accepted as part of an academic discourse in doctoral research.

As a prospective doctoral scholar, you need to be aware that the liberating process of coming into being as a PhD scholar and writer may be denied to you if you stick too rigidly to prescribed traditions and conventions. There are many ways in which traditions and conventions, if left unchallenged, dominate to the extent that you do not recognise yourself anymore. In the current global and international climate, we need to critique the normative way that research in the social as well as in the natural sciences functions, as if neutral and absent of ideology (Richardson 1994). More significantly, if you are uncritical of instead of claiming your space as doctoral scholar, you may become "doctored" in the process. If you do not want to be doctored into submission, which can leave you feeling like a passive impostor in your own work, find a way to insert your own expression and voice that pushes the doctoral envelope further. I therefore urge you to think about what *your* needs are and consider how *you* could best present your work in ways that are creative, unique and meaningful to your study.

THE HEAD, HEART, HAND OF DOCTORAL STUDY

One of the ways to shift paradigms is by experimenting with different ways of "knowing, acting and being" (Dall'Alba & Barnacle 2007:10), and by troubling the knowledge that has come to be accepted as the truth (Dall'Alba 2009). As a doctoral student, I was aware that emotional and affective spaces (Zembylas 2007) regarding my self-esteem and confidence to write well had opened up. Using the concepts of knowing, being and doing (Martin & Mirra-Boopa 2003), discussed below, I was able to conceptualise the doctoral process as a holistic and integrated one. I did not have to deny or ignore the emotionality, and this awareness encouraged me to see that

the head (knowing), heart (being), and hand (doing) each had a role to play and that I could embrace all three domains. It is in this meta-reflexive space that you can develop a strong scholarly voice and sense of purpose as a person, researcher and academic, and come to know yourself as a doctoral graduate in the making.

KNOWING THE DOCTORAL SCHOLAR

Knowing yourself is critical before you start your studies as this will affect your purpose, motivation and sustained interest in the PhD. There are various ways in which our lives intersect with academic knowledge at the crossroads of undertaking a PhD. I started looking at the possibility of doing a doctorate to offset my own existential crisis as an academic in higher education who was plagued by questions: What was the point of it all? What would be the outcome? Like many others, I chose to do a PhD so that I could make a difference, but I must admit that I partly succumbed to the pressure to enter the doctoral marathon with the purpose of obtaining a better academic position in higher education. I was aware that, if I wanted to make a difference in academia, I needed to learn to play by the rules before I could break them. A doctorate provided me with such credibility. If your reasons are similar to mine, I would suggest that your key challenge at the outset is to figure out how to channel your ideas, values and beliefs into an academic project that will not only contribute meaningfully to your chosen field of study, but that will also sustain your own interests and passion. If your reasons are purely for certification and credentialisation, you might find it difficult to reconcile who you are, what you know and what you believe with what is expected of you as the doctoral scholar. In a country like South Africa – which is riddled with the master narratives of class, gender, race, ability, ethnicity and language (Mangcu 2015; Mbembe 2015) – I have found that the tension between *knowing* and *being* becomes pronounced and plays itself out in the doctoral space¹. As such, the doctorate becomes a site for ongoing struggle. With a good sense of self as you embark on a PhD, you will keep grounded and focussed on the key research questions in ways that are meaningful to you.

BEING THE DOCTORAL SCHOLAR

As doctoral scholars, we come into our studies with a wealth of experiences, conditioning and positions that strongly shape who we are and who we become. This is especially true in the social sciences, where such influences are crucial to how

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¹ This tension between knowing and being is also emphasised by other authors in this book – see for example the contributions of Andre van der Bijl (Chapter 7), Langutani Masehela (Chapter 12) and Catherine Robertson (Chapter 13).

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researchers shape their studies to raise awareness of social issues. My positionality as doctoral scholar and researcher was set against this backdrop.

It was fortuitous therefore that, at the beginning of 2011, I was accepted to be part of the Social Inclusion Doctoral Project at Rhodes University, the first of its kind, funded through a grant from the National Research Foundation. I had found the perfect medium to channel my efforts through a cohort approach, which drew on a collaborative pedagogy and socio-cultural theories of learning. The idea of co-creating and co-producing knowledge in a shared, supportive and scaffolded environment, rather than as an individualistic and solitary learning activity, resonated with me and spoke to my personal objectives of studying in a way that was meaningful, purposeful, valuable, critical and transformational. If you too thrive in collaborative learning contexts, try to find a community of post-graduate scholars at your university or elsewhere with whom you can connect and share ideas, and from whom you can learn.

Apart from the collaborative support of peers and others, the doctoral journey cannot be undertaken without a knowledgeable guide, in the form of a supervisor. The role of the supervisor is crucial and critical to the direction, detours and new paths that the scholar takes. I have been fortunate to have had two supervisors who have provided me with a safe space to discuss, debate, share, extend and shape the research project and doctoral journey in meaningful ways. As experts and authorities in the higher education field, they gave me excellent counsel. Through the many occasions of despair, they were able to guide me even when I could not find my way. Through such a positive supervision experience, I am in awe of what potential there is for other novices like me to be mentored and supported in such meaningful ways, by similar supervisors who had just the right balance between guiding, steering, and leading, without compromising the scholar, and who provided the conducive energy and influences for the exercise of agency of the scholar².

Being a doctoral scholar means that the way in which you argue, justify, defend, conceptualise and theorise your study also says something about you as a responsible scholar in the making. Your research design and methods are equally under scrutiny and many of your choices have to be rigorously defended in your thesis. This is where the process of *coming into being* as a doctoral graduate is important. To

2 I am drawing on Margaret Archer's (1995; 2003) notion of agency which refers to the social explanatory theory used to account for human action, agential choices and causal relations. "Agency" points to the capacity of people to act on their social worlds in a voluntary way, based on their personal and psychological constitutions. The double-loop of people acting on themselves while being acted on is salutary to the existence and acknowledgement of the human agent as having independent powers and properties (Archer 2003). See Chapter 12 in this book that also draws on this particular notion.

pay homage to this process, I included a pre-introductory chapter in my doctoral thesis titled “Chapter Zero”, appropriately named to invoke the notion that Chapter One, or the background and context chapter (as it is conventionally known), does not simply emerge by itself from nowhere. Through the concept of Zero, I revoked the notion that “nothing comes from nothing” (a quote from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, echoing the proposition of Parmenides, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher) as I believe that there is always *something* to be developed, shaped and nurtured from ground zero into something greater. This is something you might consider doing if you too want to remind the reader that a great deal of preparation, planning and designing, as well as heart and soul, led you to the thesis. You might decide to include a reflective chapter or addendum such as this to offer a narrative on your own doctoral journey and the assertion of your doctoral Self. Such a contribution encourages examiners, scholars and researchers to acknowledge that real people do research, and that subjectivity is in the nature of being real (Sayer 1992). It does not have to detract from the rigour of the investigation. To this end my Chapter Zero (Behari-Leak 2015) had a very personal touch, and included pages in colour, with watermarked images, photographs of key people and influences, and graphics and symbolic representations that captured mood and intent. In this way, I inserted and asserted the doctoral scholar as a knowing, thinking, feeling and valuing human being.

DOING: STEPPING INTO THE SPACE AS DOCTORAL SCHOLAR

Doctoral agency is crucial to the depth and quality of your thesis. What you do is as important as what you choose not to do. My supervisors made me aware that stepping into the doctoral space was the most difficult hurdle to overcome. You need to be aware that you are stepping into this space with specific identities. I, for example, was aware that I was stepping into that space as a raced, gendered, languaged and classed individual, and this awareness helped me to locate and position myself alongside my study, and move from understanding who I was to what I could do (Archer 1995). This is where the shifts began to happen for me, and may well happen for you, for as your knowledge and understanding shift, so too do your identity and agency; not just as a cognitive exercise but as real shifts in your thinking, feeling and actions as well as your valuing, attitudes and discourse.

When these shifts happen, you cannot become invisible and silent (Maton 2001). Your voice is important and the doctoral experience is an embodied one, one that you should claim fully. This does not mean that the tension between the traditions and conventions of the doctorate and your location in the process will be eradicated,

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but remember it is through the activities of agents who hold ideas and who act within social contexts on and within social structures that social change may be effected (Archer 1995). You need to hold onto your personal project: What are my commitments and interests and what will my study achieve? This sense of identity and agency is what will shape the choices and decisions you make and will sustain you throughout the process.

LOCATING THE DOCTORAL SCHOLAR IN AN EMERGING PARADIGM

Once you have accepted that you have a right to be here, your next quest is to find a research methodology and framework that allow you the freedom to be creative while you are attending to the doctoral project's central concerns and questions. In my case, I was not convinced that the conventional modes of inquiry usually associated with research in the humanities, namely interviews, observations, document analysis and discussions (Alvesson 2003), would contribute to my study in dynamic ways. I had found that when the data "out there" becomes the property of the researcher "in here", it renders the voices and identities of the contributors silenced after their role has been fulfilled (Denzin 2001).

If you are also exploring research of a social science nature that involves other people, you might want to consider how you engage with your research participants. In my study, I wanted to *generate*, and not merely *collect* data (Behari-Leak 2015), in order to reflect a mutually beneficial relationship between "subject" and "agent". An emerging paradigm known as the "Third Space"³ (Bhabha 1996) provided the framework for me to conceptualise the possibility of this perspective. As an alternative way of understanding research and its purpose, you might also be interested in locating your research in this hybrid space to look critically at the taken-for-granted assumptions of the researcher and researched⁴.

The research methods that I chose included participatory learning and action techniques (Chambers 2006), which used drawings, free writing, problem trees, rivers of life and community maps to engage my research participants in the research process. Through these methods I was able to generate rich data for the purposes of my study, which the

3 A new way of working with research participants and research data signals the move away from externally imposed denial and detachment of the subject who is doing the research from the object of study, to a reclaiming of the role and involvement of the self, particularly where the self is personally involved (Denzin 2004). This "Third Space" provides the framework for understanding research as a "hybrid space" where the researcher and the researched share integrity of process in a mutually beneficial exchange (Denzin 2004).

4 See Chapter 6 by Soraya Abdulatief that addresses this issue in more depth.

traditional interview as a research method might not have been able to do. The process took the form of a photo voice story (Wang & Burris 1997), through which participants shared their experiences using photographs they had taken in response to my research questions and prompts. These stories were shared in a story circle, recorded and later transcribed for analysis. I strongly suggest that you explore and find the set of research methods that speaks to what you are trying to achieve, rather than settling for tried and tested methods, just because many have followed that route before.

CONCLUSION

The doctoral journey encompasses both cognitive and affective elements that require a doctoral scholar to engage, not only with the theoretical and research framework, but also in the doctoral experience itself and in the process of stepping into the doctoral space. For me, like many other South African scholars, this meant exercising my doctoral agency by facing my fears, accepting my limitations, playing to my strengths, setting achievable goals and intentions, and making decisions to act on my educated guesses and hunches. In being critically reflexive, I was able to find synergies between my own interests, the research purpose and thesis outcomes.

As principal author, your doctoral voice and positionality need not be minimised. Explicit acknowledgement of who you are as the scholar and how you have conceived of the project makes it possible for readers to resonate with more than the research findings. Achieving this balance requires a healthy and robust supervision relationship, as well as collaboration with others on a similar path. In the South African context, this collegial social learning and socio-cultural dimension should not be underestimated, especially as we become more connected and multimodal in the digital age. In considering different ways of “doing your PhD”, you may contribute to an expansion and extension of the traditional PhD canon so that cultural diversity can be acknowledged and appreciated as legitimate ways of doing research. The more scholars are able to take their supervisors, examiners and readers on this journey, the broader research horizons become.

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