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SO WHAT DO YOU THINK? THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN DOCTORAL LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

When I first articulated that I was embarking on a doctoral study, the inevitable question I got asked was, “So what are you doing?” Anxiety would grip me in response to this question. I found myself stymied and could not clearly explain what I wanted to do. Although frightening, such dialogues are essential, even if you feel that they are not fruitful since you may not yet have the ontological, epistemological or methodological lenses for your study. My first thought in these conversations would be that I wanted to solve all the problems in my field. My study was to be something quite revolutionary. I stammered and stuttered my way through a long rambling answer and could see from the quizzical look on the face of my interrogator that my answer was barely sufficient. You may feel the same way as you begin to formulate a focus area for your study. But continuing the dialogue with yourself and others will help you to eventually see your study focus more clearly.

A doctoral study can be shaped and reshaped through such dialogue with a number of significant others in your community of practice. You may have heard talk of a doctoral study as lonely (Harrison 2007, Brailsford 2010) and therefore, by implication, lack dialogue with others. The doctoral journey can be compared to popular conceptions of an only child in a family, as doctoral candidates are often thought of as solitary (no siblings at hand), maladjusted (abnormal focus on your studies), selfish (too much time spent away from significant others), spoilt (spending time on your passion), privileged (by virtue of doing a doctorate), and overly intellectual (preoccupied with a research project that requires extensive periods of solitary thinking).

This chapter attempts to debunk the myth of the lonely doctoral scholar by showing how community dialogues can assist in the development of a more adjusted, engaged

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and focussed scholar¹. Dialogue within a community also resonates particularly with us as South Africans, as it speaks to the African concept of Ubuntu². This concept is often illustrated through the Nguni proverb of “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” or “a person is a person through other persons” (Gade 2011:487). This means that we find value and meaning through our interconnectedness and interaction with others, which also holds true for your doctoral studies.

Bernstein (1983:162) notes that “[w]hat is most characteristic of our humanity is that we are dialogical or conversational human beings”. For a doctoral study, this means a focus on communities of practice to mediate your understanding of your study. Engaging in ongoing iterative conversations with communities of practice in your field allows you to refine a doctoral focus. These conversations could include supervisors, colleagues or critical friends, higher degrees committee members, other scholars at your proposal presentation, practitioners at conferences, discussions with scholars who are using similar theoretical lenses or doing similar research, as well as online communities³. I will discuss each of these possible dialogic partners in turn and how they might facilitate your doctoral development before, during and after doctoral study. I recognise that these spaces could be daunting to enter when you are not yet eloquent in the field. However, there is value in such engagement as it may help with the focus that is often so elusive in the initial stages of a doctoral study, help you to conceptualise your study throughout your journey, and make the journey less lonely.

DIALOGIC SPACES AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COP)

The doctoral journey can be framed within notions of dialogic spaces (Bakhtin 1990) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). Language as used in dialogue involves a multiplicity of speakers where truth is negotiated (Bakhtin 1990), while critical dialogic engagement is that which provides enabling transformations (Bebbington, Brown, Frame & Thomson 2007). What you can draw from dialogics as a scholar is how human agency is understood and with what agency it provides you in understanding your own practice (in this case as a scholar-in-becoming). In this view, you collectively (re)produce and transform praxis (making the link between theory and practice) as the meanings which you put upon your situation can be changed as a result of dialogue (Bebbington *et al* 2007). For example, you may

1 Also see the other chapters in this part of the book (Part 5), where different contributors reflect upon postgraduate study as a non-isolated, social practice.

2 See the chapter by Langutani Masehela (Chapter 12) where the concept of Ubuntu is addressed in more detail.

3 See Chapter 17 (by Wolvaardt *et al*) for a discussion on critical friends.

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initially have grand ideas of solving all the problems of a particular situation (as I did), but learn through dialogue that a narrow focus also can be meaningful.

Voice plays a significant role in your activities as scholar. Voice emerges in your dialogical conversations to take you further along by encouraging and shifting your thinking. We usually discover “who we are by addressing ourselves to others or the voices of others within us” (Murchison 1998:465). Our individual and collective scholarly voices mould our studies towards completion.

Often though, there are many voices giving input on what you are doing in your study and how you should be doing it. Burton (1997) says that these voices are the meanings competing for supremacy. This struggle over meaning is part of the dialogic process. As meanings are linked to power, it may influence who or what is deemed legitimate. Bebbington *et al* (2007) argue that there has to be recognition of the authenticity of others to whom you listen to and discuss, to seek underlying values and assumptions in multi-voiced exchanges. Through dialogue you can speak back to authoritative discourses and make your own contributions. Dialogic conversations encourage reflexivity, and reflection is what separates the novice from the expert (Daley 1999). Theorising dialogically helps to refine your focus and conceptual lenses through authentic conversation. There is always room for inquiry as dialogics is by its very nature ontological by seeking a point of view on what is considered as the so-called truth. As a developing scholar you have the capacity to resist, inquire, confront and make personal meaning for your own studies out of such conversations (White 2009). In order to do this, you have to take an additional step outside of the dialogue to make sense of the moment, based on what can be seen. Bakhtin (1990:ix, part 1) describes this as an “excess of seeing”, where you step outside the dialogue to see the value it has for your doctorate and how you can speak to a particular point of view raised in the dialogue in your doctorate.

Related to dialogics is the notion of Communities of Practice (CoP) as conceptualised by Lave and Wenger (1991), who developed a model of situated learning that sees learning as occurring within a community of practice. A CoP is defined as people engaging in “a process of collective learning within a shared domain of human endeavour” (Wenger 1999:1). He describes the shared domain as meaning everyone who is committed to the domain and share competence; the community as members engaged in joint activities and joint discussion, helping and sharing information and the practice as shared practitioners with a shared repertoire of resources. As such, CoP can be described as “a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave

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& Wenger 1991:98). For your doctorate this means sharing ideas with individuals who have common concerns and passions.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991) people join such communities initially at the periphery. This learning by newcomers is called Legitimate Peripheral Participation. As you become more competent you move to the centre. When you embark on a doctoral study in a particular field, you may be doing so initially as an outsider. You do not yet know the discourse and ways of being in the field. You are thus not able to speak eloquently within and contribute substantively to the discourse at this stage. However, you need to draw on the idea of the value of the social participation first, as Hodkinson and Hodkinson (n.d.) argue that learning in a CoP is a social process where identity, knowing and membership are significant. This initial social participation leads you to eventual full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Those involved in CoPs often have vested interests, but as the nature of a dialogical relationship also involves self-reflective spaces, these encounters will allow you to assess the merits of what others (who often will have opposing views) are saying and how these views speak to your doctoral study. Fundamentally though, a CoP has the potential to open up dialogic spaces to engage about your doctorate and the voices that emanate from CoPs help to shape and reshape your doctorate. There are many instances of dialogues with your community of practice before, during and after a doctoral study that are valuable in shaping your study.

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

Taylor (1994) talks of communities as not only whole communities, but layered communities, crisscrossing communities and partial communities. In doctoral studies, these communities include supervisors, colleagues, higher degrees committee members and doctoral scholars, scholars and practitioners at conferences and online communities and conferences who may consist of the same or different people at different times. The dialogic spaces that these different and ever-changing communities create could allow you to conceptualise and refine your study.

Dialogue with supervisors

The most significant space for dialogue is the one between you and your supervisor. You may have the opportunity to choose your own supervisor or you may be allocated a supervisor. No matter how this relationship came to be, its functioning is fundamental to the success of your study. Open and ongoing dialogue increases the chances of a successful doctoral journey.

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Being the legitimate peripheral learner (Lave & Wenger 1991) may impede your communication with your supervisor. Begin with the move to full participation by opening the dialogue with your supervisor through a discussion of your initial thoughts; what it is you are proposing to do. This could take the form of the following statement, *"I am interested in looking at ... (insert your topic of interest), because ... (insert your rationale for wanting to do so)."* As focus areas are often broad in the beginning, the response from your supervisor could go along the lines of, *"There are a few focus areas to be found within what you say. At the moment, there are too many different issues battling each other to be in the foreground."*

Furthermore, your supervisor may outline to you what the different (perhaps competing) focus areas are in your study. Your area may need narrowing down and ongoing discussions would assist here. Your dialogue could then move to a dialogue where you critically reflect on your focus based on the input obtained from your supervisor, *"I have had a look at your synthesis of my focus. I have given it some thought and have decided to go with the following focus ..."*

Ongoing dialogue thus continues to take you into new spaces where you are left with more new questions which you further refine with your supervisor in the initial stages of your study. Once you have formulated what it is you want to focus on, planning a regular dialogue (for example once a week or month, depending on your circumstances) keeps the momentum going. The dialogue occurs around your writing as it progresses. Beware of not working too long on honing a section or chapter before sending to your supervisor(s). You may want it to be perfect before you send it off for comment but the dialogue will falter if regular writing is not discussed frequently. A long lull in writing and communication sets up more and more barriers which become difficult to overcome.

A doctorate is often tied to one's sense of identity entailing the learning of "doctorateness" and the negotiation of a new identity (Harrison 2007:9), and receiving feedback becomes a further obstacle to progress. Seeing feedback as your supervisor shining a clearer light on your ideas may be a good way of dealing with supervisory critique. The space should not be a combative one that mitigates against the growth and enrichment of the process. Areas of conflict should be addressed in positive ways and not allowed to simmer. The dialogue that forms part of feedback is one of mutual respect though the supervisor is in the position of having more authority on the field and study itself – at least initially. Receiving feedback does not mean that you cannot assert your own ideas.

The dialogue continues and intensifies as you approach the final stages of submission. Here it is crucial for you and your supervisor to collectively map out how often you

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will be conversing and what both parties expect from these conversations. You do not want to be part of a one-way conversation where there are no responses, especially since doctoral study is seen as involving a process of becoming (Barnacle 2005) and thus a move to a critical, independent and responsible scholar (Lin & Cranton 2005).

Dialogues with colleagues and critical friends

A different dialogic space is that of colleagues who could give you rich feedback on your study. Perhaps you are in an educational institution where you could present your research project at a research seminar or departmental meeting. This space could alert you to areas you may not have considered or critiques on the theory you are using. Colleagues who have gone on this journey before you may have good advice about pitfalls and possibilities. Even if you are not in an educational institution, colleagues are still of value and you may seek opportunities such as a formal staff meeting or informal chats to present your project. This space helps you focus on the rationale of your study, especially if it is related to the field you are working in. If you are studying full time and have no colleagues with whom to discuss your study, critical friends can fill this space. Even if they are not studying or have not studied, critical friends can help you by asking questions. They would be holding a mirror for you to see your study's reflections and this assists in gaining more clarity. In the initial stages of your study, such questions help you to see what your doctoral study is about and who it is aimed at.

Dialogue at proposal presentation

Institutions in South Africa often require of doctoral candidates to do a formal presentation (some call it a defence) of their doctorate. Other scholars, professors from the university's higher degrees committee, as well as internal and external examiners could be present. The audience would also usually have read the proposal beforehand. At this session, you usually prepare a presentation outlining the rationale for your study and argue as to why it warrants a study of this nature. You would also provide your ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological positions as it pertains to the research design (Frick 2011).

Questions from the audience constitute the real dialogue and therein lies the value of this space. At a postgraduate seminar I attended, a member of the audience asked a doctoral candidate, "What troubles you?" This question was in reference to what the candidate wanted to do. The audience member indicated that he was not getting a sense of what the focus area of the study was. The candidate then clarified in more

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detail what her focus area was. This may resonate with you because you too may have trouble conceptualising your research in the beginning stages of your study. If you are given feedback on the areas you presented and especially those you may have to engage with more fully, it could greatly benefit your study in the long term. You also respond to questions and both the questions and your reflections upon them allow you to give and gain more clarity on the various aspects of your study.

Dialogue at conferences

Conferences are further important dialogic spaces with a community of practice. You may be wary of presenting your study at a conference until after graduation, but these spaces can also help you move forward during your doctoral journey.

My supervisor encouraged me and others to present our proposals at conferences as work in progress. The studies of those of us who took up the challenge emerged stronger as a result. Decide on conferences that speak to your field of study as these are the audiences with whom you want to engage. You may only have your rationale, theory and methodology to talk about at this stage. But that is enough. The feedback you will get will encourage further dialogics with your supervisor in order to address any concerns that arose, or to further refine a particular area of your study.

You could also present on your initial data findings at a conference. You may not have analysed all your data, but only a section of it. You could speak to it as a work in progress and discuss with conference participants the merits of the claims you are making. This could allow your conceptual and analytical lenses to become even sharper.

Post-doctoral conferences are also spaces that could continue to shape your work as you take the findings forward. The audience may of course tell you what you should or should not have done but the main idea is to open up spaces for your findings and recommendations. They should engage with the implications of your study and the contribution it has made to new knowledge. How your study advances your field will be significant conversations. You may also get ideas about how to take your study forward by applying new conceptual lenses.

It is also important to share your findings with practitioners in your field. There were solid reasons for embarking on your study and your recommendations need to be part of conversations in practice. Practitioners do not necessarily attend academic conferences, but it is necessary to find or create dialogic spaces where you can feed your work back into practice if you want it to have relevance beyond academia. Also

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remember that you have a responsibility to the practitioners and respondents (where relevant) to make your results known as widely as possible.

Dialogue with experts

You or your supervisor may know of experts in your field with whom you could have additional sessions. A theorist or scholar whose work you are using may be coming to present at a conference and a meeting could be arranged for you to have a conversation with him/her. If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, you could connect with such a person online. A leap in learning or the crossing of a conceptual threshold (Whisker, Kiley & Aisten 2006) could result from engaging with someone who is intimately connected to the theory.

Publishing articles prior to the examination of your doctorate can create another kind of dialogic space for engagement with experts. You get valuable feedback via peer review. Publishing articles are not only for people who are doing their doctorates by publication.

Your discussions about your work need to continue beyond your final submission and after completing your doctorate. You would not want your study to be gathering the proverbial dust on a shelf. Your institution would usually place your study on an online repository and you may have conversations initiated about it by scholars who access it. However, you can create further dialogic spaces to converse about your study. You can set up informal discussions and meetings with practitioners who are affected by your study's results to discuss how they could be taken forward. You need to discuss how you can enhance what is already being done.

Dialogue with other doctoral scholars

Discourses traditionally construct academics as having academic freedom and autonomy to conduct independent enquiry in research (McKenna & Boughey 2014). They argue that such autonomy needs questioning if it does not lead to excellence in both research and teaching. To respond to such obstacles and others, some institutions of higher learning are starting to use structured cohort models of supervision to alleviate these obstacles. These cohort models provide spaces for doctoral scholars in a similar field to engage in a collaborative and sustained manner. It develops collegiality and support for scholars. It mitigates against the isolated space of a doctoral study and allows for more systematic and rigorous study, especially for scholars who start off without a strong knowledge basis (McKenna 2014). The cohort space could be face to face or online. Here you can speak about an area you are grappling with or an experience of illumination. You are

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also afforded opportunities to dialogue with expert scholars or supervisors to whom you can present your work in progress. These dialogues could result in further joint projects such as conference presentations or articles⁴.

Online spaces

Technologies allow us to make meaning of our realities through dialogue in virtual spaces. Some institutions create such online dialogic spaces for you to engage with your own and others' ideas. These spaces also can be repositories for literature you may want to access. They could also have proposals and completed doctoral studies of other scholars you may want to reference or consult. An online space such as a blog, website or facebook page may exist for scholars who are using similar theoretical frameworks. Examples of useful blogs are The Thesis Whisperer (<http://thesiswhisperer.com/>) started by Inger Mewburn and to which many people contribute, and the Doctoral Writing SIG (<https://doctoralwriting.wordpress.com/>) managed by Claire Aitchison, Cally Guerin and Susan Carter. An example of a local South African blog is PhD in a Hundred Steps (<https://phdinahundredsteps.wordpress.com/>) with posts by Sherran Clarence⁵. Some sites even list the top blogs for doctoral study by discipline and theme and some are for light relief like PhD comics (<http://phdcomics.com/comics.php>). There are thus numerous online dialogical spaces to cater to your different needs.

CONCLUSION

The doctoral study does not need to be a lonely conversation that only you and your supervisor are privileged to be part of. It makes it all the more worthwhile if it is informed by significant others. Seek the voices of others to enrich your own voice so that what you envision becomes a rich process. Think about your doctoral study as one that involves a community of practice with dialogic spaces. The value of a community of practice lies in the alleviating of the pains of the substantial doctoral task. Your elusive voice emerges stronger as your theoretical, epistemological or methodological lenses become more and more nuanced. Significantly, you emerge more adjusted through your engagement with significant others. This chapter has illustrated the value of dialogics within a CoP to make sense of and enrich the doctoral experience.

4 See Chapter 16 by Puleng Motshoane for a discussion on cohort models.

5 Sherran Clarence also contributed to this book (see Chapter 11), where she used extracts from this blog to substantiate her argument on crossing thresholds.

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