



My Research Doctorate Journey

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INTRODUCTION

This article presents my critical reflections of my doctoral journey from its initial pre-application period through to its completion. The article demonstrates that I gained extensive professional, practical, and theoretical knowledge and experience, which benefits me in all facets of my life. The themes of my reflective piece are the requirements to be proactive and organized. While I could have approached aspects of my study in a more effective and efficient manner, which are discussed throughout this paper, both my personal and professional situations combined with my time management skills enabled me to complete all the requirements to earn my doctorate ahead of the required completion time. This reflection may help potential doctoral or higher-education by thesis candidates on their journeys.

Pre-Application

I had completed two master's degrees and numerous other qualifications prior to researching doctoral programs. I wanted to challenge myself. I wanted to improve myself. I wanted to further develop my skills and knowledge to share and pass onto others. These were the prime motivators for applying for doctoral study. I had looked at doctoral degrees a number of years earlier, which provided me with some knowledge of doctoral offerings from around the globe. I had decided well before the application process that a Doctor of Education by Research was what I wanted to do and not a philosophical doctorate, because I wanted it to relate to my vocation and to have practical application.

I had drafted a proposal, and as you will see later on in the reflection, while it presented my initial ideas, the quality and structure were poor, and sent it via email with my resume and an introductory email inquiry. It was forwarded to the relevant person at the university who was to become my primary supervisor. A potential co-supervisor was identified.

The three of us had a video call, which I felt went well and worked through some aspects of the proposal, which I then resubmitted based on the structure they mentored me on. These initial meetings and communication were extremely important in both my development and my potential supervisors' evaluation of my suitability for doctoral study. The three of us continued to communicate and during this

time I was advised to submit my application forms to the university.

Application

The application forms that I was required to complete were straight forward and the administration staff member overseeing it was extremely efficient, knowledgeable, helpful, and supportive. During the application process I had begun working on the structure of Chapter 1 and looking back now this was a skeleton with parts of it in point form. On the positive side, progress was being made and structures were being put in place. One thing I neglected to do was read the APA guidelines. In hindsight this proved to be a positive oversight on my behalf.

Substantive Piece and Proposal

I was working at a reasonable pace and had completed Chapter 1 and approximately 60% of Chapter 2. I maintained this momentum throughout my first year as my writing continued to improve and I completed (note: not finalized) Chapters 1, 2, and 3 within nine months. However, as I commented in the previous section, while I had referenced certain points I had not followed APA guidelines. I needed to go through the entire document to format it correctly, which was a good experience as I was able to edit the document during this process. Further feedback from my supervisors also highlighted that I had omitted to reference numerous points in the Literature Review, which provided an additional opportunity for me to edit my document.

I was happy with Chapters 1 and 2 and had a very good understanding of the content and my scholarly writing continued to develop. I felt that my understanding of Chapter 3 and the methodology could have been better. Research methods are so much more than a couple surveys; there is the theory and justifications behind the research methods and how to apply them. However, by the time I had commenced Chapter 5 I had a good understanding of Chapter 3 and had made significant edits to the chapter. This really strengthened the chapter.

Confirmation of Candidature Seminar

Along with my supervisors I had set the goal of presenting my confirmation of candidature within a year of acceptance. As I mentioned in the pre-application section, my initial proposal expressed my ideas but it was extremely limited in content for an in-depth research proposal. Completing the Research

Proposal Proforma was a professional development exercise in itself. It contributed to the further development of my succinct writing skills and allowed me to reflect on what I had achieved in the first year, and what I would do moving forward. It was not easy and there were also time pressures.

In hindsight something I could have done at the outset was write a list of all the deliverables and requirements associated with my doctoral study, and a brief summary of each and put it on my wall on a large piece of paper as a point of reference. The summary would have included what documents I needed to access and submit as well.

My supervisors provided me with guidance for my confirmation of candidature seminar. This professional learning experience continued to develop my presentation skills; the necessity to be sharp and to the point, and remove unnecessary detail from presentations where the audience is listening for key points and not so much detailed explanations. I enjoyed the seminar and succeeded with the confirmation, and the feedback from the internal and external reviewers was positive and supportive. This was a relief. I can still recall the amount of paperwork to complete and I was well organized with this. I had made a conscious effort to be efficient with submitting and completing the required documents on completion of my confirmation of candidature seminar.

Document Analysis (Chapter 4)

I was organized and had been collecting relevant documents in the six months before I had received acceptance from the university. My writing had evolved to a level that required minimal correction for all of Chapter 4 apart from the summary. I had completed a draft of Chapter 4 within 15 months of starting my journey, but the summary section was not finalized for another three months. It took me a long time to achieve and be able to see what was required for the summary of the chapter and research chapters in general. It was hard on me personally and I questioned my ability, in spite of continued improvements in my writing. Meeting this challenge was beneficial for me both personally and professionally. Once I could see what I was not doing correctly, it set the par for Chapters 5, 6, and 7 where it was even evident to me that I was writing with authority and in a far more direct manner.

Professional Development

After I had completed my confirmation seminar, I submitted my documents to meet the requirements of the professional development unit. This is an example of where I had not investigated the requirements of the unit correctly; specifically, the submission date. The submission date for the professional development unit was after the mid-candidature review, which I thought would be signed off then. If I had investigated this and downloaded the submission form earlier on and put this on my calendar and/or wall chart early in my journey I would have been aware of the

submission date and full requirements. Lesson learned: be proactive and investigate.

I was happy that I was able to complete the online modules as I gained a lot from them. As a doctoral candidate I was responsible for my learning and development, particularly at this stage in the journey; it was not my supervisors' responsibility to follow-up every point. I did not do the professional development unit for the sake of doing them and genuinely engaged with the content. During the course of my doctoral journey I participated in numerous workshops through my employment and completed many complementary qualifications.

Chapters 5 and 6

I was well prepared for the data analysis and structure of Chapters 5 and 6. I had never used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software before. I found it to be a complex program, which has a huge amount of statistical functions available in the program. It was interesting to learn about SPSS and I am glad I had the opportunity to use it; admittedly at a very basic level. However, unless one needs to do T-tests and more advanced statistical analysis the subscription survey collectors available online provide a user-friendly experience. 18 months into my doctoral journey I had all the quantitative and qualitative data presented in tables under sub-headings in my thesis document for both Chapters 5 and 6. This coincided with the completion of Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 had taught me a lot about the structure for the introduction and in particular the summary requirements for chapters. I was able to complete drafts for Chapters 5 and 6 by the end of my 20th month. I found it to be a straight forward process of describing the data in the tables. It did not need to be over-written, but direct.

Chapter 7

I felt I was making good progress. The content analysis of initial teacher education programs was very interesting and hugely beneficial for my thesis. It provided me with the invaluable experience and competency of program comparison and analysis.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 brought everything together and concluded my thesis. This included providing conclusions on the study, recommendations from the study outcomes and opportunities for further research. For people in the academic field opportunities for further research can provide them with journal articles for years to come, and allow them to expand upon their initial research to continue to generate meaningful and practical application outcomes and outputs. The aim should be to use these for the benefit of academic institutions who support the research, and for economic and social benefit.

Publications

In the proposal document that formed a part of the

confirmation seminar process, I was required to list two items for publication from my thesis. On reflection, I learned that preparing journal articles from one's thesis forms an editing process and a valuable opportunity for the researcher to go back and improve their thesis. I worked on articles with my supervisors; co-authors of the articles. This was very challenging for me; the attention to detail and addition of sections that I was not familiar with; discussion sections, with what seemed to be an extended introduction with an additional sub-heading; and more. However, the learning experience was immense in not only preparing me for the future in being an independent writer but also improving my thesis.

Pre-completion seminar

The beginning of the first day of the 30th month of my journey coincided with my pre-completion seminar preparation. It provided another opportunity to read through my thesis in its entirety, and make corrections and amendments as necessary. This process highlighted the need for further APA adjustments and comes back to a significant lesson learned that I have noted throughout this paper. That is to familiarize oneself with APA rules and obtain a copy of the APA at the commencement of one's higher degree by research journey. It was apparent that I had not followed the APA reference list rules, which is to only include references in the reference list that are referenced in one's thesis. That is the differentiation between a bibliography (lists all references read and not necessarily referenced in the body) and a reference list. In addition to the reference list I also needed to edit the appendices, table headings, table of contents and headings in the document along with ensuring consistency of links to chapters and sections of my thesis.

Another important element that I needed to include in Chapter 1 (Locating Myself as a Researcher) was a description of my 'positionality' in regard to the research. That is, how has my position possibility influenced my approach to the research and the framing of the surveys distributed? After my pre-completion seminar I added paragraphs in the discussion sections of Chapters 5 and 6 of my thesis on the influence of my positionality. Chapter 8 also noted my positionality as a potential limitation of the study. My positionality is something that I will be aware of when conducting future studies to negate this potential weakness or influence from the outset of the study.

I used what learned and the experience from the confirmation seminar to contribute to the success of my pre-completion seminar, which was conducted 36 months after commencement. The feedback from the candidature committee, in particular the committee chair and independent academic was invaluable. It enabled me to further strengthen my thesis and provided a source of professional and personal reflection.

Thesis Submission

The feedback I received during and from the pre-completion

seminar resulted in some amendments to be made to my thesis. I addressed the recommendations from the pre-completion seminar between the 36th and 40th months. I was aware that it was my responsibility to identify potential examiners. After my pre-completion seminar I had identified 20 possible examiners. I needed to select potential examiners whose research interests and backgrounds would resonate with both the content and research approach of my thesis. I was pleased that I was organized and had completed the list of potential examiners well in advance. I made the necessary edits and my thesis was submitted for external examination at the 42nd month.

CONCLUSIONS

My doctoral journey has been the greatest learning experience of my life. I learnt so much about my subject area, developed my scholarly writing skills, became reasonably competent in document and content analyses and discussion, publishing, research techniques, critiquing my own work, editing, and learned a lot about myself as well.

My recommendations based on reflections contained in this paper for potential research candidates are as follows:

1. Treat your research project (journey) as a project and manage it that way. I would not suggest it is necessary from the outset to list all requirements on a sheet of paper and pin it up on the wall but be aware of what you need to achieve. By the sixth month (if not before) I would suggest a detailed plan of all of the deliverables (associated with your postgraduate research) should be mapped out and you should be aware of all of the documentation that needs to be submitted with each milestone. The plan can be reviewed and updated as one progresses through their journey.
2. An aspect of the journey that provided challenges for me was verb tenses in the different chapters and also during the different stages of the journey. Highlighting which tense to use during one's research journey on your research plan from the outset would be of benefit.
3. Interconnected with the above is a good professional development activity, which is to create an efficacy framework. This could be done in conjunction with a candidate's supervisors and helps to map progress and address why any milestones are not being met.
4. Set yourself goals. Postgraduate research candidates should also include employment and family/personal commitments in their goals and plans.
5. Maintain ongoing communication with your supervisors and the graduate research school or office. At postgraduate research level, one is responsible for their individual learning. Do not wait or expect your supervisors to follow-up with you. Work with and help your supervisors help you by being organized and lead the communication with your supervisors, particularly after successful completion of your confirmation of candidature seminar.

6. Use tools to help plan your studies, write your thesis, and map your progress. An essential tool that I suggest all research candidates should obtain at the commencement of their studies obtain is the current full edition of the APA (or other) referencing system. What is available on the internet is only in parts and is not complete. Related to this point is to ensure standardization from the outset, both of the form and the use of words and phrases. It saves time and makes the writing clearer, particularly for readers who are not familiar with your research and its topic.
 7. Continue to review your work throughout the journey; something I could have done more of. Go back and revisit previous chapters and make corrections. Not only will this improve efficiency, but it also provides a time for reflection.
 8. Engage with your peers whether you are an internal, external, part-time and full-student and attend workshops that are offered. One never knows what future opportunities may arise from what in essence could develop into professional learning communities and/or mutually beneficial commercial relationships.
 9. Attend face-to-face workshops, orientation sessions where and when the opportunity arises.
 10. Be dedicated (set aside time each week for study), have self-belief, be positive, be motivated, and make sure the motivation for postgraduate study is driven by the thirst to learn and develop, which you can then use to transfer for knowledge and experience, particularly to those who are less fortunate and deserve and need educational opportunities.
- Am I disappointed in myself that I did not follow all of the points above from the outset of my journey? While it certainly would have improved my efficiency, if I had followed the points I would have missed out on the opportunity to identify and reflect on these points over the course of my journey and present them here.

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