

Chapter 10 – The experience of research

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Over 30 years ago Reason and Marshall (1987: 112) identified how all good research produces outcomes in three distinct areas: '*for me, for us and for them*' (author italics). *For them* is the traditional research contribution to the fund of knowledge about a subject; *for us* is a contribution from the research that is relevant and timely or, in today's parlance, has 'impact'; and *for me* is the contribution to the researcher's own personal and professional development. This chapter is concerned with the third of these areas – how the experience of research affects the researcher both as a professional and as an individual.

Because coaching is still quite a nascent discipline, particularly in relation to research, we believe it is important to capture the developmental experiences of doing research in the field. In this chapter therefore we include first-hand accounts of how doing doctoral research has affected some of our former students, how it has influenced their engagement with the discipline and has helped them reconsider or expand their professional practice. With the objective of presenting individual case studies and drawing out pertinent themes, we invited doctoral alumni from Oxford Brookes University to share their experiences of

doing coaching research. We received feedback from six alumni working in a range of coaching contexts and below we share how their research has impacted their professional lives and their personal development. In presenting the cases we have used pseudonyms to aid confidentiality.

We hope that by drawing together doctoral candidates' experiences of research in this chapter we will be able to share how students working on coaching topics identify and confront the various benefits, risks and challenges that doing a doctorate presents.

Student 1 – Savannah

Savannah is an experienced executive coach and supervisor and her research topic was directly related to her work at that level. She had identified a lack of guidance and research on how to obtain direct client feedback to support her professional development as a coach and so her research was focused on designing a feedback instrument to address this problem. There were two strands to the research: a qualitative strand undertaken with a small number of clients to develop the instrument, followed by a quantitative strand where the instrument was surveyed with a larger number of coaching clients.

Savannah explained how undertaking doctoral research had affected her work as a coach. During her study she uncovered how clients of other coaches were both willing and able to provide developmental feedback to their executive coaches. Involving participant clients in the development of a feedback instrument for executive coaches had surfaced an expectation of professional transformational learning actions and empathic behaviours. It also encouraged the inclusion of these two outcomes as part of the feedback discussions subsequently initiated

with survey participants. Thus, specific findings were implemented in practice; indeed the addition of these two elements to the feedback instrument were found to relate to the strength of the working alliance and the generation of new insights. At the same time, the feedback instrument developed with participants did not include many goal setting and monitoring behaviours, nor was it related to the achievement of goals. Rather than taking the need for goal setting for granted, Savannah decided to ask participants in the survey whether they were interested in receiving support for goal setting purposes.

The findings stimulated Savannah to actively seek developmental feedback from her own clients and systematically suggest topics to them as potential feedback domains.

As well as the impact on practice, Savannah also shared the ways in which she considered her doctoral research had impacted the discipline and her understanding of the discipline. She explained how one of the issues she encountered at the beginning of the research was the absence of relevant literature relating to client feedback in executive coaching. As a result, she says:

‘I explored the theory of feedback in related disciplines such as management and helping disciplines. I also explored various theories of coaching to find out which one would be suitable to support a theory of client feedback. This allowed me to explore in depth two theoretical domains that are core to my practice, thus equipping me with explicit theoretical foundations to continue developing my own practice and supporting those of my supervisees’.

Savannah has also been influenced both personally and professionally as a result of the research experience. She noted how she found out during the literature review that the competency models she used to train and accredit coaches are generally not explicitly related to a theoretical framework. This inspired her to join the research committee of the American professional body ‘Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching’ and support the on-going development of their academic standards. In her practice, she learned to critically review coaching models and make decisions about adopting them based on the rigour of the research behind them rather than based on sponsors’ request or popularity within my coaching communities. Finally, the research experience inspired her to teach coaching skills in an academic setting.

We have seen in this example, how the choice of research question can be directly linked to work as a coach. For Savannah this link was vital: her motivation for the study was fuelled by the lack of research into client feedback and the identification of the potential impact she could have on the discipline itself. Following her doctorate, Savannah felt moved to contribute to the development of others and to the improvement of academic standards for coaches - all based on her felt need for rigour in the field engendered through the research.

Student 2 – Leon

Leon is an experienced coach with a background in therapy. His critical realist research explored the experiences of insight of coaches and their clients during coaching sessions.

Leon reported that he had no doubts whatsoever that his understanding of the discipline had been improved: ‘Having read the amount of coaching literature, having discussed coaching

in differing cohorts and attended conferences, I have become aware of so many papers and research results within the industry'. He also confirmed how the critical thinking promoted by doing a doctorate has forced him to think about deeper and differing ways of being: 'Firstly, there is an increased awareness of the self; then, there is an increased desire to consider the client at a deeper level and to understand more about the client's unknown philosophical beliefs in order to understand how they are describing differing issues and questions'.

Leon reported that during the research phase of the project his coaching activity continued as previously. However, he noted that once the analysis phase was complete, he was keen to attempt to identify whether the results of the research would manifest in coaching sessions. Leon reflected on this delay in applying findings to practice and asked himself whether he was 'giving my all to the client or if I was adding value'. So Leon now asks himself: 'What are they seeking and from what perspective?' He is implementing the results of the research in order to operate as a better practitioner.

One of the additional outcomes Leon had not considered was the underlying pressure he felt to maintain 'the professional expectations and standards expected as a person holding the title of Doctor of Coaching and Mentoring and also as a member of the doctoral community'. This is something that was mentioned by a number of students.

In summary, Leon's coaching practice appears to have deepened by undertaking his doctorate. His understanding of the topic has resulted in him exploring areas in greater depth with clients, rather than, as he puts it, taking things for granted. Like, Savannah,

Leon's view of himself has also changed. He seems very aware of an uplift in expectation by clients and others towards someone who has reached doctoral level.

Student 3 - Pearl

Pearl's interest was in how creative writing could be integrated into coaching. Her biggest insight was around the discipline of coaching and the discovery of its complexity despite the 'wider perception as to its simplicity for those who focus simply upon coaching skills'. Additionally, Pearl found that her Heuristic Self Search methodology, involving the use of her own experience as data, supported 'healing and growth and, critically, a shared but unique perspective with co-researchers'. She explained how her reflexive diary was 'invaluable in terms of my growth and development throughout the research process and my appreciation of the experience and learning I had garnered'. Pearl thus shared with us what she calls the 'riches gained from the research experience in terms of skills and competencies'. She now knows that she is 'instinctively a reflexive practitioner and that the research brought forth enriched perspectives of self.

Pearl considered that she had developed a 'greater breadth and depth of insight' which underpins her communication and understanding of the discipline. She highlighted how her research 'brought forth key contributions in the areas of 'identity' as a coach; moving 'beyond personal narrative' into a more reflexive practitioner and the 'craft of becoming', recognising that these are possible areas of focus for dissemination of the research.

For Pearl, the reflexivity involved in doctoral research provided a realisation that learning is ongoing and describes this as a 'gateway into the possibilities of becoming; the idea that

there is always the potential for more; the notion that becoming is about evolving and progressing towards the fulfilment of potential and that everything can contribute to learning and growth subject to the willingness of the individual to commit to enhancing capacity and capability'. She recalled how throughout the heuristic research process her ability to differentiate between her approach to her work and that of others increased. This differentiation was partly 'grounded in a deeper and richer appreciation of coaching theory' which enabled her to be clearer about her offering when talking with clients. She also explained how these considerations remain 'invaluable, influential and enduring' acknowledging that the research process has contributed to the enrichment of personal and professional credibility. Pearl considered that this level of engagement requires 'practice, effort and courage and a willingness to embrace the notion of development as an ongoing process rather than a fixed destination (or qualification)'.

Once her studying was completed, Pearl noted how she missed the academic resources that were available during the doctorate: 'I miss access to the University library and the academic portals available to me during my doctoral studies and find myself challenging myself as to how I am going to keep abreast of developments within coaching and related fields'.

In relation to how her doctoral research had impacted the field and her understanding, Pearl conceded that her research had only made a small contribution to the field: 'One of the things to emerge very clearly from my coaching research is how much there is to learn – an exciting and daunting idea but one which is also stimulating and encouraging. A critical piece of learning for me throughout my research was that my research contribution is a crumb the size of a pinhead but that it is no less valuable for that scale.'

Like Leon, Pearl also commented on her new identity as a doctor: ‘My doctoral title gives evidence as to the rigour and discipline of my approach and supports ongoing clarity of self and personal approach to coaching. Practically, it took about six months post viva to feel worthy of my new identity and to incorporate it into my being. Congruity between identity, professional credentials and delivery has secured new client work.’

Pearl’s experience was similar to Savannah and Leon in that she also found that completion of her doctorate provided her not only with a deeper understanding of theory but also the opportunity to become more reflexive. The doctoral journey has impacted her view of herself, supporting ‘a richer, deeper me to emerge – a more measured and considered individual with a stronger richer sense of self which supports enhanced self-belief and confidence’. Finally, and enduringly her research facilitated understanding: ‘a greater sense of how little I know, a greater appreciation of the breadth and depth of my field of practice alongside a curiosity and a humility to learn more and to find ways to share and apply my insights’.

Student 4 – Mollie

Mollie has been a project manager and self-employed coach and she reports how undertaking doctoral research had been time consuming and had ‘hampered the creation of new possibilities from a time perspective’. However, her study did force her to think what she was doing: ‘it highlighted the importance of philosophy’.

Mollie also explained how because of the research process she has slowly softened all her opinions to be more accepting of different positions, for example previously she would have

said that without the contracted coaching conversation a coaching culture can easily embed hierarchy/power. Now she would say 'it depends on the context'. However, although the research process can have individual impact, she suggested that it may be hard for any doctoral research to impact the discipline overall because the meaning of coaching is so idiosyncratic: 'different for each client'.

Mollie also confirmed that the research had encouraged her to read more than she would otherwise have done. For example, she now has a better understanding of different discourses. She identified how much she has been influenced as a result of the research experience. Research has made her engage more in thinking and argument. However, Mollie realises that she still is not a natural theorist. She considers that this may have hampered her career and understanding: 'I'm thinking I've had practical knowing rather than theoretical knowing and I might have been less good at the practical if I'd spent more time on the theoretical'. She stresses that the time taken to complete a doctorate, whether a professional doctorate or a regular PhD, should not be underestimated.

Student 5 – Ava

Ava was clear that she felt much more confident as a coaching supervisor and as a supervisee following her doctoral research: 'As a coach - I feel more up-to-date about the latest thinking in coaching. I read a lot more books about coaching and leadership than I did before'. She feels she has 'stepped into' her authority as a coach, writing articles and speaking at conferences. She has also become a partner in a coaching organisation and takes a significant role in the CPD activities there: 'I have increased my fee rates as a coach and supervisor.'

Following her doctoral study, Ava is now involved in two new areas of research in the coaching field (on coaching women leaders and chemistry sessions and matching processes). She acknowledges that she feels confident in her abilities as a researcher and attends a lot more conferences. She also confirms that the doctoral research has ‘deepened my understanding of the discipline. For example, I understand more about the supervisee perspective and I am more aware of the power dynamics and feelings of fear that are present in coaching supervision’.

Ava explained how the research had made her feel differently about her professional self, explaining how she had incorporated her findings into how she works as a supervisor and as a supervisee: ‘I feel that my research added to the scant body of knowledge about the supervisee perspective in coaching supervision and I frequently get asked to contribute to conferences, share my findings with organisations, write articles and contribute to books on the subject’.

Ava explained how she is now involved in two new areas of research in the coaching field as a result of her research, namely coaching women leaders and chemistry sessions and matching processes. She feels confident in her abilities as a researcher and attends a lot more conferences. She is also more conscious of the importance of academic and empirical evidence in coaching and coaching supervision and so is more able to critique research and articles. Overall the doctorate has increased her confidence.

Most students agreed that undertaking the doctorate enabled them to be more informed in relation to theory. Ava also felt she had become more authoritative and has begun disseminating findings in writing and speaking engagements. Similar to the other students

she observed how she had grown in professionalism, but she also notes how it has ‘given me a sense of my signature presence as a supervisor’.

Student 6 – Alfie

Alfie commented on how the research had affected his practice as a coach on a number of levels: ‘The most obvious is that I have had a rare opportunity to undertake a collaborative inquiry into a phenomenon that seems to be intertwined with the very essence that everything that coaching, and being a coach, means (certainly from a relational standpoint)’.

Alfie explained how he became ‘highly sensitised’ to the concept he researched and how presence is ‘expressed and experienced from the perspective of both coaches and their clients’. Through the research process, Alfie explains how he met people from outside his regular network ‘who have been willing to work with me to make sense of what many see as being a slippery and nebulous concept’. He considers that this exploration and consequent development of a practical model has been invaluable to his own practice.

Alfie also came to appreciate ‘the inter-relationship between coaching practice, research and learning from the research of others’ and recognises now ‘having contributed my own grain of sand to the beach of knowledge, I now feel a responsibility as an active member of this community’. He confirms how researching at a doctoral level has taken existing good continuing professional development habits to a new level with new ones being developed during the process of becoming a researcher: For instance, he says, ‘with search engines like Google Scholar at my fingertips, my whole discipline of reflexive practice has been enhanced through being able to access the wealth of coaching research. It’s a bit like having

a virtual supervisor to hand to help with reflective insights after a coaching session'. Alfie gives examples of this new ability:

'If I had an experience where there was a sense of rupture with a client because I had challenged too strongly, I might find some research on "critical moments" and understand more of what other coaches have felt and done about this. If I felt a sense of flow during a coaching session, I might write a paper on flow in coaching and how it affects practice. Whilst this doesn't necessarily provide clear-cut answers or solutions, it adds to my appreciation of the wider system or field of intelligence that I can access to make sense of my coaching experiences'.

Alfie confirmed how many of the insights that he drew from the research have found their way back in to his practice: He confirms that he has been able to experiment with new ways of being and build a different type of relationship with my clients following a study of presence in the coaching relationship. As a result, he prepares differently, coaches differently and reflects differently:

'For example, I spend more time at the start of a session allowing myself and my client to come into presence with each other by listening with an aware compassion, noticing my breathing, sitting upright in my chair and trying not to let my mind jump into problem-solving mode. I am more aware that my presence impacts my client on a conscious and sub-conscious level so I have developed habits to cultivate presence, including meditation (a research finding was that clients felt when a coach wasn't fully present with them and that this affected the strength of their relationship and their ability to trust and show vulnerability). I am more attuned to the power of silence, allowing it to

be an active part of the coaching process and I value my role as a witness or observer when a client is recounting a narrative of an event of issue (because client research partners reported the value of this role to them). These are examples of a wealth of new, practical knowledge arisen directly from the research that have informed new practices, attitudes and ways of being and which I believe, have helped me to be a more effective coach.

Alfie explains that during and since the research: ‘There have been many moments of insight and many more gradual shifts in my appreciation of coaching. For example, one further fascinating aspect that arose during the research was the frequent use of metaphor by research partners when trying to make sense of their experience of presence’. The study identified 16 different metaphors and further investigation into these have led to a more informed understanding of the concept of tacit knowledge and the process of eliciting and expressing this kind of knowledge so that it can find language and meaning which can then be communicated. This awareness has direct relevance to the coaching process and I am now more highly attuned to the use of metaphor and more actively work with it’.

Alfie’s experience of the research process is profound. He explains in some detail how the process has contributed to a depth of understanding about his own philosophy and consequently his approach to his professional work:

‘The research process has broadened my thinking and helped me to understand more deeply my philosophy as a coach. Previously, I had only a vague awareness of the ontological and epistemological stances that underpinned my worldview and my preconceptions of who I was as a coach. I remember it took me some months of

exploring my professional and personal identity before I became comfortable with taking a constructivist stance and choosing to undertake a phenomenological inquiry’.

‘Coming to this position was a challenge and a journey and in doing so, I have realised that the congruence I feel (and can now better express) between who I am as a person and who I am as a coach, is also reflected in who I am as a researcher. The common ground is that I try to value all perspectives of clients or research partners as equally valid and stay true to an inductive, dialogic process. I view meaning-making as a mutual process unique to our particular time and place, informed by our individual histories and the histories we bring into the room with us. My focus as a coach and a researcher is on listening with all my being on a physical, emotional and mental level, to hear beyond the words and also to contribute fully to the meaning-making dialogue that happens between us. It has been a gift to really clarify this in my own mind and then to practice a phenomenological approach to research, which then deepens that same stance as a coach and vice-versa. It’s as though one hand washes the other’.

Alfie also identifies that the close relationship between being a coach and becoming a researcher was evident right from the start of the research journey and continued to develop over the years of the doctorate: ‘I have evolved as a coach since experiences in one domain have informed experiences in the other. The key to making sense of it all has been a much deeper reflexive practice as a both researcher and coach. This to me, really brings home the meaning of what it is to be a researcher-practitioner’.

Summary

A doctorate in coaching is most likely to be rooted in the professional practice of coaching and, whilst recognising and explicitly embracing academic research as an integral component, will also be concerned to develop and test new theories, practices and knowledge in that professional context. Consequently, the completed research will often have direct professional significance for the student, their work situation and, importantly, the professional field. Writing about their experiences with professional doctorates in the education sphere, Burnard, Dragovic, Ottewell and Lim (2018: 41) also confirmed that, through research, the identity of the researching professional can change:

Whether situated as an insider or in-betweener, encountering new ideas, and embracing a willingness to accept one's identity as being fluid through engagement in a professional doctorate programme involves risk-taking; the outcomes of ongoing reflexive self-interrogation may be uncomfortable, personally, professionally, culturally and methodologically. The impact may be difficult to predict or control.

In this chapter we have shared how the experience of doing coaching research has affected six doctoral researchers working and studying in that field. The chapter considered the effect of the research process on students themselves and the outcomes for their professional lives and for their clients. It revealed several themes that were common to all students despite differing ages, backgrounds and applications of coaching.

One noteworthy theme is the insights gained into the practice of coaching. Over the years, many students have commented that they had not realised that the theoretical understanding

and research rigour employed, particularly in a doctorate, could have such a significant impact on practice. Most students confirmed that they now have a different type of relationship with clients following their research.

Another significant theme relates to how students took on the mantle of ‘doctor’. One student referred to it as stepping into her authority, another said he felt a responsibility and yet another referred to wanting to feel ‘worthy’. This process of identity formation, or of ‘becoming doctor’ (Barnacle and Mewburn, 2010), has tended to be overlooked in education research, but the credibility that the doctorate confers to these student coaches is plainly vital to their identity not only as a researcher but as a professional coach.

In the quote above, Burnard et al (2018: 41) point out that being open to new ways of thinking and being can be ‘profoundly challenging and unsettling’. This certainly appeared to be the case for Mollie and most of the other students who shared their experience with us.

As noted earlier, critical thinking stimulated by doctoral research forces students to think deeper about not only the topic area, but also their practice and for many, their whole way of being. For doctoral researchers, and especially for professional doctorate researchers, the influence of the process on the profession and on the researcher him or herself is seen as particularly important. This chapter, as well as highlighting relevant propositional knowledge therefore, considered the influence of the research process on the researcher and highlighted their developmental experiences.

Further reading

Sverdlik, A., Hall, N. C., McAlpine, L., & Hubbard, K. (2018). The PhD experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 361-388.

This paper presents a comprehensive review of the factors, such as success, satisfaction, time management and well-being, that influence the experiences of doctoral students.

Gupta, R. K., & Awasthy, R. (Eds.). (2015). *Qualitative research in management: Methods and experiences*. SAGE Publications India.

This book explores a diverse range of qualitative approaches through the in-depth, lived experience of researchers in the management field.

References

Barnacle, R., & Mewburn, I. (2010). Learning networks and the journey of 'becoming doctor'. *Studies in Higher education*, 35(4), 433-444.

Burnard, P., Dragovic, T., Ottewell, K., & Lim, W. M. (2018). Voicing the professional doctorate and the researching professional's identity: Theorizing the EdD's uniqueness. *London Review of Education*, 16(1), 40-55.

Reason, P. & Marshall, J. (1987) in D. Boud & V Griffin (Eds), *Appreciating Adult Learning: From the Learner's Perspective*, London: Kogan Page, 112-126.

