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If We Can Do It, So Can You: How Doctoral Study Leads to Personal and Professional Growth for Tertiary Learning Advisors

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Abstract

The work of tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) in Aotearoa New Zealand is performed in collaboration with staff from all disciplines and support services on campus and online all year round. This work occurs across the full gamut of educational levels, starting with the school to tertiary study transition right through to working with doctoral students. In amongst all of that, some TLAs even manage to do doctorates ourselves. In this article, four of us reflect on our respective journeys towards successfully completing our doctoral studies while also doing our work. We share and discuss our markedly varied personal experiences of balancing work, life, study, and relationships; personal health and wellbeing; working in solitude and/or within communities; and impacts on TLA professional practice. In reading this article, we hope that other TLAs are inspired to start, continue, or restart their doctorate.

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The doctoral journey can be an exciting journey of self-discovery, personal growth, and skills development, and it ultimately leads to making a difference in our chosen field. Individual personality and research confidence are among the factors that contribute to success (Lindahl, 2023; Phillips & Pugh, 2010), and for those less confident, the doctoral journey can provide an opportunity to overcome negative rhetoric such as self-doubt and imposter syndrome (Sverdlik et al., 2018).

This paper explores the PhD journeys of four tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) from Aotearoa, New Zealand, and our aim is to encourage other TLAs to consider embarking on doctoral study. We begin with individual reflections on our personal journeys written in our respective authorial voices. We purposely wrote our reflections independently of each other because it was our intent to show that there are numerous paths to successful completion. Yes, all doctoral students have to proceed through the same set of academic and administrative processes. Yes, the relationship between student and supervisors is always important. Yes, doing a doctorate is demanding in all sorts of respects. And, yes, it takes a long time. All that accepted, how the four of us lived these standard elements of doctoral life was unique, and this will be the case for any TLAs who are considering whether to do a doctorate or not.

After writing our reflections, we shared them with each other ahead of meeting to identify points of similarity and contrast across our respective experiences. We selected four points from that meeting to then discuss in the paper because they were germane to our focus on the individual experiences and growth of doctoral students – some of these points are evident in multiple reflections, while others are unique but were deemed potential points of interest for readers. The following four discussion points are balancing work, life, study, and relationships; personal health and wellbeing; working in solitude and/or within communities; and impacts on professional practice. Throughout each discussion point, we highlight barriers we had to overcome, and as a result we grew personally and professionally, bringing our new knowledge into our practice as TLAs.

Tertiary Learning Advisor Reflections on Doing a Doctorate

In this section, we the authors (Kaaryn Cater, Nigel Gearing, Mark Bassett, and Quentin Allan), each state the title of our doctorates and reflect individually on our experiences of doctoral study.

Kaaryn: Nurturing Body, Brain and Relationships

Title of doctorate: *The benefits and challenges of environmental sensitivity for postsecondary learners: Implications for education policy, practice and institutions* (Cater, 2022)

Fitting study into an already burgeoning life can be extremely challenging and takes careful preparation, planning and support to ensure the maintenance of relational, physical and mental health. In my role as a TLA, I frequently had that particular conversation with students about rearranging life to accommodate fulltime study, whilst caring for self and relationships. As I juggled my multiple roles and responsibilities, I constantly caught myself revisiting my own advice as I grappled with my PhD journey in tandem with my fulltime TLA role. I was mindful of doctoral attrition rates and sought to mitigate possible issues from the beginning of my doctoral journey – so I established robust plans to ensure work/life balance and the maintenance of high levels of physical and mental health.

While the above may sound simple and straight-forward, it is well-known that work-life balance is a complex counterpoint that is infinitely more nuanced than simply balancing work and study. Consequently, I found that juggling the demands of daily life, family, friends and work required meticulous organisation, in addition to remaining cognisant of the need to attend to often conflicting demands for my time and energy (Mitchell, 2020). Self-awareness of personal self-care needs and preferences are vital for managing life, however, I could see that the very best of intentions could be usurped by the busyness of juggling multiple demands. Both TLAs and PhD candidates spend long periods of time sedentary, and I remained mindful of the need to maintain physical fitness, and there are clear links between exercise and mental and cognitive health (Bernstein et al., 2020). Additionally, connection with nature is well established as a mediator for mental health (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014) and ‘green exercise’, or exercising outdoors, hits the sweet spot of combining the benefits of nature and exercise simultaneously (Müller-Riemenschneider et al., 2020).

Throughout my PhD journey I continued with my long-standing routine of early morning jaunts along the local beach and up into the hills, and I regarded these early morning junkets as essential for my wellbeing on multiple levels. First, I was benefitting from the multiple advantages of green exercise. Second, I was able to reap the rewards associated with solitude, or alone time, including enhanced levels of reflection, metacognitive monitoring, creativity, and free-floating thoughts (Cater, 2022; Cater et al., 2022). Those early morning excursions proved invaluable for planning, synthesising information, and organising thoughts for writing, and they were integral in helping me stay focused and motivated. Prioritising my health and wellbeing, managing my time, and having the wholehearted support of my partner and children all helped to keep things in perspective. I devoted five–six years of my life to my PhD, and my reward now is getting out there and educating within the education sector Was it worth it? Absolutely. With careful planning, structure and support, I found the doctoral journey to be not only doable, but completely manageable – and I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of generating research that informs practice.

Nigel: Some Obstacles are Made to be Overcome

Title of doctorate: *Factors affecting the motivation of EFL instructors living in South Korea to learn Korean* (Gearing, 2018)

They say every cell in your body is replaced every seven years. My PhD took eight. Therefore, I emerged an entirely different person. Casanave's (2012) pathfinding reflective case study of her eight-year attempt to acquire Japanese, while teaching English in Japan, focused on non-academic factors that impacted her academic journey. This included lack of time due to conflicting demands, personal issues and living as an 'alien' on contract in a host nation.

I believed I was adept at managing all of these, having recently completed an MA in TESOL while working full-time at a South Korean university. However, immediately upon entry into the PhD candidature, I was engulfed by imposter syndrome, or the persistent inability to believe in the validity of one's success (Bothello & Roulet, 2018). Initially, this was due to my perception – as someone who had never studied Applied Linguistics – that exposure as such would immediately and publicly (I was a distance/online candidate) be revealed. My confidence dipped sharply. My father passed one month in. I drew on my innate

self-discipline and established an intensive study timetable and adhered to it. I achieved distinctions in four of the ten coursework papers. My imposter syndrome had been 'defeated'.

Once into 'independent' study, due to the consistent delays and bureaucracy, including gaining ethical approval and receiving feedback from supervisors, I increasingly experienced amotivation, or "the realization that there's no point …or it's beyond me" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 140). To combat this sense of being 'secondary' or 'irrelevant', I pushed for PhD by publication. I had been a successful writer – but in journalism. The inordinate delays and slow pace of submissions and rejections saw amotivation and imposter syndrome return as recurring themes – initially intensively. Over time, however, they became dull, ever-present tooth aches and I pressed on until a personal crisis that almost led me to suicide. I could not study for three months. Slowly I regrouped. One year later, after having no contact with my family, again I had to stop. And then I did what I have always done – drew on my self-discipline to 'beat' my 'challenge'.

I had to present my findings at an international conference as part of my candidature. Mine took me to Cambridge, England, and an associated two-week study tour during which I met some of the leading experts of my chosen research area. My imposter syndrome and amotivation dipped again. I returned to Perth and devoted every day for two years to a regime of prayer, study, nature, gym – repeat. Every day; which in turn, helped to build my confidence with all of them. I got my PhD.

I now have so much more respect for any artist, athlete, or champion of any endeavour, knowing that regardless, their success took 'grit' because of their determination to stick with something through thick and thin. I am stronger than I thought – not intentionally intellectually as I was aiming for at the outset – but emotionally. At the time, I had no idea I was suffering from Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. To find this out, I had to spend as much time on self-healing as I did on my PhD study. I experienced the worst time of my life during my candidature and concurrently often felt dwarfed by 'intellectual giants' who seemingly 'had it all'. Now, I know that regardless of the challenge, with determination, the ever-present threats of imposter syndrome and amotivation are just that. With consistent, dedicated effort, you will make it.

Mark: Finding the Time

Title of doctorate: *Learning advisor and lecturer collaborations to embed discipline-specific literacies development in degree programmes* (Bassett, 2022)

Of all that I learned while doing my doctoral research, time was by far the most significant influence. Throughout my PhD, I worked full-time and had a young family. I had to experiment with what worked for me regarding getting all the thinking, reading, analysing, and writing done. Sequestering myself at home in a hermit-like existence for lengthy chunks of time was what I ultimately realised was needed.

Studying at home suited me because I had a room that was for me to use exclusively for studying, a supportive partner, a preference for solitary work, and a sensitivity to ambient activity and noise. Aside from a handful of days in the university library, I usually only went to campus for supervision meetings.

As a part-time student, I needed to be spending about 20 hours per week on the PhD. From the beginning, I suspected that I needed blocks of time to get my work done, which pretty much limited me to weekends, but I could not accrue those 20 hours each week in that way. After each workday, I needed to either cook dinner or care for my son, who was five at that time. After 8pm, I tried to spend one to two hours studying. At these times, I was sluggish, and I would often over-stimulate my brain and then struggle to get to sleep. Instead, I tried getting up 90 minutes earlier each workday. The first early starts were productive, but I started falling asleep more and more as each day passed.

Eventually, other than the day of work time that I could sometimes use for research work, I had to abandon studying during the week. I used one day at the weekend, or two part-days if I had family commitments, and then used whatever leave was available to give me concentrated bursts of time. Through trial and error, I got into a rhythm that suited me. I also became more disciplined than I had ever been with maximising the use of my study times, basically eliminating procrastination. It took the first year or two, but I ultimately hit saturation point with my own frustration at my slow progress. A steely determination was born, and I could just start working the moment I sat down in front of the computer, knowing that the time was precious and finite.

By the time I came to writing the full draft of my thesis, I was churning out a couple of thousand words a day. Not all the words were great, but they were there on the page to be edited. Crucial to gathering that momentum was the four-month block of time I had cobbled together through a combination of annual leave, statutory holidays, and professional

development time. Thankfully, my department supported my absence from work for such a lengthy period, as well as my not taking any time off prior to that in 2020, which was of course a difficult year for all. Between September 2020 and January 2021, I wrote from morning to night six days a week. Saturdays were for housework and other tasks that did not involve heavy thinking. The only exception was Christmas Day.

Those four months created the spacetime I needed for drawing together the strands of my data analysis and generating the macro-structure of my thesis. The other incremental efforts eked out over the years were also essential, but I do not believe that I could have completed my PhD without the handful of fortnights and that four-month block of sequestered, hermit-like, existence.

Quentin: How did doing a PhD change me?

Title of doctorate: *Gay men coming out later in life: A phenomenological inquiry into disclosing sexual orientation in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Allan, 2017)

Completing a doctorate requires persistence, sacrifice, and the resilience to overcome the inevitable challenges. The experience has certainly impacted me in numerous ways, yet it was not until I engaged with this reflective exercise that I began to discern the meanings and significance of these changes as they reveal themselves in various domains.

Since embarking on the project, my life has been enriched through interactions with an extraordinary assortment of individuals, some of whom were an integral part of the process, others more serendipitous. When people discover that you are doing a PhD, one of the first questions is, "What is it about?". My research project was a phenomenological examination of gay men's experiences of coming out later in life (Allan, 2017). If I had not undertaken this study, I would have been deprived of encounters with many random people who, when inquiring about my topic, shared a wide range of responses, including the observation that they know people who fit my participant profile. Remarkably, the sharing of this detail typically catalysed interesting and unanticipated discussions – helpful for all parties. Working closely with others on a complex project such as a doctorate is life-enhancing, partly because of the expansion of social and professional networks. Some of my participants have become personal friends, and within my university, I have developed close relationships with a range of colleagues including liaison librarians, ethics advisors, and of

course, my supervisors. As I worked my way through the research process, I was fortunate to have the company and support of other doctoral candidates who shared the same supervisor. This group was known as the 'Potluck' team, a powerful and enduring community of practice with whom I continue to interact some 10 years after my first meeting (Davis et al., 2021). Another significant community that sustained me throughout, and continues to provide intense intellectual stimulation, is Auckland University's Heidegger Reading Group, convened first by Professor Liz Smythe, and more recently by Professor Susan Crowther. Each of these groups is made up of unusually talented people who are passionate about their research, generous with their time, and committed to making the world a better place.

Thinking hard about methodology has helped me to become more epistemologically aware, conscious of the wide range of research possibilities, and concomitant options for critiquing research output. This in turn has helped me to become more effective as a TLA, as I explore in Allan (2021). At a personal level, I find myself to be more mindful, more inclined to dwell in the moment, with a conscious outlook of gratitude. I am acutely aware of my privilege and my responsibilities as both educator and researcher.

Most of my observations are positive. Any anger that I experienced during my engagement with the literature – and in processing my research findings – has gradually resolved itself into a strong sense of advocacy. Post-doctorate, I have discovered a new energy as an activist. Now, much of my leisure time is devoted to disseminating my research findings, in conferences, academic journals, and as a book.

Discussion

Now that we have shared our contemporary reflections on what doctoral life was like for each of us, we hope it is becoming clear that multiple paths to completion exist. In this section, we discuss points in those reflections that struck us as particularly demonstrative of the standard similarity and keen uniquity inherent in the doctoral student experience. As you read, we invite you to consider your own position on how you would balance work, life, study, and relationships; how you would maintain your personal health and wellbeing; the extent to which you would need to work in mainly solitude or within communities; and the impacts that doctoral study could have on your professional practice.

Discussion Point 1: Balancing Work, Life, Study, and Relationships

Upon meeting to discuss our respective reflections, we came to agree that it is imperative to find a balance between the myriad necessary and desired life activities and chores (Martinez et al., 2013). Additionally, work responsibilities severely limit available study time (Mitchell, 2020), and all four of us continued on in our roles as TLAs in tandem with researching and studying, to varying extents. The constant tug-of-war between professional and study commitments can lead to doctoral students suffering poor mental health outcomes, often sacrificing sleep in an effort to attend to all vying commitments (Byrom et al., 2022; Hazell et al., 2021). Further, the constant juggling of family/relational commitments, and work and study can create added conflict (Cater, 2022; Offerman, 2011) and the resulting difficulty in maintaining relational homeostasis can lead to experiencing conflict between the academic and relational roles (Haynes et al., 2012; Prendergast et al., 2023; Priode, 2019). For those who have not embarked on a similar academic journey, there can be a lack of understanding, which can put further strain on relationships with family and friends. Completing a doctorate demands enormous personal time resources, and the inevitable limited free time and social isolation can lead to feelings of guilt for taking time away from family, friends and children (Cornwall et al., 2019). One thing we all agree on is that vital to the successful completion of a doctoral journey is social support (Panger et al., 2014) and excellent priority and time management skills (Cater et al., 2022).

Discussion Point 2: Personal Health and Wellbeing

A shared sense amongst us when meeting to discuss our respective reflective pieces was that doing a doctorate was a long journey that could potentially test each of our resolves. The management of personal health and wellbeing in order to maintain psychological health while studying and working full-time and concurrently fulfilling family/relationship commitments needs to be prioritised (Dixon, 2020). Without such a focus, negative mental and physical health outcomes can be anticipated (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2020). A key component of this focus is alone time (Nguyen et al., 2018) and the corresponding space to avoid over-stimulation (Suedfeld, 1982) – themes that may well reduce the potential stress of studying at doctoral level. This may result in freedom of mental and physical choice (Long, 2000), a corresponding increased sense of calmness (Nguyen et al., 2018), creativity (Gong & Xin, 2019), imaginative involvement (Barabasz, 1991), free floating thoughts (Larson &

Csikszentmihalyi, 1978), space for self-examination (Storr, 1989), and reflection (Koch, 1994). It may also decrease a person's sense of self-consciousness (Larson, 1990). Experiencing solitude in nature improves health, cognition, mood, happiness, subjective well-being, reduced cognitive failure, and improved attention and vitality for some (Howell et al., 2011). For some postsecondary learners like Kaaryn, walking outside or green exercise (Müller-Riemenschneider et al., 2020) can be a preferred form of exercise (Cater, 2022). Finally, dedication to resistance training (Best et al., 2015) and cardiovascular exercise at a gymnasium may also serve as a highly effective means to reduce stress and anxiety, as can prayer and meditation (Turner, 2020).

Discussion Point 3: Working in Solitude and/or Within Communities

A dichotomous point across our four reflections was that of working in solitude compared with being part of a community. We all agreed that one of the outcomes of doctoral completion is for a student to become an independent researcher, but this can develop in different ways for different people. For example, Kaaryn and Mark found working alone most of the time to be optimal, while Nigel and Quentin placed more value on working with others. This variation can depend on a student's personality (Lindahl, 2023) and self-confidence with research (Phillips & Pugh, 2010), but it is also influenced by other factors including the model of supervision (King, 2007) and the characteristics of the project (van Rooij et al., 2019). However – whether you see yourself as needing more alone time or more collaboration – integration and a sense of belonging with an academic department and its various social and professional groups has been demonstrated to positively influence doctoral student satisfaction and to reduce intention to withdraw (van Rooij et al., 2019). Research into undergraduate student performance highlights the importance of conscientiousness, a strategic learning approach, and knowing to seek support (Paynter et al., 2023); other research shows that conscientious doctoral students publish more work and co-author more with their supervisors (Lindahl, 2023). It is our experience, and that of other successful doctoral students (see Waring & Kearins, 2021), that these personality traits are fundamental to successful completion whether you prefer solitude or being part of various communities available at your institution.

Discussion Point 4: Impacts on our Professional Practice

When discussing our individual reflections, we all agreed that completing a doctorate has enhanced our interactions with students and lecturers. Recent lived experience of postgraduate study promotes empathy, sensitising TLAs to the manifold challenges likely to be experienced by research students; for example, when discussing writing relating to epistemological and methodological options (Carter, 2011), or exploring how texts fit together at macro, meso, and micro levels (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019). Authoring a thesis promotes awareness of metalanguage, specialised vocabulary and various academic writing conventions, particularly the importance of genres and sub-genres (Rose, 2015). A deeper understanding of genre is invaluable when helping students to tackle assignments, looking in turn at the purpose, structure, and clustering of rhetorical features (Dreyfus & Weekes, 2022).

TLAs can share their own insights into the interplay between reading, thinking, and writing (Bitchener, 2017), as well as cultivating an awareness of one's emerging 'authorial voice' (Olivier, 2017). We all noted the positive impact that the doctoral journey has had on our professional identities as TLAs. At a personal level, this manifests as increased self-assurance – in some cases overcoming imposter syndrome (Cisco, 2020), especially regarding tensions around academic status (Whitchurch, 2013). From an institutional perspective, possession of a doctorate enhances TLA credibility and perceptions of TLA value across our institutions (Cameron, 2018). In practical terms, we noted enhanced relationships with various colleagues, especially lecturers across a range of academic disciplines. Given the high value placed on embedding academic literacies in faculty courses (McWilliams & Allan, 2014), this networking pays dividends in terms of increased visibility and reach.

Conclusion

Through sharing some of our respective experiences of our own doctoral journeys, we hope to kindle curiosity and confidence amongst TLAs to begin, continue, or finish doctoral study. We have endeavoured to articulate candidly what doctoral study was like for us, how it impacted us personally and professionally, and how we negotiated our individual journeys through to successful completion. We hope that the reflections and discussion render some insight into the diversity of personal circumstances, professional contexts, challenges, and strategies for success that exist amongst TLAs as doctoral students. This diversity applies to

just the four of us; it would be even greater if this discussion were to be continued by other TLAs who have done or are doing doctoral study.

We hope that TLAs who read this are left with the understanding that there is no single right way to do a doctorate and that there is no ideal doctoral candidate. Indeed, when the four of us met to discuss our reflections, it was obvious how starkly different our approaches had been, including how we got started in the first place. Some of us had prepared for years, including reading entire books about how to study at doctoral level before even enrolling. Others of us had just got started and worked out what to do at various points as we went along. Just like some of us, you might also want to avail yourself of all manner of guidance before beginning your doctorate, or such preparation may discourage you from ever doing one at all. Wherever you are on this spectrum, and whatever your personal and professional circumstances are, we invite you to start, continue, or finish your doctorate. Just like us, you have it in you.

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