

Die, Brain Demons, Die!

The Internal Monologue of an Aboriginal Researcher

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INTRODUCTION

As an Aboriginal researcher I recognise that the decision to undertake research places me in a precarious position. Historically, the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been the subject of numerous research projects—making us the researched rather than the researchers. As such, repositioning ourselves as researchers affords an opportunity “to give voice to the voiceless” (Brady, 1992, p. 106). Consider that it was not until the late 1960s that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were allowed to enter the Westernised classroom (Beresford, 2012; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012). Opportunities have been afforded to me because of the fight taken up by others in the struggle for self-determination; therefore, there is a responsibility and accountability to continue in this struggle.

I also acknowledge that I do not only represent myself but also my families and community. I am a descendant from Kamilaroi Country (Dirranbandi). I acknowledge my ancestors for their strength and guidance—providing opportunity for me to gain access to education. This chapter gives me the space to share my lived experiences as a way to encourage others to enter the academic realm.

What follows are letters that I have written to myself as a way of reflecting on some of the negative internal monologue that I face. I explore some of the strategies that I employed to assist in defeating the self-doubt, which I affectionately call my *brain demons*—as if one could be affectionate toward criticism from within.

Further study into a Masters or a PhD has a tendency to make you feel isolated. At times, the voices in your head are loud. As you enter—or consider entering—further study, it is important to be aware of such things so as to put strategies in place to assist yourself throughout the process. Therefore, these letters are also written for you.

For this chapter I draw on Rigney's (1999) Indigenist Research Principles to guide the advice that I provide to other and future post graduate students. There are three principles: resistance as an emancipatory imperative, political integrity, and privileging Indigenous voice. The first principle seeks to address and break the dominant ideology of the 'deficit view'. That is, "the dehumanizing characterisation of Indigenous peoples as the oppressed victims in need of charity by challenging the power and control that traditional research has had on knowledge" (Foley, 2003, p. 48).

Within this chapter I share my own experiences in completing the Masters of Education (Research). I foreground the internal challenges faced due to the social positioning of Indigenous Australians within modern Australian society as well as the social positioning of women. My objective is to provide an example of resistance. As an Aboriginal researcher, using an Indigenous methodology is beneficial as it complements our ways of thinking, knowing and being (Rigney, 1999). Furthermore, such methodologies provide a means to introduce a new narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by taking the position of the researcher that re-evaluates our position. These ideals are also relevant to the non-Indigenous researcher who chooses to work in Indigenous communities or with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. You will need to consider how your research will provide benefit to the People or community.

The second principle speaks of the political integrity in Indigenous research where "Indigenous Australians ideals, values and philosophies are core to the research agenda" (Rigney, 2006, p. 41). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are shifting the paradigm from being researched to the researchers, and in doing so, are increasing their involvement in negotiating the methodology, the research questions and so forth. This is something you need to consider if your research involves Indigenous participants. The third and final principle advocates for the privileging of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices to counter the traditional view of the Indigenous as the researched. Here, my own voice as an Aboriginal researcher is dominant with the sharing of my lived experience.

I also draw on the work of Clance and Imes (1978) on the imposter phenomenon. In their research, the term 'imposter phenomenon' is defined as "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness" (p. 241). My own self-doubt is exacerbated by the historical and social conditions of Australian history. The social positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within modern Australian society plays a strong role which is defined within the research regarding White privilege

and Whiteness (Hayes & Hartlep, 2013). In a narrative of his own experiences, Hayes (2013, p. 23) shared how "Black students resist dominant claims of Black intellectual inadequacy by conforming to existing norms and values. They work hard to disprove Black *lack*". In other words, by taking on further studies, Indigenous researchers tend to overcompensate by placing further expectations on themselves, to prove they belong. Together, the imposter phenomenon and Whiteness influence my lived experiences. Sharing my reflections provides insight into the challenges that you too may face when deciding to and undertaking further study.

The mind is a beautiful thing but it also has the power to paralyse and prevent you from achieving your goals. For me, my acceptance that the negativity will not leave has been freeing. Instead, I am finding ways to pre-empt the brain demons and to support myself in times where I have identified the 'dips' in the waves while navigating the 'Sea of Research' for me. Within these narratives, you may very well identify and understand you are not alone in your feelings or find ways to tackle and quieten your own *brain demons*.

HINDSIGHT IS A BEAUTIFUL THING

For some even the first step of enrolling in further studies poses a challenge. I hadn't undertaken any formal study since leaving University in the 1990s. I was doing fine and dandy. I had been teaching for 15 odd years and was comfortable in my position. Life was good! Why would I want to go back and put myself under that pressure? Here, I write a letter to myself pre-enrolment from my future self with advice and reflection on the things I wish I had known then. By promoting a sense of direction, motivation and self-discovery you can achieve success.

Stage 1: Pre-enrolment of the Masters

Dear pre-Masters self,

It has now been three years since you began contemplating taking the Masters of Education. Three whole years! In that time, do you realise that you would have completed the Masters and been working towards gaining your PhD? Instead, here we are still filled with self-doubt and contemplating whether to apply for the Masters. Believe me, the self-doubt will not subside and you are wasting time. You can do it!

So, let's just take another couple of months listing the pros and cons just to be double sure whether or not it is a wise decision. Let's just prolong this a little bit longer, but rest assured, your enrolment (albeit finally!) will be the best decision you make for your future self. Firstly, the pros—what are the benefits of doing a Masters? You are not alone. The path that you are facing is well trodden and while being under-represented within the academic population, there is a place for you. Know that thanks to the efforts and successes

of your predecessors—an opportunity that less than 60 years ago was not possible. You are now able to apply for a position within the Masters of Research. Your enrolment is not only for personal gain, but also it assists in continuing to define the role of an Aboriginal researcher within the academic realm.

With this in mind, remember that first and foremost you are a teacher. You are already in a position where education and learning is central. The rationale for your job is to instill within the youth of today a love of learning; to understand that life-long learning are skills to maintain throughout your lifetime and therefore, you need to be a role model and demonstrate the need to continue learning and developing yourself. What better excuse to enter studies than that?! Come on, fill out that application and stop wasting time!

I see you need more convincing!

As a classroom teacher, you are regularly conducting research within your position to cater for your students' needs, skills and knowledge. On a daily basis you are assessing students' understanding of content and their ability to apply their skills in various contexts. Why not begin a research degree to better hone your own skills and knowledge? Wouldn't this make your own practice better? Actually training in conducting research and learning how to better position yourself to cater for your students?

The Gonski Report (Australian Government, 2011) has recently been released. Whilst its focus is on the funding of schools, there has also been a highlight on the qualifications of the teachers in higher performing countries within the OECD who must have their Masters to enter the classroom. Here comes that internal monologue—Will this happen here in Australia? Even more reason to do this! Isn't that working towards future projections and conclusions you have drawn from the literature? What are you waiting for?

All these reasons to apply and yet, you still resist? The brain demons are strong. The only con you can come up with is that you may fail and the brain demons have held you from applying now for over three years. You can do this. You will never know unless you at least try! Go on! Fill out that application form. Believe me, it is the best decision you make! The brain demons are constant throughout the entire process as you will see, BUT you will prevail. You will succeed. Oh, hindsight is a beautiful thing.

While the brain demons have control, your own internal monologue will continue. Take the chance. What have you got to lose? Don't let them win! Don't wait until the day you look back and think about what could have been. Seize the day and invest in yourself. You are worth it!

*From,
Your future self who can't believe you took so long!*

DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS

I began the Masters as an external part-time student while still fulltime teaching. I had my first win defeating the brain demons and was about to embark on a new

path into research. The future was unknown and I had very little knowledge of what research actually entailed but I was ready.

Upon entering the course, you quickly learn it isn't all about just getting a thesis done. There is likely coursework that also needs to be completed that introduces you to the vast methodologies, theoretical frameworks and other components necessary for the conduct of research. The role of the supervisory team is really established here as you become overwhelmed with epistemologies and ontologies and wonder if they will ever make sense to you. Decisions, decisions, decisions! It can all start to become too much. Enter the brain demons stage right, who have been waiting for this very opportunity. It is about now that you need to build yourself up before you go into a personal slump and it is about now you need another letter to yourself to remind you of your progress.

Stage 2: Six months since enrolment

Dear super-confused-overloaded-with-information-and-having-too-many-decisions-to-be-made self,

You are progressing well. Honestly, the fact that you are here enrolled and working towards attaining the Masters is amazing considering the amount of humming and haaa-ing that occurred! Now you find yourself struggling again because of this new language. What are epistemologies? What are ontologies? What informs your theoretical framework? What methodological approach will you use?

The questions are suffocating you. Will I ever understand? The brain demons have returned. There are too many decisions to be made and you find yourself asking, 'What am I doing?' and answering yourself, stating, 'I am an imposter! A fake! Sometime soon someone will realise! You are going to fail!' Oh, brain demons, you continue to taunt me.

Be assured you are not the first nor will you be the last who feels as though they are wading in the Sea of Research and its technical jargon. Best of all, you will come through this challenge. You have surrounded yourself with a good supportive network. Your family is always willing to provide their words of support even if they still have no idea what you are really doing. That's okay, they don't need to understand—they are there for you regardless!

Your supervisory team is the best! Funnily enough, you didn't consider it so much upon application. You were lucky to collaborate with two passionate researchers in your field of study that complement your research goals. Note to self: Never ever underestimate the value of this collaboration—they understand your research. They are in this with you and you will be consistently drawing on their knowledge and experience throughout the process—whether it be refining your research and narrowing its focus, to ensuring you are maintaining the progress necessary to reach your milestones.

In fact, once you have established the rationale, aims and objectives of your study, have developed your research questions and are wading through the methodology, your

supervisors will be there to guide you through those murky waters. Building those relationships is highly significant during this adventure. Their knowledge and expertise are irreplaceable.

So don't give up and don't listen to those voices. Be gone, brain demons! Will I ever silence you?

Remember, only a couple of months and you will be at Confirmation and ticking off another milestone. Just breathe and set achievable goals.

There are many decisions to be made when developing your research project. However, I reiterate that your supervisory team is one of the most important components and plays a quintessential part in the successful navigation of your study. Be sure that they are people you can get along with and better still, are people that you already have a working relationship with. If you already have strong ideas on the area of research, make sure that at least one of your supervisors has also researched in that area. They may not have the same approach but their experience is an invaluable resource. Of all decisions to be made, this decision which you make in the initial phase is the most important and could be quite beneficial for your progress!

Yours Sincerely,

Your future self who-got-through-this-part-and-knows-you-can-do-it!

THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

"What you are doing is learning the methodology of research!" I heard this statement at a Masters class I attended and it resonated with me. By this stage, I had presented at Confirmation. That's right, by this stage I had written three to four chapters including my literature review and my methodological approach for the study. Remember that different universities and faculties all have their own approaches and milestones to achieve along the way, and your own experiences may therefore differ to my own. Learn about these milestones as soon as possible to identify the key events within your own personal calendar. On the whole, there is a methodology of research that needs to be followed when undertaking research—get to know it.

Stage 3: The day of confirmation

Dear petrified self-standing-at-the-lectern,

You have done all that you can do. You submitted the partial thesis one month prior to this day and followed all the necessary instructions. You have had a copyeditor look through the thesis thus far and have made all the necessary changes. All the boxes have been ticked. Yet, here you are completely and utterly having heart palpitations, sweaty palms and hoping this churning in your stomach is merely butterflies.

You have your presentation done. You have gone through several trial sessions and you know that the presentation falls within the set timeframe. You have deconstructed your paper and found the necessary key points that best describe your study. You provide details of your research, the research questions that inform the approach, the theoretical framework and the methodology. At this stage, there is nothing more that you can do except take a deep breath and steam ahead.

Don't listen to that voice. You are prepared. The people in this room are here because they chose to be. You can do this. Breathe!

The panel has read through your partial thesis. These are academics whose feedback can be adapted to make your paper even better. But will they 'get' you? Will they see the importance of your study? Oh be quiet brain demons! Where is that switch off button?

And before you know it, it is over. The presentation given, your PowerPoint shown and feedback provided. Now I know those voices are working in the background but don't listen! The feedback is yet another phase of this study and as I said, it will improve your writing. The advice you receive at this point of time is invaluable. It assists in building your understanding of the processes and procedures of the methodology of research. Listen to this advice with open ears. This process is in the stages for a reason. Learn from this experience because in one year's time you will be doing it all over again but having to synthesise the entire paper! This is your opportunity to share your project, to validate your study and to demonstrate its contribution to the area of study. That brain demon needs to quieten down so that you can move forward.

Trust me, the learning you receive from this process and the confidence you find cannot be described in words. You are progressing well and you have just ticked off another major milestone. The next thing to face is the process of gaining ethical clearance for your study. Congratulations, you are getting there! Take that, brain demons!

After confirmation, you can then start the process of gaining ethical clearance. Dependent on your project, this could be an arduous task. You will face another learning overload especially if you need to complete a National Ethics Application Form (NEAF). The NEAF is a necessary ethical process when, but not limited to, conducting research that involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This form is also necessary if your data collection will involve pregnant women and so forth. Once again, there is support there. Don't lose heart! Once you have ethical clearance, you are set to begin collecting data and the real fun begins.

From,

A proud future you—Go you!

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Depending on the type of methodology you choose to use when analysing the data, your approach here may differ greatly. I personally used a qualitative

methodology as it suited my study and the power of words from an Aboriginal voice was necessary.

Stage 4: Post ethical clearance

Dear me—thinking—will—this—ever—end,

The answer, my dear, is yes! You are almost there and I know that the brain demons are having a ball at this time but you don't have time to sit and listen to them. You are only a few months from the Final Seminar and those final chapters are not going to write themselves!

This is the best part! You are analysing the data and reporting the findings. You finally have all this lovely text that is validating your study and how it will contribute and provide impact into your area of interest. Why are you sitting there listening to those brain demons?

Are you afraid of finishing? Or are you afraid of failing still? What is happening here? Why do you give those voices time? Don't listen! They don't know—they are the ones who are scared! You are almost finished. You have proved them wrong thus far!

Now get to it! But what about ...? And how about...!? Are you serious!? Are we back to the very beginning again? After getting this far, you are still letting this happen! You have written over 30,000 words articulating a theoretical framework that complements and justifies the methodological approach you have used to analyse the data. Listen to your supervisors! Their feedback on your writing is valid. They are helping you! These voices aren't!

You can do this! You are so close! Don't give up now! There is light at the end of the tunnel. I know you can see it! Now get writing and stop wasting time!

The fears of finishing the project seem to creep up on you. Be careful not to put too much pressure on yourself which many of us are probably guilty of! The timeframes and milestones are not set in stone and there are processes in place that allow for this. Once again, your supervisory team are your best support! They know the 'ins and outs' of the processes and will be able to advise you on the best things for you. Be open and be sure to listen. Most importantly, remember you are not alone!

Furthermore, the importance of at least trying to get to some of the extended Master classes or Research weeks that universities provide cannot be underestimated. At these events you have the opportunity to network with others who are travelling the same road as you. It cannot be described in words how comforting it is when you hear the stories of others who are experiencing all the things you are.

These events also give you the means to learn about others' projects. We tend to get so engrossed in our own projects. Learning about others' projects is both fascinating and invigorating. The experience provides opportunity to share your study with others. Remember, feedback of any kind is good. Before you know it, the chapters are done,

the thesis has been through the copyeditor again and has been submitted for the Final Seminar.

From,

Someone at the end of the tunnel

HOOK, LINE AND SINKER

The final stages of the process of research for myself involved the Final Seminar and the Examination process. The Final Seminar followed the same processes as Confirmation. The Examination process, however, is a learning experience. I felt as though I was in limbo because this process can take up to three months. The thesis is typically sent to other academics external to the university who are asked to provide lengthy feedback. Therefore, the study itself comes to a screaming halt. The important thing is to use this time productively. As with your study, develop a new milestones calendar documenting journals and potential articles you will develop from your thesis. Maintain the focus and motivation to proceed to the next level.

Stage 5: Final seminar and examination

Dear me—who-is-now-so-near-to-the-finishing-line,

So here you are! Look at you now! In 40 minutes the Final Seminar will be over and you will receive the final feedback prior to your paper going under examination. This is it! This is what the past two years has been all about.

Once again, there is nothing more you can do. You have responded to the feedback from Confirmation. You have made the necessary changes as suggested by your supervisors. You have timed your presentation and have gone through it twice and made the necessary changes. Lucky you did the dry runs though! Taking 80 minutes to explain your project is double the amount of time allocated! Changes were definitely necessary.

I understand that those changes were difficult to make. I know you spent hours agonising over removing that quote and that important data. In hindsight, those things you thought that were all so important—over which you pleaded with your primary supervisor to include—weren't necessary. The participants understood your project without them.

Enjoy this moment. Remember to breathe. Eye contact, eye contact! Stop reading from your script. Lift your head, look around the room, and project your voice! Don't mumble! Breathe! Don't sway! Remember to change the slides! Do these voices ever leave you alone?

Honestly, this is it! Don't listen to them! Breathe it in! This is what it is all about! You get to share with the audience your research, your approach and explain how your work contributes to the field of study. You are almost there. The presentation is over before you know it.

Listen to the feedback. Read through the notes of the panelists within your paper. Discuss the suggestions with your supervisors. Make the necessary changes. Don't slow down now! Get those changes done so that paper can move into the final stage of external examination. It can be done!

Now, that wasn't so hard now was it!? Makes you wonder why it took you so long to enroll! That's right, we are lining up for the next stage—the PhD. It looks like research has caught us—hook, line and sinker!

In other words, you have overcome many of the barriers you faced in the initial stages. The brain demons may still be there but you have found strategies to quieten them. The potential impact and contribution your paper will have on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education has been identified by your peers and colleagues. You have not only completed the Masters but you have also ensured that the study will benefit your community. Know this, whatever issues you face from here on in, you are able to overcome them. No challenge is too big. There is always a solution and you can do it!

*From,
A very drained and yet strangely exhilarated self now with her paper under examination.*

CONCLUSION

Research has a way of sneaking up on you just like those insolent brain demons! If you lack self-confidence, if you are considering returning to study or even if you are already within the waves of research and feel isolated, know that you are not alone. You can do it. Write letters to yourself to remind yourself why you are doing this on those super fantastic days to open and re-read on those 'other' days when the brain demons won't leave you alone. Look out, you may just learn to enjoy the process. Maintain the motivation and always, always quieten those voices by internally screaming 'Die, brain demons! Die!'

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