



# The Doctorate:

international stories of the  
UK experience

Edited by Sheila Trahar, University of Bristol

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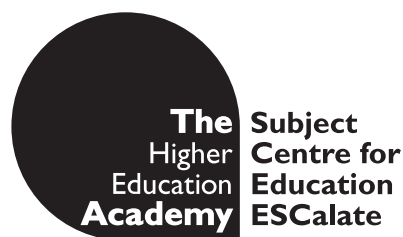
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# The Doctorate: international stories of the UK experience

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# Introduction



## **Global stories of courage, knowledge and unbecoming**

A year ago, a copy of the ESCalate publication *The Doctorate: stories of knowledge and power* (Brown, 2009) landed on my desk. I read it from cover to cover, enthralled by the richness of the stories and the many resonances for me within them. But, as I read the stories, I noticed that all of the people who had written them were, apparently, from the UK. Given the global nature of higher education, in particular at postgraduate level in the UK, I therefore contacted Tony Brown, the then Director of ESCalate to express my pleasure at this publication, but also my surprise that all of the writers were from the local context. In response to my comments, Tony suggested that I produce a sequel that would enable people from other countries undertaking doctoral research in the UK to tell their stories.

The Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol, where I work, prides itself on being wholly international in its constituency. In addition, for some years now, my research has focused on ways in which postgraduate students – both ‘international’ and ‘local’ – experience the learning and teaching landscapes of the UK. I was, therefore, delighted when ESCalate agreed to fund my proposal for a

sequel and I began to contemplate the shape of the publication and who I would ask to contribute. I wanted people to write about their experiences of the doctoral journey and to reflect, if appropriate, on experiences of supervision. But I did not want to be overly prescriptive by setting out definitive parameters for their stories. Some contributors assumed that I wanted an ‘academic piece of writing’, by which I inferred that they were asking about the need to include academic references. They were delighted when I disabused them of the requirement to take such an approach. Others immediately relished the opportunity to tell the personal story of their doctoral journey; yet others wanted to reflect how their research journey mirrored the doctoral research that they were conducting/had conducted. All of these approaches were welcomed, equally.

It would have been easy to gather 10 stories from the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol for the publication but it was essential to me to include people who had studied/were studying in a range of different institutions. I contacted some colleagues around the country who provided me with names of people to approach and very soon I had received 11 offers of contributions, from which 10, finally, found their way to me. My invitation had attracted a combination of people who had finished

their doctoral journeys and others who were nearing completion. In the case of the latter group, I was careful to avoid asking people to contribute who were in the very final stages, as I did not want to disrupt that crucial phase of the process for them.

### **‘International’? ‘Local’?**

There was, and is, however, a paradox for me that I need to articulate at this stage. For many years I have resisted homogenising terms such as ‘international students’, ‘home students’, arguing vociferously that grouping people together in such ways may be useful to differentiate fee status but is indefensible when it is carried over into everyday parlance and into policy documents, whether these be at local, national or institutional level. Such terms are often used in pejorative ways, to discriminate against those who do not belong to the ‘dominant culture’ because of their ethnicity, first language or cultural background. While I have some allegiance with those such as Gannon (2009, p.71) who consider categories such as race, ethnicity and culture as ‘deeply unstable social constructs’, proposing rather that we are ‘continuously decomposing, reproducing and multiplying’ differences (ibid, p.69), nonetheless, a ‘liberal *disavowal of difference*’ (Manathunga, 2007, p.95, original emphasis) can lead to people feeling that their ‘difference’, whatever that might be – and which they may wish to have ‘illiberally avowed’ in order to have a voice – is not acknowledged. In this discussion paper, therefore, it was important to me that people wrote the stories that they wanted to write – rather than those that they felt I wanted to receive. In my own writing I draw attention to the desirability of pedagogy that is respectful and inclusive, that celebrates the diversity of the academic traditions that we encounter, viewing them as rich opportunities to learn about each other rather than seeking to assimilate those from different cultural contexts into ‘our’ ways of doing things, whatever they may be. By having two separate publications,

therefore, one which consists of UK students writing their doctoral stories of ‘knowledge, power and becoming’ and one that contains stories from ‘non-UK’ students, is ESCalate – and by association – me, contributing to perpetuating the very divide that I claim as artificial and unproductive? In an effort to address this conundrum, as the contributors began to submit their stories, I decided upon an editorial title, ‘Global stories of courage, knowledge and unbecoming’, that reflected the somewhat different themes of the stories. These themes were of courage, developing new knowledge, learning to survive and thrive in different contexts, having one’s perceptions challenged – and challenging those of others. I use the word ‘unbecoming’ in the title of the editorial not only as an antonym to the humanistic notion of ‘becoming’ in the prequel to this discussion paper, but also in the sense that each of the contributors, in their different ways, is ‘unbecoming’, as they present readers with their disruptions to more orthodox narratives of doctoral research experiences.

In spite of my struggle not to position contributors as belonging to particular groups, notice how the majority of writers in this discussion paper mention, albeit in their different ways, the support they gained from ‘other international’ researchers, whether from their home context or from other parts of the world. Read of the difficulties that some of our doctoral researchers encountered in getting to know their ‘local’ peers. Such frustration and disappointment at the lack of interaction between students from different contexts is, unfortunately, well documented in the literature (e.g. Hyland et al., 2008, Montgomery, 2010); it is, however, even more salutary to read that such paucity of interaction exists for some doctoral researchers, given the rich potential for learning from each other revealed by the stories told here.

### The stories

Somewhat inevitably, many of the contributors wrote about their experiences of supervision and of their encounters with 'different' pedagogical approaches. Georgina Yaa Oduro's shock at the ways in which many students interrupted a lecturer without waiting to be invited to do so will be familiar to many readers. The principles of good supervision, as with the principles of effective learning and teaching obtain, irrespective of where we come from. There are, however, some important differences that are reflected in many of the accounts here, ones that, in my view, need to be recognised and established as central when supervising doctoral researchers who are not 'local'. The first one is that of expectations. People who come to the UK - or study with a UK higher education institution - from other contexts and academic traditions carry with them the many experiences that they have accrued. Given that the majority of people who undertake doctorates in education tend to be more mature and usually have extensive professional experience on which to draw, they will have formed expectations of supervision gained from their previous academic experiences. Such expectations apply to 'local' doctoral researchers as well of course, but 'local' people are less likely to be working in a language that is not their first, are usually more familiar with the approaches to learning and teaching, and tend to expect an informal relationship with their supervisors. In addition, it is rare that such doctoral researchers will have left their family several thousand miles away to undertake their doctorates. Oduro, for example, begins her contribution with the words 'Mum when are you coming home?' and continues by writing so poignantly of the sacrifices that she made, in leaving her three children in Ghana, to do her PhD in Cambridge.

Secondly, many of the stories in this publication bear witness to what some of their writers refer to as

'cultural shock'. I have been working with postgraduate students from and in different parts of the world since 1999; indeed my research continues to focus on how all of us working in higher education navigate its rapidly changing, often uneven landscapes and how our identities shift and are formed by our encounters with each other in these landscapes. I like to believe that I am developing cultural capability, that is an understanding of how we are all shaped by values and systems that have different consequences for some people and societies, often resulting in social division. Being culturally capable, for me, means understanding what those values and systems are and being challenged to question my own beliefs and values, in particular about learning and teaching (Trahar, 2011). Yet, in reading these stories, I realise once more how much I still have to learn about 'cultural shock'. Reading of the importance that Kai Ren placed on the doctoral hat; of how Shawanda Stockfelt feels that she is continuously 'categorised' in different ways; of Cheryl Rounsaville's anger at people feeling they have the right to be critical of 'her culture', yet not of others' culture; of Thushari Welikala's journey of 'coming to (un) know in another culture', I can feel that the insight that I have developed into the experiences of others remains at a fairly rudimentary level.

I then began to reflect on these narratives, in particular those that focus on the importance of the supervisory relationship, using a postcolonial framework. Manathunga (2007, p.93), in writing about 'intercultural postgraduate supervision' highlights the postcolonial themes of contact zones, transculturalism and unhomeliness, asserting that they allow exploration of how colonial overtones/stereotypes may impact, subconsciously, on perceptions. She defines contact zones as offering opportunities for productive dialogue in those spaces where disparate cultures meet, without glossing over 'difference'; transculturalism creates new cultural



possibilities and creative new knowledge; the concept of unhomeliness, which I find particularly valuable, is the ambivalence that supervisor and supervisee can feel in their adjustments to new cultural practices. With some caveats, once again, one might usefully use this framework when working with any doctoral researcher yet a powerful example of its value for me is in an experience with a doctoral researcher who was a devout Muslim. In our supervisory meetings we had held many conversations about Islam, which, as a non-Muslim, I found illuminating and enjoyable. Given that her research was very reflexive, I became curious about why she did not include reflections on the ways in which her faith contributed significantly to her beliefs and values, including how it informed her research and teaching practice, in her writing. Taking up my challenge, she began to write about herself as a Muslim woman and of how her faith informed every dimension of her life. I was aware of feeling deeply uncomfortable at reading about some of the beliefs that she held that were not at all in accord with my own. I consider myself to be open to diverse understandings of the world and my work over the past 12 years or so with people from many different contexts, cultures and faiths has enabled me to acknowledge my unfortunate propensities to continue, against my better judgement, to stereotype sometimes or to privilege certain perspectives. But, in reading her very powerful and challenging words, I realised how much I was struggling to accept her versions of the world that seemed so different from mine. In our next meeting we discussed my discomfort. For me this was a good example of how,

by allowing myself to feel such discomfort and to share it with her, we were able to establish a different footing for our relationship. Both of us were able to move beyond constructions of difference as immutable (Frankenburg, 1993) and to engage in robust dialogue in which we were able to ask sensitive questions of each other, questions that can often be avoided because they can be embarrassing, but are so crucial to ask if we are to deepen our understanding of those from different backgrounds and contexts. In doing so, we arrived at a place where we acknowledged and celebrated our disparate beliefs and values - and recognised our many similarities. In reading the stories in this discussion paper, I feel that there are many such opportunities for learning from contact zones, transculturalism and unhomeliness – and I hope that you, the reader, will engage with the stories in similar ways.

As a narrative inquirer myself, inviting people to tell stories is what I do. Two of the contributors, Thushari Welikala and Narina A. Samah, used this methodological approach in their doctoral research. A. Samah writes of how she was introduced to narrative inquiry, along with a range of other methodological approaches, in her research training programme. In her story, she recalls making the paradigm shift from being a quantitative researcher to becoming a narrative inquirer, reflecting intensively on each step of her journey to see, as she puts it 'with new eyes'. Welikala writes of how her choice of using this methodological approach was shaped by





her 'experience of growing up and living in a culture where there is a saga of stories'. Reflecting some elements of their stories in hers, yet taking a somewhat different stance, Shawanda Stockfelt asks the very powerful question 'How can I talk about the influence of the narratives of mothers and grandmothers on the aspirations of boys in the Jamaican context using Judith Butler's version of postmodernism?' These writers describe, along with several others, their experiences of the hegemony of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks that are informed, mainly, though not exclusively, by 'white (usually dead) philosophers and the white feminist ideals'. Reading Stockfelt's impassioned critique of the latter I agree wholeheartedly with her criticisms and urge her not to 'stifle the actual stories being told' yet it is important to remind ourselves that many academics in the UK draw on the work of people from many contexts and cultures when 'teaching' research methodology. Indeed, they seek to encourage doctoral researchers, wherever they may be from, to create methodological approaches that are grounded in their local narratives.

### **My experience**

On a more personal level, I could not read these stories without reflecting on the resonances for me, when I undertook my own doctoral journey. In common with most of the contributors to this discussion paper, I was a 'mature student', and considerably so. I had extensive experience of the world both outside and inside of academia – but I had less experience of doing formal research. I use

the phrase 'formal research' because for me, research embodies natural human curiosity; it becomes 'formal' when conducted in an educational institution and/or when it is funded for a particular purpose. I recall participating in research methodology courses; of relishing being a 'student' yet so often of allowing myself to feel infantilised, rather than holding on to my own knowledge and power. A similar experience is described movingly by Cheryl Rounsaville as she writes of her resistance to being positioned as a 'student', deciding, ultimately, to refer to herself as a 'researcher'. In my case, here I was, a mature woman with a family and experience of a range of occupations, including counselling and teaching in higher education, allowing myself to be positioned as though I knew nothing about anything. Before too long I realised that I was going to do the PhD that I wanted to do – not one that others might want from me. I pushed at the edges of methodological 'boundaries' and in my methods of re-presenting my research used dreams, fictionalised narratives and other literary devices. I caused some consternation, at times, in my supervisor, but he supported, valiantly, my endeavours to rattle what I perceived as a stifling academic cage. Now, as a doctoral supervisor myself, I read Thushari Welikala's accounts of the weekly meetings between her and her supervisor, meetings that lasted for two and a half hours in which they discussed the stories that she had written and feel myriad emotions. I feel envy, envy that he was able and/or chose to give her so much time; envy because I would love someone to give that much time to talk with me about my writing. In addition, I feel uncomfortable, uncomfortable because, with so many

demands on me as an academic, I cannot give that amount of time to each researcher every week. In addition, I also feel uncomfortable because I am aware that I often say to people, 'Just send me what you've written', 'Write the story, don't worry about integrating other elements for now, just write'. Sometimes I am met with puzzled looks. Am I not living up to their expectations of how a supervisor should behave? I want to work with how the supervisee chooses to work but sometimes I find that supervisees, experienced professionals, ascribe expertise and power to me that I do not care to accept. Perhaps, as a supervisor, I, too, am 'unbecoming' in my disruptions of their expectations? Are these strategies helpful – or not? I continue to muse on that question...

Finally, to reiterate, supervision is, as I have indicated, only one of the themes that run through the stories recounted here. Courage, developing new knowledge, learning to survive and thrive in different contexts, challenging perceptions – in others and in themselves – these are some of the themes that are foregrounded for me in these global stories, as explained earlier. Others may emerge for you, whether as a supervisor or as a doctoral researcher. My hope is that you will read these very powerful stories and, whatever your role, that they will raise questions for you, as they do for me, and, in doing so, may effect deeper knowledge and understanding of your own – and others' – 'doctoral narratives'.

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# Living the interfaces: coming to (un)know in another culture

Thushari Welikala, University of Nottingham

This story provides a reflexive narrative account on the experience of living a doctoral study within a higher education context, located far away from my home geo-politically and socio-culturally as well as emotionally. The story examines the ways in which the process of doing my doctoral research – from selecting a research focus to defending my thesis together with the relationship with my supervisor – emerged and re-emerged as a sojourn of encountering multiple world views. It reflects on how the socio-culturally embedded nature of knowledge-making guided me to construct an alternative social imaginary of international higher education which moves away from the dominant economic agenda towards co-designing critically reflexive epistemic virtues that promote global interconnectivity.

## **The pianos and the drums: different versions of knowing**

I believe that we, human beings have partial perceptions of the world. We never perceive things in their entirety. We capture life, love, hatred and people through cracked lenses. We are wounded creatures trying to patch up life using the silhouettes of the memories of the past and hopes of the future.

We make meaning of our lives and our experiences through the memory of old films, characters we loved and hated, childhood wounds, sweets we could not taste and dreams we forgot to dream (Rushdie, 1991).

I read Rushdie in the 1990's, but I began to make (partial) sense of his words after embarking on my sojourn of studying abroad. My perception of the world, the people I encountered, the stories I lived about life, learning, love and hatred and the meanings I designed around diverse slices of my life as a human being, a woman, a daughter, a wife, a mother and a person pursuing higher education in a distant land resonated with the sentiments he expressed.

Some years ago, I started my sojourn of doing doctoral research in the well regarded Institute of Education in London. Before adding myself as a number to the Institute's list of doctoral students, I had spent one year at the same institute following a master's course. That whole year was very eventful for me since inside the four walls of the classroom, in the halls of residence, inside the library and in the corridors, I began to imagine question marks rather

than full stops. Curiosity, confusion, uncertainty, fear, distrust and disharmony embedded with loneliness and the anxiety to learn created a world which I had never experienced before. While certain notions and practices related with learning and living in the new environment did not surprise me much, some did turn my world topsy-turvy. Reflecting on Geertz's ideas (1975) I felt that what is philosophy in my home country is theatre in the host country. However, I did not want to call the experience a cultural shock because it was much more than a mere shock and the notion of culture had already begun to trouble me, questioning the unquestioned and observing the unobserved.

I felt that my previous experience of 'being at home with learning' became only a story lived in the past once I started doing my master's. This experience of living diverse stories of learning and the tensions, ambiguities and dilemmas they create and recreate within the sojourn of learning resulted in huge socio-cultural, personal and epistemic confusions in me. These very confusions fuelled a strong passion in me to research more about the ways in which the learners who come to British universities to pursue higher education make sense of their process of learning. Hence, soon after my master's I added another number to the enrolment list of the doctoral students at the same institute of higher education.

### **The story of the self and the study**

Taking one or two steps back from the experience of conducting my PhD research (Steier, 1991), I can now clearly see how my diverse locations – historical, personal, professional and cultural – shaped and reshaped the whole process of the inquiry. From selecting the topic of the research to choosing the research approach, the view of knowledge construction, data collection techniques, making meaning of the data collected to writing about the

narrative of doing the research all were spirally connected and reconnected to my own self in the world. For instance, I did not experience a period of 'writing up' of the thesis since I used a co-constructivist (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) view of knowledge creation and the narrative approach. Instead, from the beginning of my journey of the inquiry I did write about it though I did not call it the 'thesis'. I always moved back and forth between data collection, transcribing the interviews I conducted, making meaning of them and going back to the field to co-create more stories with the respondents.

I used a narrative approach (Bruner, 1990, 1996; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Sarbin, 1986) since I felt that it would successfully address the purpose of my research. My choice of using a narrative approach was also shaped by my experience of growing up and living in a culture where there is a saga of stories: stories about life, love, learning, teaching, birth, death, mathematics, medicine, poems, the wind and the rain.

In the meantime, I was not very much interested in following the standard steps of doing the research and writing about it. For me, living the story of conducting the inquiry and living itself could not be separated in an objective manner. The story of the 'passive Asian' from a 'developing' country slowly acquiring the 'valuable knowledge' under the shelter of British higher education does not exactly portray my story of living the PhD. I also cannot draw a trajectory of adaptation which started from 'cultural shock' and then gradually calmed down by total 'assimilation' into the host university's ways of knowing with the help of the empathetic approach of a supervisor. Moreover, my PhD narrative did not have a proper story structure: (a) *the start* 'once upon a time there lived an international student... (b) *the middle* 'in a British university'... (c) *the end* 'who gradually became a very critical person'. When life,

part time working, looking after a small child and living in London mediated with doing my doctoral inquiry, I began to feel that I am meandering between the Self and the interface of the sojourn of conducting a research for a PhD and my own story of living.

The messy, complicated process which always did make me shuttle between my socio-political past and present, the theoretical underpinnings I lived, the stories of knowing and unknowing I used to narrate, and a human being from a particular part of the world which had been invaded by the British in the past re-emerged in the process of writing and doing the research.

Now, some years after completing my studies, I turn the pages of my thesis with different meanings and feelings. I feel that it is a piece of art work composed by assembling and overlaying pieces from my geo-political history, fluidity of my identity, memories of the socio-cultural and personal stories I lived and dreamed of living in the future. When I go through certain pages of my thesis now, the 'eye' that moves on the pages intuitively becomes the 'I'.

### **The super-vision**

Having narrated the degree of the presence of my self in the process of my inquiry, I will move on to tell the way in which the supervisor-student experience continually reconstructed my sojourn of knowing and unknowing. It is confusing for me to write about this experience since I find it difficult to think of any methods, patterns, approaches either my supervisor or I used in living our experiences of learning and teaching. I would rather not use the notions of learning and teaching or supervision.

At the very beginning of my inquiry, we sat down – me and my supervisor – for at least two and half hours every week and we talked. We talked about the story of going about the doctoral inquiry, the life, the country, culture and the world. Such conversations led to a confusing process of unknowing, and an idea of alternative ways of looking at my life and inquiry. He asked me to write small articles which were not directly related to the research area. I wrote them with enthusiasm. He read them with more enthusiasm. And again we talked.

Time passed by and I began to wonder 'where am I going'? Nevertheless, I strongly felt that my journey would be very different from most of the other students who almost all the time followed the standard rules and norms in relation to doing their research. They told me that they were instructed to plan ahead, step-by-step, then once they started 'writing up' they wrote draft chapters, emailed them to the supervisor before the meeting (normally once a month) and then they were given 'feedback' either in the form of printed 'comments' or in the form of post-modern art with lots of lines and words here and there on the draft paper. My supervisor did none of these activities and at the beginning I was curious but was not at all disappointed for not having feedback in symbolic form. Whenever I met my fellow PhD students in the library or in the canteen I often found them turning pages of a big bundle of papers which they called the 'list of references' given by their supervisors. I looked at them and with messy feelings re-thought of the only reference suggested by my supervisor – *The Local Knowledge* by Clifford Geertz (1983).



### **Confronting the stranger in me**

Interestingly, our conversations became deeper and more illuminating as time went on. I brought a piece of writing every week to my supervisor and he read it with me and discussed it with me. He never gave answers. Instead, the conversations were full of questions which were not aimed at answers but stories describing issues. Sometimes the confusions created by such questioning encouraged me to find and read ten or eleven books and articles. While my friends were troubled that I would never pass my PhD like that, I enjoyed this way of knowledge making and the avenues my supervisor opened for me to live my own process of learning.

The most important thing my supervisor did not attempt to do was to hold a super-vision over my learning. This does not mean that this relationship was neutral and there were no traces of power, politics and authority (see Gergen, 1994). Coming from a culture where there are different meanings to the 'authority' and 'power' of the teachers, I found it easy to make sense of his power and the ability of giving a learner the authority of leading his or her own learning journey. And we talked about the politics of knowledge making explicitly. Sometimes, certain experiences encouraged me to relate some stories lived in the host university to the story of colonisation. We had very constructive conversations about knowledge, power and the re-colonisation

through knowledge making. Somewhere in such conversations he would imply that he is Welsh but not English. Such conversations, my field work, reading and reflexive moments of penetrating deeper into my day-to-day learning process made me more and more curious about myself as a learner and as a human being.

### **The process of (un)knowing**

While Levinas (1969) mentions that Western philosophy has insistently repressed the Other by striving to give it a definite place, my supervisor never seemed to allocate a socio-cultural place for me. This absence of place allocation helped me to find my Self within the host university environment. I felt that Sartre (1958) was right when he pointed out that there is no Self without the Other. We come into being when we become the objects of the other person's gaze. Relating this to my experience of knowing, I felt that while making sense of the Other among diverse stories of living and learning, I could trace the silhouette of the Other within me. This understanding made me very confused since I know that nobody comes from nowhere. I felt all of a sudden I belong to here and there. My epistemic beliefs and theoretical understandings revisited me all the time. I began to question my norms and beliefs about living and learning as well as those of others. At times I felt that I was meandering and floating between my own cultural ways of knowing and

alternative ways of knowing. However, this nowhere position sharpened my desire to know more and do my research in an alternative manner to those of the 'standard' ways of doing the research and writing the thesis.

After some time, I had to undergo the institutional formalities of doing a PhD. I was at the same time confident and confused since I did not know whether the upgrading examiners would make sense of my chapters written so far. Even some academics commented on the difference of my approaches and the way I was constructing my chapters with suspense. However, my examiners were very positive and surprisingly, they came from very different theoretical stances of making knowledge to those of mine. This was yet another occasion which told me that alternatives and strangeness do not (and need not) always lead to failure of understanding (see Welikala and Watkins, 2008). On the day of the final viva, I could talk through the process of living my PhD intellectually and confidently based on all my theoretical and personal dislocations and relocations while the thesis was resting inside my bag.

Some years later, I am now retelling the story of doing my PhD. I feel that Julia Kristeva's (1990:187 in Cavallaro, 2001) words keep telling me something important.

*Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container... I lose my composure. I feel 'lost', 'indistinct', 'hazy'.*

I add the next line:

*And I also feel very distinct, I feel my composure at the same time... the story about my brown skin, the life worlds known to me from childhood, my parents, my teachers who taught me in my primary school in a faraway land, my PhD supervisor Chris Watkins, the three letters 'IOE' written inside a blue square with the word 'London' underneath... and much more. I feel the interface I live.*

#### **Author Details**

I completed my doctoral studies at the Institute of Education, University of London in 2006. The focus of my research was on the mediation of culture in learning in international contexts of higher education. I have presented the insights from my research widely at international level conferences and co-authored the book *Improving Intercultural Learning Experience in Higher Education: Responding to Cultural Scripts for Learning* with Chris Watkins.

I am passionate about narrative research, cultural politics of the English language in international contexts of teaching and learning and the meaning of learning in different geo-political contexts of higher education.

My experience of working as a teacher and a teacher educator (teaching of English as a second language) and as a researcher in the field of education in different cultural sites provides me with insightful stories about learning and teaching. I make use of these experiences to continue to co-design new meanings about knowing and unknowing. I now work as a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham.

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# Slave to the white leaders on paper? The PhD expedition



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*You sell your soul like you sell a piece of ass...Slave to the dead white leaders on paper* (Ndegeocello, quoted in Lewis, 2006). I might not be as lyrically raw as Meshell Ndegeocello<sup>1</sup>, but sometimes I do wonder if my enslavement in academia is akin to me selling myself like 'a piece of ass', constantly struggling to exercise and realise my personal capability without forced acceptance of these white (usually dead) philosophers and the white feminist ideals. When I say 'white' I am actually referring to a modern way of thinking stemming from a historically white western middle class outlook, and not necessarily race. These ideals, disguised on paper as '*epistemologies*', are, according to Steup (2010), focussed on the scale and nature of knowledge in all its essence. Therefore, these philosophical outlooks are viewed as critical lenses to measure, evaluate and understand the realities of the world in which we operate as educational researchers. Personally, I do not think there is anything innately wrong with these ideals;

however it is problematic when I am encouraged to tell my stories and those of others through these lenses that do not fit into my cultural context. As I was told by an established academic, '*it is common practice for doctoral researchers to extend theory and knowledge*'; who then referred me to the departmental guidebook. However, the onus is still on working with these theoretical ideals; even if I build on or extend them, I still have to inform my research through these philosophical lenses; most of which are based on white, male, European ideas (e.g. positivism, constructivism, interpretivism, critical theory). My research area focuses on young, black boys in Jamaica. On the other hand, I am given the option of a more 'radical' ideology that seems based on reducing the obsession with the symbolic phallic<sup>2</sup> way of conducting and evaluating research; a form of what I perceive as white feminist ideals. Don't get me wrong, some of these 'approaches' – as they are sometimes called – seem quite radical and open-

<sup>1</sup> An American singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist ten times Grammy winner

<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'symbolic phallic' is used in reference to the cultural implications of the male sex organ in feminist theory.

ended, like post-modernism and feminism – however these ways of thinking are usually conceived in a different time period, culture and for political reasons specific to that context. How do I make it work in my cultural and contextual field of investigation?

This is a short opinionated narrative article about one aspect of my experience on the PhD expedition so far. My main aim in this article is merely to share a small aspect of my journey without coming to any distinct conclusion. Why? Because the PhD expedition is not over yet, because I am still learning and metamorphosing and on another level, I simply want to share some of the challenges I have experienced. I have used Sen's (2005) definition of capability as representing a person's freedom or real opportunities to choose; i.e. real choices based on equal advantages. For example, telling me that I am free to use or not use an epistemology is redundant if my chances of success are grossly reduced without it. In my perception, these are not real choices but merely empty expressions that look good on paper.

### **My story**

It is critical to be able to evaluate stories through different perspectives to enhance understanding, after all, reality, in a sense, is multilayered (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006). However, what is more critical for me is the capability to present the voices of participants in my research (including my own) without disguising, altering or overpowering them with an epistemology that sounds rational but is not based on my cultural or geographical context. According to Robeyns (2003), the capability approach is a relatively broad standardised frame of reference to evaluate social situations and the wellbeing of individuals in respect to inequality and poverty. According to Comin et al. (2008), Sen's thesis is based on a justification that true progress can only be evaluated through the level of personal

agency individuals have at their disposal. This involves the use of two core concepts: functioning and agency. Functioning is basically what people may value being and doing (Sen, 1999); and agency is 'what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important' (Sen, 1985, p. 203). An individual's capability is based on her/his functioning and agency (Comin et al., 2008). Therefore, what I am calling in to question here is my capability to accept or reject a Westernised epistemology. Let me re-emphasise, I have no major problem with most of these philosophies of knowledge, but with the overzealous attempt in academia for one to use these as lenses through which you 'see' your research... Why?

My current research focuses on exploring the educational aspirations of boys in Jamaican secondary schools to understand the stories relating to their academic desires and intentions. These boys have identified economic independence as something that is of significant value to them, which is further immersed in the context of what it means to be a man within their subcultures i.e., education is not a functioning for them. In some cases, boys - specifically from the inner-city of Kingston - do not value formal education as it is not perceived as a pathway to economic independence because it does not fit within their realities. Instead it is viewed as a way of stifling indigenous knowledge – used in this context as true knowledge from their experiences and subcultures – by propagating standardised ideals to fit within a global western culture (Tikly, 2001). Personally, I think there is a level of 'truth' in such beliefs where although Jamaica has made strong progress in moving away from its oppressive, negative colonial past, its educational field still maintains some aspect of this, inherent in the culturally held beliefs, practices and policies. Do I then further this oppression by investigating the voices of these black



youths through a white, Westernised ideal? I used the word 'oppression' to reinforce what I sometimes feel is the undertone behind the constant pressure to pin research on an epistemology, that is, the experiences of these participants (including myself) are not credible enough to be presented without the support of a theory of knowledge.

At this point, some of you might be nodding your head in agreement while others might be basically asking 'What is your point? Not all epistemologies are founded by white men (dead or otherwise) with outdated realities irrelevant to your research context!'. Fair enough, however in my experience, the most frequently used, most epitomised ones within the PhD research framework, are. As novice educational researchers, we are usually encouraged to tell our stories and those of our participants (regardless of quantitative or qualitative format) in reference to one of these knowledge theories; whether we are using, building or even critiquing them. How can these theories fully explain my and these participants' situations when these philosophers have never been in my context or had similar experiences to these participants? A theory of knowledge is defined as practical or theoretical understanding of a particular area through experience and education (Steup, 2010). Some experienced academics sympathetic to my situation might be thinking that a more post-modern or post-structuralist ideology might match my current thinking. However, although I can see the value in these; I sometime shudder at these

conceptual titles aimed at containing thoughts, actions and experiences into a framework based on standardised ideals to categorise research. People, behaviours, cultures and ideas existed prior to the conception of these epistemological titles, so why do we need to be bogged down into the language of these concepts if we choose not to? These concepts live on and evolve in the written format until the original meanings become degraded and/or outdated with time. In reflection, what might be told as a 'need for economic independence' by these boys in my research today, might evolve into 'a search for identity' tomorrow, based on the philosophical and theoretical outlook employed to evaluate these written stories. I struggle to 'prove' why I do not want to bury the stories I have collected with these large dead, symbolic white European phalluses that are some of these prime epistemologies. On the other hand, I am sometimes told that I may reject these epistemologies if I can justify their irrelevance. However, I still struggle with why I have to justify that the voices of these participants (including myself) are trustworthy enough to be heard without these epistemologies. Supporting these voices theoretically may create a more diverse outlook and multiple versions of that reality which could result in a more holistic understanding of the event being investigated. However, working with set, standardised 'theories of knowledge' may stifle the actual stories being told as they will be told from a certain philosophical understanding.

Since I first embarked on this PhD expedition in the UK almost three years ago, I have been categorised as (in no apparent order): Afro-Caribbean, female, Jamaican, international, Black/Minority, African and 'exceptional'. I chose to place the last bit in quotation marks because of my interpretation of the word 'exceptional' when it was sometimes uttered by a white person of a certain position or class; it may sometimes mean '*you are smart BUT black-Jamaican, so must be exceptional*'. Categories seem to be the building blocks of research; most educational studies are framed based on epistemology, theoretical frameworks, methodologies etc. These categories are usually so normalised that one has to be extra careful of stepping outside of their confines. The problem is that social reality is not normalised but dynamic and multi-layered, so how do we represent and present these realities in such a philosophically standardised manner?

How do I represent knowledge based on the actual social 'reality' we are coexisting in if I am impeded by these ideals? In trying to explore this question, I am usually countered by the idea that knowledge and reality is based on the epistemological worldview of the research. However, this just takes me back to my contention with no exit strategy. Why do I have to frame these stories in ANY of these set epistemological worldviews? I undertook this journey because I wanted to reach out to oppressed voices (as a voice of someone who is oppressed) in my small context, and provide a medium for them to be heard along with mine. Another selfish reason is to get the accreditation to increase the volume of my voice as one belonging (or belonged in some cases) to that of the oppressed: black, woman, Jamaican/low-income and low socio-economic status. However, to do so, I sometimes feel that I have to edit the voices of those I want to expose the most, including my own. Why? Because although it is

possible to use a grounded methodological approach; one is usually still 'strongly' encouraged to maintain a certain philosophical outlook to guide, support and present research. Without this, it seems to reduce one's advantage of succeeding in the educational academic field. In my perception, that is not true capability.

Moving away from the shadow of these symbolic phallic epistemologies, takes me to another set of ideas which I perceive to be feminism within epistemology – a form of transformative, 'post-modern', even 'feminist' approach. I refuse to put a name to it because there is so much contention surrounding different categories in academia; I am sure I have already broken a few with my use of 'epistemology' and 'theory' as concepts. However their usage may suffice in helping to deal with some of these theoretical constraints as it moves away from a meta-narrative to include the voices of individuals and contexts (Benhabib, 1995, Storey, 2006). I am all for this, so I can appreciate this development; however, sometimes it seems like we are given this 'choice' of alternative epistemologies when the stories we want to tell do not fit within the more traditional ones. How can the dynamic open-system of the social world be so easily compartmentalised? According to hooks (1981, 2000) and Walker (1983), written feminist theoretical ideas originated from white, middle class European and North American women. Yet, I would never say real feminist ideas were given birth by this same sector, this would go against the narratives I grew up with, stories of women's exemplary struggle for freedom within the Jamaican context from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards – like Nanny of the Maroon and Queen Cubah just to name a few (Cooper, 2006). The point is that these narratives are not usually written up as feminism because they do not fit within the context of what a feminist or



postmodernist written ideology is about. But how can they be when the contexts are so different?! How can I talk about the influence of the narratives of mothers and grandmothers on the aspirations of boys in the Jamaican context using Judith Butler's version of postmodernism (Butler, 1995)? In other words, what Butler might consider a form of subjugation, might be seen as a symbol of power instead! For example, as Cooper<sup>3</sup> discussed in her book *Noises in the Blood*, what may be perceived as oral exploitation of women by others, may actually be an expression of freedom from law, sin and the conservative feminised version of sex and gender ascribed to women in the Jamaican context (Cooper, 1995).

Is it even practical for me to successfully complete the PhD expedition without *selling my soul like a piece of ass to dead* (or otherwise) white philosophers or white feminists' ideals? I guess there are no easy answers. I could fool myself into saying that these philosophical approaches I am currently using in my research are based entirely on my sense of agency due to realistic field experiences and observations. There is indeed some truth in that statement, but I am still 'strongly encouraged' to use a 'named' standardised philosophical outlook in order to 'sell' my data to an expectant audience: namely my supervisors, examiners and future targeted journals through which I want to present these unheard stories. As you can see, I have still employed the

resources of different theoretical outlooks to support this opinionated, narrative of my struggles. According to Sen (1999) – I am doing it again – an agent is *someone who acts and brings about change* (p. 19). Can I be an agent if I subscribe to these philosophical westernised ideals? On the other hand, can I be an agent without subscribing if it cripples my ability to succeed? I actually do not have an answer, since apart from the research participants – Afro-Jamaican boys/teachers/parents – I have employed Bhaskar, Bourdieu, Chevannes (R.I.P sir you will be missed), Cooper and my own preconceptions to the research contexts, experiences and interpretations. However, I have tried to keep the voices of the participants as the most dominant by using them to validate and restructure these philosophical and theoretical ideas; these ideas are then used to support the voices and make them louder to their audiences. You may view this as me exercising my agency, however I do not perceive this as full agency if that 'choice' is not made from a place of true freedom, i.e. based on equal opportunities. I do not have an answer about how to exercise my agency and realise my full capability in educational research yet; however, I am clear as to what my functioning is, and that is to ensure the trustworthiness and wellbeing of the stories I have shared with my participants. One might argue that a story cannot be referred to as an entity, but I disagree... Why? That is another story...

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Cooper is a Jamaican female author, professor and literary scholar. Her approach is said to be grounded in critical theory.

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### Author Details

Shawanda Stockfelt is an afro-Jamaican PhD student at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol. She also has Swedish nationality from living and teaching in Sweden for a number of years. Shawanda is in her third year of studies and is currently focussed on completing the thesis and publishing. Her research centres on exploring the nature of educational aspirations of secondary school boys in urban Jamaica, in relation to their dispositional (and normative) beliefs and socio-cultural field. The research targets boys who are underachieving and under-participating in school.

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# Some threads on supervision



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This piece of writing attempts to provide the reader with some insights into my experience of PhD supervision. I have kept this a very personal account. I must confess I have a particular reader in mind. I envision the reader, you, to be either a student starting your PhD course or an academic, but both exploring avenues into what is often referred to in books about PhD courses as 'managing supervision'. This narrative of some snapshots of myself and my experience of supervision is being completed at the end of my doctorate journey. The issues I narrate emerge from a process of reflection on the most valuable lessons I learned during my course. First however, I will start with some biographical notes of who I am.

## **Fluid identities**

As an international student at the University of Nottingham, I started studying a master's degree in Research Methods in 2005. What had attracted me to British higher education (HE) was the possibility of increasing my employability by having a British

degree. My plans to look for a job were postponed when I was offered a studentship to start a PhD course at the start of the next academic year. At the time, this seemed like a professional opportunity I could not miss out on. Little did I know what a journey of self-transformation this would be and how the financial crisis would radically change people's professional opportunities.

When I started on the master's course in 2005, I, like most international students, had completed my previous secondary and undergraduate degree outside the UK, in a different cultural context and language. Yet by 2006, when I started to do my PhD, my status as an international student had somewhat shifted. For starters, I had gained some knowledge of the British HE academic culture. I had completed a dissertation and had some experience of individual one-to-one interaction supervision. Additionally, unlike most international students, my story would not end with a flight back to Venezuela, as the UK had now become my new country of residence.

Therefore, I do not fit comfortably in the binary category of home/international student but demonstrate the shifting identities of students along their courses.

On the other hand, my previous studies were not 'typical'. Although raised in Venezuela, I had attended most of my schooling in international and bilingual schools. At University I had studied sociology and had to complete a 'dissertation' to graduate. It was customary for sociology students to take a whole year, sometimes longer, after finalising their last year of taught classes to complete this project. This was not the usual practice for students in other disciplines, who usually completed their dissertation over the summer holidays of their final year.

My project was supervised by a highly respected international researcher in the area of rural sociology and, although very good in his area, his time was extremely limited. My experience of supervision was mostly that you had to get on with the work and not expect much input from supervisors. This would noticeably shape my expectations of future supervision. I assumed that I was mostly on my own, that it was up to me to let my supervisor know what I was doing and where I was going with the study and that supervisors were very busy people. I doubt that my supervisors could draw much from my own high school and university experience that could help them build an idea of what the 'typical Venezuelan student' was, if such a category even exists, because my experience was in many ways very particular and unusual.

By this brief introduction of myself, I hope to draw attention to the cosmopolitan nature of some international students and our shifting identities, which make it very difficult to homogenise international students' experiences. In the following paragraphs, I will shift my focus from me to the

relationship between supervisors and students. I will describe critical instances in regard to my supervision and my relationship with my supervisors which, I believe, were crucial in helping me to complete my PhD. I will talk about some supervisor roles and some norms that influenced my progress positively. I will also reflect on the limitations of supervision in the development of one's thesis, but first I will describe how I had to redefine the supervision discourse.

### **Redefining the supervision discourse**

At the end of my first PhD supervision session, after showing my supervisors my first written piece of work, I felt negatively about myself; my confidence had dropped and I generally felt very guilty. This feeling repeated itself at the end of a few more supervisions until I was invited to participate in a project regarding supervision. As part of the project, we watched a video of real life PhD supervisions from another school in my university. It was not until I saw the video, that I realised how 'personalised' the supervisor's language was. The supervisors in the video would say things to the student, like: 'What did you mean?', 'You did not explain in detail...', 'You are not clear in this section', 'Why did you do this?', 'You did a good job here but...', 'You are not using apostrophes correctly'. Very similar comments to those I had heard in my own supervisions.

Although what was being evaluated in the supervision was the students' work not the students, it was difficult not to think it was the student because the supervisors often used the word YOU in each sentence. It was then that I realised that the negative feelings I usually experienced after supervisions were related to the feeling that I was being judged and that I was not reaching the mark as a whole person. From then on I decided to paraphrase mentally what my supervisors said, after all I was not my work, so when they said: 'What did you mean?', I mentally rephrased it as 'what does this section mean'; 'you did a good



job' was paraphrased to 'this was a good piece of writing' or 'good piece of fieldwork'. Once I did this, my self confidence increased, I felt better about myself and therefore more positive that I could do a PhD. It was not I who was being evaluated but my work, and there was a distance between me, the subject, and my work that I felt was necessary to maintain. After all it is much easier to change a report, an experiment or an interview schedule than to change oneself. However, the irony or paradox is that these small changes in the way I did things also led to deeper changes of who I was.

### **Supervisors, roles and norms**

Some other areas which I found important in supervision, apart from language, were roles and norms in the supervision context. In my experience, one of the most important roles the supervisor undertakes is helping a student with time-keeping and time-tracking. Supervisors are like alarm clocks! As a new PhD student it is very easy to lose track of time, after all your end product (the thesis) is not due for three to four years. However, your supervisors are critical at helping you pace yourself and ensuring that you do move forward at these early stages and that you complete the necessary stages on time to progress to subsequent stages. It is important that both supervisors and supervisees feel that 'meeting deadlines' is a norm that needs to be adhered to. Yet, as I will discuss later on, the norms set up in supervision should not be perceived by the student or the supervisor as set in stone.

Another important role of the supervisor is to facilitate a space where students practise being research writers and speakers, two very important roles the PhD student has to learn by the end of their PhD. How safe this space should be is questionable. If this space is not challenging enough the student might not learn what it takes and what it is to be a

researcher-writer and a researcher-speaker. From a student's perspective this means often being out of one's comfort zone. Students are researchers in the making, and at times will have to suffer growing pains. Accepting these growing pains as a very important part of the process is a useful, although not always easy, psychological framework to have, which helped me have the stamina to progress with my work.

Often when my supervisors started questioning me on my latest piece of work in supervision I felt out of my comfort zone. Now that my viva is on the horizon, I understand the value of these interactions. They were all small settings to prepare me as a 'researcher-speaker', somebody able to communicate what her research is about and why it is valuable. My advice to fellow students on how to manage questions in supervision is: to try to attempt to answer as many of their questions as you can; to not be afraid of getting the answer 'wrong' or losing face; and most importantly to reflect on these questions and your answers after supervisions. If possible, write down the questions and think whether the question and, most importantly, the answer needs to be addressed in your thesis. If, at the time of your supervision, you did not know the answer but you have found an answer later, practise saying the 'right' answer now that you know it.

My supervisors also took me out of my comfort zone when they encouraged me to present at the School's Conference. It was an ideal place to test my abilities as a researcher-speaker as it was not exposing me to 'strangers' but to people I knew and felt safe with. In hindsight, maybe my supervisors should have pushed my comfort zone further and 'forced' me to present at a conference outside the University. It would have been a great challenge and hopefully my self-esteem and confidence as a researcher-speaker would have increased.



Therefore, supervisors are not only time-keepers but are like good personal-trainers, they need to challenge us just sufficiently to stretch us but not to break us. Comfort zones and challenges can vary deeply from individual to individual. I have a peer who comes from a designer background. She finds writing very difficult but speaking and, particularly, representing her thoughts through drawing easier, whilst I am a bit the opposite. So, for example, my supervisors should encourage me to do verbal presentations, developing diagrams while they should encourage my peer to write a journal article.

### **The importance of flexibility in the supervision relationship**

I mentioned above that one of the norms for students to adhere to is to meet their deadlines. Yet an important aspect I learned to value in the supervisor-student relationship is flexibility. When I started my PhD the last 15 minutes of supervision were dedicated to agreeing when our next supervision would be, what I would do next and setting a deadline to submit my next piece of writing, usually a week before our next supervision meeting. This was very useful at the start of my PhD, but as I progressed in my work and my personal situation radically changed due to the birth of my child, having writing deadlines in fact became an obstacle in my work and a source of great stress.

When I returned from maternity leave and my little girl started nursery, she became sick regularly. Each

time she was sick I would be delayed in my work caring for her, this would cause me stress, because it meant I had less time to submit my work. I would send my daughter back to nursery before she was fully recovered because of my deadlines. The stress and lack of time would affect my work, my little one would catch the next cold (because she was not strong enough to resist infection) which would create more stress, and so a vicious circle started.

When I talked with my supervisors about this, we found an easy solution. I would work at my own pace and send in my work as it was completed and then we could agree on a supervision date. Between sending in my work and waiting for supervision, I would continue working on the next section of my thesis. This new arrangement worked very well. It taught me that as one's work progresses and changes, and one's personal situation changes, so might supervision have to change. Being able to discuss these issues with my supervisors and find a middle ground ensured that I was able to continue with my work.

### **Supervisors are not the be all and end all of your progress.**

Thus far, I have explained some strategies to deal with supervision, such as paraphrasing supervisors' feedback. I described how I have valued certain supervision roles such as the supervisors being time-keepers, and 'personal trainers' who challenge the student. I have also discussed the need for



established norms but at the same time emphasised that supervision should be flexible, so that if norms need to be renegotiated, this is possible. This requires open communication with your supervisor to explain why something may not be working or could work better. To complete my account of supervision, I will include what was probably the most valuable lesson I learned during my PhD course and that is: that supervisors are not the be all and end all of one's PhD. This was not an easy lesson to learn, yet most importantly, I learned that my resources were not limited to my supervisors but included a whole community.

At the same time I was doing my field work, I met somebody in a seminar and got talking about my PhD work. One of the questions he asked me was what theoretical framework was I using. I explained I had still not found an adequate framework and that I was contemplating doing grounded theory but that I would prefer not to go down that route as this was often the direction that previous research had taken. He suggested I look into Activity Theory (AT), which I did and was immediately attracted to it. I decided to include AT as my theoretical framework.

My supervisors heard my justification on why I wanted to use AT and were supportive of my decision. They were open in explaining that they were not AT experts and suggested that I should contact other academics who were more familiar

with this 'theory'. At first, I was a bit put off by this and seriously considered not going down that route. I believed that it should be my supervisors giving me advice and that other academics would not have time for me. Yet, as I progressed more and more with my analysis I realised that I did need an expert to review my work. My supervisors insisted and finally convinced me to contact one of the experts in the school. Although I was convinced by then that contacting an AT expert was the best way forward I remember procrastinating about emailing the experts for days because I was unsure how best to go about this. I found it terribly hard to write emails to request advice, a meeting or a favour from another person, particularly a senior academic. The reason being that I was acutely aware of being 'an outsider' and the lack of knowledge of the small written language conventions and protocols that allowed me to communicate politely and in an assertive and convincing manner. Finally I wrote my letter, had it checked by my peers and reminded myself that there were plenty of other fish in the sea. To my great surprise the AT expert I wrote to agreed to read my work, review it and even meet me for a discussion. We had a very interesting meeting which led to further exchanges of ideas and reviews of my work.

Feeling very positive about having an 'in-house' expert review my work provided me with the motivation to continue to search for expert advice both inside and outside of my school. Once again, I

was pleasantly surprised at the involvement of other academics in my work and the level of feedback they were willing to provide. Most importantly, I learned a few valuable lessons: a) that I was part of a much wider community than simply the one consisting of me and my supervisors; b) that my supervisors, although important in my progress, were not a 'deterministic variable'; and c) that taking risks could pay off. Yet, if it had not been for my supervisors' encouragement to seek the comments of other experts in my field, I don't think I would have dared to do it.

This is the last thread to my narrative. I started with 'me', this is the short thread that illuminates the fluid, dynamic and cosmopolitan identities of some international students. I end with the thread of coming to realise that I am a member of a wider community, which extends beyond me and my supervisors; and the realisation that my supervisors

were not the ideal experts for all phases of my thesis. In-between these threads there are several other threads to this narrative, such as: how I had to rephrase the supervision discourse and the norms and roles I found useful. I hope all these different threads have formed an interesting tapestry of my supervision experience.

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#### **Author details**

Paola Signorini has an undergraduate degree in Sociology from the Universidad Catolica Andres Bello in Caracas, Venezuela. She moved to the UK in 2003 and completed several postgraduate studies in the field of Research Methods. In 2005 she started her PhD research at the University of Nottingham in the area of group work in the multicultural classroom. She has just successfully completed her viva and has started working on her corrections.

# Doctoring change



Cheryl Rounsaville, University of Nottingham

My doctoral research looks at the decisions made by international students in their pursuit of education overseas. I should note here, at the beginning, that I am also an international student: an American pursuing a PhD at a British university. Most people would assume that being an international student myself gives me a lot of insight into how international students think and what they want, but in collecting questionnaire data and in speaking with students in face-to-face interviews I found that this is not always the case. These students showed me that while they are often portrayed as numbers grouped according to host or source country, field or level of study, they all have individual stories and sets of reasons for how they came to be studying in a country far from their home and loved ones.

When conducting interviews, I was impressed with the way these students could articulate their reasons for studying overseas and describe their experiences both before and after making what is, admittedly, one of the biggest decisions of their lives. Interviewing them left me wishing I could talk about my own reasons and experiences with such clarity and confidence, but I feel I am still trying to

comprehend...to understand thoroughly why I came here, what has happened to me, and how it has changed me. In many respects I feel I have more questions than answers, and I think some of my reasons for doing this and the meaning of what I have experienced might only be clear later on down the road. I think I can safely say, however, that I have definitely experienced some level of change in at least three areas: the intellectual, the professional, and the cultural. Each is talked about in more detail in this article.

## **Becoming an academic or some semblance thereof**

In reading the literature about the reasons international students decide to study overseas and why they select certain host countries, I came across a somewhat disconcerting statement by Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) in their article about the international marketing of British education. On the second page of their article they make the statement, '...we see that the students are not buying degrees; they are buying the benefits that a degree can provide in terms of employment, status, lifestyle, etc.' (p.319). Is that all that I'm doing? Is there nothing

deeper or higher that I or other international students are reaching for? My first reaction to this statement was that it portrays international students as somewhat shallow and materialistic. What about wanting to get more education to help others? What about the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake? Surely, I told myself, these were some of my reasons at least.

Before beginning my program, when I imagined what my life as a PhD student would be like, I looked forward to the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge. I pictured long chats over coffee with academics and other students about intellectual-type things. I saw myself as part of a research community sharing my knowledge with others while absorbing the knowledge they had to offer. I looked forward to reading academic materials. After all I'd always enjoyed learning and am a voracious reader, so this PhD thing seemed right up my alley and what I was looking for at that time of my life. And I was sure that I would enjoy, immediately understand, and spend hours thinking deeply about the engaging knowledge I would come across about my subject matter. But it didn't really happen the way I'd envisioned...my first year as a PhD candidate was a real struggle.

Firstly, over the last ten years in a career managing international exchange programs, I was reading only policy documents and other organizational memoranda, and I didn't take into account that it had been a decade since I'd completed my master's degree – ten years away from doing academic research and reading academic publications, and even then in a different subject matter. During the first year of my PhD program, I took several courses (part of the New Route PhD program at my university) which required the reading and presentation of journal articles. It took me hours to read one article, and

even then I felt I only had some rudimentary understanding of the content of it. First of all, much of the terminology was new to me. I often thought some of these words were simply made up by the author – I couldn't even find them in the dictionary! Many times the content was incomprehensible and it seemed that the more obtuse the article, the more the author was revered as an expert. Bourdieu; what the heck was this guy talking about and why didn't he seem to believe in punctuation? Some days my head felt like it was literally going to explode. I seriously questioned whether I was really PhD material and felt disempowered and, frankly, thick.

Looking back now, I realize also that although I did a lot of research about where and what I wanted to study, I made the mistake of not reading about the realities of the PhD experience beforehand. I was not prepared for the work to be such an isolating and lonely experience, although it is for most students, and likely even more so for international students who are often in their host country by themselves. This did not really sink in until after I had started my program and was already committed. Those long chats over coffee didn't really happen for me, and my department did not have a strong sense of a joint research community that embraced both students and academics. Each seemed to have their own separate community although the students longed to be invited to join the academics.

Three things helped me to get beyond the struggle of that initial year of PhD study; first I was lucky to have a supervisor who was not only knowledgeable but also supportive and encouraging, although extremely busy. Second, the lack of a strong research community overall caused me to go outside of my department to look for that community, to meet and talk with others in my field more than I might have



done otherwise. Finally, the other international students in my PhD cohort have been an invaluable source of support; we encourage and help one another constantly. I talk more about them in this article.

### **Professional or student or both?**

#### **Repositioning my identity**

One of the reasons I chose to pursue a PhD was something I didn't want to admit to myself at first – I didn't want to work anymore. Admitting this might mean that I was just lazy. Anyway, isn't doing research and writing a PhD a kind of work? I believed so or tried to convince myself of it anyway so as not to feel guilty about not earning a salary. I finally realized what I was trying to get away from wasn't working, but rather work in the traditional sense. The conventional world of work requires one to be at a desk in an office from nine a.m. to five p.m. every day and makes me feel trapped and claustrophobic. I wanted some sense of freedom; I wanted to enjoy what I perceived to be the flexible, be-your-own-boss world of the student. I was also frustrated with the point at which I seemed to be stuck in my career; I was stuck at a program manager level when I felt ready to make the move to the director level dealing with policy and higher level responsibilities. I thought that having more knowledge and an academic title behind me would give me the confidence to strive for that type of position. I wanted to take back control of my career, and I had to concede that I was looking for a way to re-enter my field with more status and on my

own terms – having a PhD seemed to be the solution to this. Maybe Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) were somewhat correct in their statement after all.

I didn't realize though that this would mean tumbling all the way back to the bottom of the totem pole first. The change from being a professional, someone who manages programs, budgets and staff, back to being a student was one that has been more frustrating and humbling than I had imagined. Choosing to be a student I, without thinking, put myself back at the bottom of the hierarchy – a position my department has chosen to remind me of numerous times. This is actually a complaint I heard from several other PhD colleagues, even those who have had years of experience and held high level positions prior to their studies. They too felt firmly put in their place as students.

I managed to snatch back some feelings of professionalism though – these might seem to most to be small victories but for me they were ego-soothing. I recount two of them here. Funnily, the first one is that I have reinstated a work schedule similar to that of the traditional world of work from which I was trying to flee as described above. Throughout my PhD studies, I have maintained a routine of working seven or eight hours a day, Monday through Friday every week as I would do if this was traditional employment, but I also take advantage of the great perk of flexible starting and ending times and being able to work on what I want each day.

Second, since beginning a PhD I have felt uncomfortable with being called a 'student' and slightly embarrassed having 'PhD student' in my e-mail signature line, but for a long time couldn't quite put my finger on why I felt this way. Surely, someone working on a PhD, one of the highest levels of education that can be achieved, is more than a mere student? An epiphany came for me when I read, *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision* by Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson (2006). They state the word 'student' seems to '...signify the institutional power relations at work in the supervisory relationship' (p.2), and in my experience the relationship between the department and the student. Yes, here was the reason I felt uncomfortable with this term! It was a term whose definition, while seemingly innocuous, perpetuated the power relations in which I was again reminded, through being labelled as such, that I was a player with little to no power or status and with nothing of use to share with those higher than me. Kamler and Thomson go on to explain that

*...we refer to the person undertaking the doctorate as the doctoral researcher...our preference is to define doctoral candidates in terms of their work (research) and to acknowledge the increasing diversity of ages, experience and professional status they bring to doctoral study (2006, p. 2).*

I grabbed on to this sentence as if it were a life-line – finally, here was proof that there were some in academia who understood I wasn't just a *PhD student* but was a *doctoral researcher*. They recognized that doctoral researchers now come in all shapes and sizes. We are not mere students, or a homogeneous group of inexperienced bright young things, as such a

group might have been in the past, but we are individuals from a wide range of backgrounds with a combined store of vast experience that, if appreciated and made use of, can benefit not only other doctoral researchers but also academics. Interacting with and befriending other international students from other countries, as well as cultural and professional backgrounds has made my experience a much richer one. Needless to say, the day I read this quote from Kamler and Thomson I changed my title in my e-mail signature from 'PhD student' to 'Doctoral researcher'. I encourage others in my situation to do the same.

I now see that the experience of doing a PhD, while not an easy one, has been valuable in that it has opened up more possible professional career paths for me than I had access to before. I can perhaps go back to being a practitioner who manages international exchange programs or recruits international students...or maybe I can go into academia or teaching...or I can become a professional researcher...This all makes for a very exciting future filled with more choices, and thus more freedom I think.

### **Seeking the 'Interdependence' stage**

The two experiences I spoke of above can apply to any doctoral researcher no matter if they are studying in their home country or a host country, but for us international students to do a PhD across cultures adds a whole other layer of challenge. I have been an Anglophile since I was young so thought I had enough of a handle on British culture to be able to navigate it easily. After all I had spent three years living in Japan successfully and how much different can you get from American culture than Japanese culture for goodness sake? American culture and British culture, on the surface, have much more in common making me sure



the transition would be a piece of cake. Wrong. It's been a struggle through which I feel I have made some, but not a great deal of, headway. I am still very much stuck in the 'Reintegration' phase of culture shock, as described by Pedersen (1995) in his book about the five stages of culture shock, in which individuals '...no longer [accept] all the blame and fault for misunderstanding but rather [put] the blame and fault on the locals' (p.199).

Some of this may be due to my position in what I see as a 'cultural no man's [sic] land' – a space which I inhabit that doesn't really belong to the British group nor to the international group. In other words, I'm not British but to many people here I am not foreign either. I have been asked on more than one occasion why I am paying international student fees since I am not a foreigner. A side-effect of American hegemony perhaps? I had to explain each time that I am indeed a foreigner. To make my situation in Britain an even more confusing one for me, during the application process to my university, I was asked to take an English proficiency exam. I refused. Higher ups were conferred with and I was kindly permitted to opt out of this requirement. At one of my early supervisions, I was told that I must write my thesis using British English. Both of these situations made it clear that I was a speaker of a 'different' English and mine was not the correct one. A defense against American hegemony perhaps?

Although an experience overseas can make someone more open-minded, and I think it has done that for me in many respects, it has also made me more protective of my nationality at the same time. When I first moved to the UK, I noted that everyone seemed to have a handle on my culture and my country and while this was positive in one sense – the other international students felt comfortable interacting with me and seeking me out for help or just for a

chat – it was negative in another. Some lecturers felt comfortable making derogatory remarks about my country in the classroom. Granted it was a controversial time for the US – the middle of the Iraq and Afghan wars with President Bush deeply unpopular abroad (and rightly so!) and there was a lot to criticize. But I noticed that while it seemed okay to criticize the US, this same norm did not apply to the countries and cultures of other students in our class. Some of the points they made I don't dispute but it was still embarrassing and uncomfortable to have my culture singled out for criticism in front of a group of people.

These experiences have most definitely made me retreat back into my shell a bit, and worry about being judged every time I speak in professional and personal situations. Perhaps this is why I am having trouble moving on to the next stage of culture shock as described by Pedersen, 'Autonomy', a stage he describes as one where 'The person begins to establish an objective, balanced, and impartial view of the whole situation' (1995, p.201). I don't know. If I can't reach that stage then I might never make it to the final stage of 'Interdependence' where I hope to move '...from alienation to a new identity that is equally comfortable, settled, accepted, and fluent in both the old and new cultures'. I have to try my best to get there though as I have married a Brit and need to make my life here. I imagine moving to these higher stages is also a struggle for other international students who decide to stay in their host country for whatever reason.

Looking back now after four years, I have realized that while being intelligent is a helpful trait for doctoral researchers, tenacity may be an even more important one. Doctoral researchers have to be tenacious in the face of hardship – something that may apply even more to international doctoral

researchers who face the additional challenge of cultural barriers. Despite the struggle of the first year intellectually and spiritually, I hung in there and it was well worth it. Looking back I can see the leaps and bounds I have taken intellectually and professionally in my subject area. I also learned more about myself and about navigating a different culture although I still have a way to go as noted above. One of the biggest sources of joy and comfort for me through the journey I have described here, besides meeting my husband of course, was the great camaraderie among the international students in my department which provided invaluable friendship and support. As admitted at the beginning of this article, although I can't say I know what all international students think and what they want, I think I can confidently recommend one thing they need: friends. For any students considering overseas study, I highly recommend that the time and effort you put into your friendships with other international students in your department is vital and will be well rewarded.

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#### Author Details

Cheryl Rounsaville is a doctoral researcher in international and comparative education at the University of Nottingham's School of Education

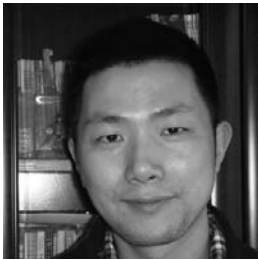
working with Professor W. John Morgan. She has long been interested in the area of international education and exchange as signified by her more than 10 years of work experience in this area. She has managed two international exchange programs sending students and young professionals abroad, and lived and taught in Japan for three years. She has had a long-term interest in international student issues and is currently conducting PhD research in this area. Her thesis is titled *Where to study? International students' perceptions of the comparative advantages of higher education in the UK, Ireland and the US*. This is a comparative research study focusing on the decision-making processes of international students and how their perceptions affect their choice of host country.

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# The elusive hat: my PhD story



Kai Ren, University of Bristol

When picking up my robe for the Graduation Congregation, I suddenly remembered that I forgot the doctoral hat that I had bought on-line for the occasion while away in China. To any Chinese, wearing a doctoral hat was essential for the graduation. I was then in a panic because I would be quite late if I fetched that hat now sitting comfortably in my wardrobe. But there seemed to be no choice but to take the risk... When I finally made it to the ceremony venue, sweat soaking my shirt inside the robe, I was shocked to find that none of the other PhD candidates were wearing the hat. In fact, I soon learned from a colleague nearby that doctors at the University of Bristol were not allowed to wear a hat. I was genuinely frustrated and was wondering if this would be the last educational cultural shock I would experience doing my PhD in the UK. I was also thinking that without wearing a doctoral hat at the ceremony, people in China might challenge the authenticity of my doctorate. This all brought me back to the very beginning when I was uncertain whether to pursue a PhD in the UK.

## **Decision time: spring 2006**

Initially, I had planned to do only a master's at the University of Bristol. Yet half way through my Master of Education (MEd) I was confronted with the choice between returning to China in another six months and pursuing a PhD for at least three and half more years. It was a tough decision. Interestingly, the first person who encouraged me to do a PhD rather than just an MEd was Mr Li, Departmental Director of Administration at the Chinese university I had worked with before coming to Bristol for a self-funded master's course. In his email, Li emphasised the importance for me to get a doctorate to further boost my academic career in China, as there were already a large number of Chinese UK master's degree holders returning to work in China's higher education. Meanwhile, having lived and studied at Bristol for half a year, I was beginning to genuinely enjoy my life and learning there. In particular, the rigorous yet vigorous academic atmosphere, an open forum to discuss those educational issues that mattered and the encouragement and support from

my tutors all motivated me to consider furthering my journey in UK higher education beyond a master's.

However, having failed in my ORS (Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme) grant application, I had to overcome several big hurdles, mostly financial, before even embarking on that journey. After numerous thoughts, and with strong support from family, friends and colleagues, I finally decided to do a PhD even if I might have to self-fund it. There were still hopes though. I was encouraged to give ORS another try in my first year of doctoral study. Meanwhile, my research potential was noticed by Dr Ruth Deakin-Crick, one of my course tutors then, who approached me as a potential candidate for Data Analyst of the Bedfordshire Project led by her, yet she was adamant that she did not really promise anything. So the only thing I was really certain of was that I was going all out to get my doctorate and wear that hat some day.

**The first year: doctoral training, being a waiter, and finally, gaining a scholarship and RA post**

There was still no news about my studentship when I started my PhD in October 2006. Yet despite all the frustrations and anxieties, I was soon intrigued by the MPhil training programmes offered by the GSoE (Graduate School of Education); the lectures and workshops on both conventional and innovative research methodologies and methods provided me with a smooth transition from a taught master's into a PhD researcher and laid a solid foundation for me to conduct doctoral research in education.

During the initial period of my PhD, I was in close contact with both my then supervisors Professor Tim Bond and Dr Ruth Deakin-Crick. It was during this time that there was a significant shift of my research interest from academic ethics, a topic related to my

MEd dissertation, to something that was rather new to me. In my communication with Ruth, I was fascinated by a concept that she repeatedly mentioned yet I knew little about – *underachievement*; though, strange to say, I don't even know how to translate 'underachievement' for my fellow Chinese because there is no equivalent for it in Chinese. Curious about this concept, I started to explore the literature and rather like looking at the tip of an iceberg the more I investigated the more I was intrigued to find out about it. So it is interesting why someone like me who comes from a culture which does not even have the word 'underachievement' should choose it as his PhD topic. I believe it had something to do with my personality as I am stimulated by interesting challenges. In fact, I was so fascinated by it that I ended up changing my topic to underachievement and learning, and Ruth became my new supervisor. Yet this could never have happened if I had not had the understanding and support of Professor Tim Bond, who later became Internal Examiner of my PhD thesis and one of the referees for my postdoctoral work back in China.

Now you may want to know what this 'mysterious' Bedfordshire Project that changed my fate was about. It all goes back to a research project initiated by the head teacher of a boys' independent school in a southern English town. He was curious about how factors apart from cognitive abilities and prior attainment predict student academic attainment. The project officially started in January 2007 and subsequently I was offered the job of data analyst.

Meanwhile, on the academic side, I found that although a highly important term in educational policy and practice in the West, there is no consensus on the definition of underachievement, the identification of underachievers or effective interventions to change the achievement pattern of underachieving

students. This 'muddiness' presented considerable challenges for the research but I was keen to take on these challenges. An important factor that gave me confidence was the use of theories on student engagement and commitment for learning or 'learning power', to investigate the long-standing topic of underachievement from a new perspective. The concept of 'learning power' has been developed by Ruth and her colleagues (Deakin-Crick, 2007), and having studied it in my master's I endorse its values.

After evaluating a pilot study which justifies the missing link between underachievement and learning power (Yu, Deakin-Crick and Leo, 2006), I completed a thorough research design under the supervision of Ruth. As an acknowledgement of the quality of my work, I was soon appointed as Research Assistant on the Bedfordshire Project. I then started my dual role in the research processes: as a key researcher responsible for the project directed by Ruth and a PhD student under her supervision conducting an in-depth and more theoretical doctoral study within the project. It resulted in a mutually beneficial link between the research project and my PhD.

More good news was the success of my second-time ORS application in April 2007, which was a great relief for me both financially and mentally. As a self-funded international doctoral student I had lived a modest lifestyle and worked as a buffet breakfast waiter for six months at a hotel. It was extremely difficult to juggle between a heavy academic workload and 20 hours of waiting per week for which I had to get up at five a.m. Quite often I would go directly to the training units right after the early morning shift, wearing the uniform underneath my jacket. A dramatic coincidence was that I happened to wait on Ruth at a Christmas lunch in that hotel! Fortunately this was in the UK and we could have a laugh about it and Ruth even seemed proud of me working there. I

knew that if this had been China, a PhD student serving at a restaurant would have made headline news and the supervisor would have been furious at her student not finding an 'intellectual' job to make ends meet. Despite all the hardships, I felt my potential had never been explored better and both my marks and waiting tips went up significantly.

After winning an ORS award, I ended my waiting contract and concentrated fully on my research. Looking back, I have no regrets of the time spent as a waiter because by working there I had first-hand experience of what British society was like and a deeper understanding of the English culture. This contributed much to my working with the English participants in my research afterward. At the end of my first-year of the PhD, Ruth and I decided to ask Professor Sally Thomas to be my second supervisor, as I had chosen a multiple methodology for my research. Later on I not only benefited from the expertise of both Ruth and Sally, but also experienced two different research styles.

### **The second year: road trips, new research experiences and finally getting to teach English people Mandarin**

For a Chinese researcher working in the UK, research provides both great opportunities and numerous challenges. I endeavoured to fully use my strengths, knowledge and expertise (Etherington 2004) while working with colleagues, practitioners and students. Although it took a considerable effort to familiarise myself with the English secondary education system, being an outsider enabled me to be less biased and see issues that insiders might ignore (Crossley and Watson, 2003; Broadfoot, 2001). As such, while empowering underachieving adolescents to fulfil their academic potential, I also explored my own potential along this challenging yet exciting and rewarding PhD journey.



I spent most of the following year doing field work and collecting data. The project sampled a cohort of 823 14-year-olds in four schools and followed them for about 18 months. The road to data collection was not without many hurdles and some of them were quite tough. Initially, three of the four project schools were not keen to provide us with student data. Hence I was sent there to collect them in person. I assume probably my Chinese humbleness moved them rather than my negotiation skills; the quantitative data were soon gathered. Then the qualitative data collection started, followed by an intervention for 18 underachievers once every fortnight for three months. During this period I worked closely with Mr. Tim Small, an educational consultant for the project and a former secondary school head teacher. I was amazed I could work with a senior colleague who would listen to my ideas and sometimes tolerate my criticism which would be seen as unacceptable in my own culture. Eventually we became close colleagues and friends and he later became godfather to my son. We still talk about our field trips from winter to summer and the changes of stunning English countryside landscapes. On one of those trips we heard the news of the disastrous earthquakes in China and Tim was the very first person to comfort me...

Strangely, being an ethical person myself, one difficulty I had encountered was dealing with the ethical concerns for conducting educational research in the UK. I was trapped in such ethical dilemmas as

the appropriateness of writing to my adolescent participants, even if I was just trying to help them, and the necessity for me to have a criminal record check before talking to them individually. Obviously cultural differences complicated ethical issues in educational research because what I tend to take for granted may be in conflict with the ethical guidelines in UK higher education. Later on I developed awareness of cross-cultural ethics and was able to handle the issues properly owing to a strong research culture at the GSoE that gives priority to ethics.

Besides academic work, I was also busy organising the annual doctoral student conference as coordinator of the organising committee, not to mention my Mandarin teaching at the Language Centre and obligations as Deputy Senior Resident at the Hawthorns. My mother, despite being thousands of miles away, was concerned I was taking on too much. Maybe I was, but I knew I just wanted to make the most out of my doctoral experience in England, so that one day when I looked back at those years like I am doing now, I would have some good memories not just of my doctorate, but other things such as the success of the doctoral conference.

### **The third year and beyond: from posh conference halls to the 'cave' and from a PhD student to an early-career researcher**

The third year of my PhD started with two conferences. In September 2007 Ruth and I presented a paper based on the Bedfordshire Project



at the Annual BERA (British Educational Research Association) Conference, which was indeed a vision-broadening experience for me. Two months later a dissemination conference about the research saw the project winning positive feedback from practitioners, fellow researchers and in particular, student representatives. After the conference Jessie (see Ren, 2010 for her story) came to me and said: 'Thanks for everything you did for me, Kai'. I was deeply moved and felt my PhD research was special because it might actually make a difference to the youngsters' lives.

One essential ability for completing a doctorate, nevertheless, has not been highlighted yet – writing. While I was happily immersed in my data collection, Ruth had started to chase after me for my writings. Thanks to the pressures from her I became a competent writer using English as a second language to write my research. The writing-up of my PhD thesis commenced in winter 2008 when I became a 'caveman' at the Graduate Centre of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, also nicknamed by doctoral students who worked there as the 'cave'.

Ruth and I usually met once every month to discuss the writing I had sent her beforehand. In general she was happy about my work yet sometimes I did have writer's block and she would be patient and kind enough to let me pick up rather than pushing me harshly. Over the years we had developed a cooperative relationship which was both professional

and personal. Yet Ruth did push me hard in my construction of theory and conceptual framework. She emphasised that she wanted to see me become a researcher, not an academic technician. It was really hard work to isolate myself from the outside world and reflect upon works by such great thinkers as Bourdieu and Vygotsky. Under the strong influence of Confucius learning tradition, I knew to get my PhD, to earn that doctoral hat, these were the pains I had to bear. But just hard work was not enough; Ruth wanted me to go beyond the work of others (hers included), and find my own voice. Encouraged and inspired by her, I developed the perspective that underachievement is a relative, contextual and temporal concept and needs to be redefined by taking into account the complexities of the concept. In addition, I proposed the shift of focus in underachievement studies from psychology and educational sociology to 'learning' both in explaining achievement and addressing underachievement issues. These are the two key factors contributing to the originality of my study. 'Narratives' and 'life stories' were also used as important methods in investigating underachievement and learning, which has been a novel approach in underachievement studies.

September 2009 saw me entering the critical stage of writing up my thesis. My time was mostly spent in the cave and at my flat. Fortunately Ni, my newly wedded wife, had come all the way from my hometown and stayed with me for four months to

look after me. A warm home certainly made those chilly British autumn days less cold. I could already see the end of the tunnel when Ni returned to China before something unexpected happened. To prepare me for the viva, Ruth arranged for me to give a seminar at the GSoE. Among the audience I saw someone special, Sally, my second supervisor! She had offered me advice on the quantitative aspects of my research, yet she really challenged me with some relevant questions at the seminar. I was forced to debate with her openly and defend my ideas and positions, quite against my Chinese culture actually. Yet later on I was amazed and delighted to receive an email from her praising my performance at the seminar and making some suggestions on how I could improve my thesis. Thanks to Sally, I had a special mock viva which proved to be very helpful for the real one.

In January 2010 my thesis was completed and submitted, at the cost of my Christmas though. Ruth and I agreed that I was ready to put a stop to this long and winding journey. On the day of my viva, despite all the nerves, I felt the strength within that kept me calm and doing my best. The viva was successful. As expected, there were some tough questions, but I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to discuss my thesis with two of the few academics who had read through my work.

Having learned I was going to be awarded a doctorate, I felt ecstatic for a moment before realising that I still had some concerns about my career after becoming a PhD. Ruth had long before talked about this with me and I had been trying a few paths. Yet none of them worked out for various reasons. On the other hand, my journal publications had been weak; the paper co-written by Ruth and myself had been rejected twice, much to my dismay. Actually I was so focused on my thesis that I did not have the

time and energy to write journal articles, yet just a doctorate without strong publications overshadowed my academic career and once again I was at a crossroad wondering what to do next.

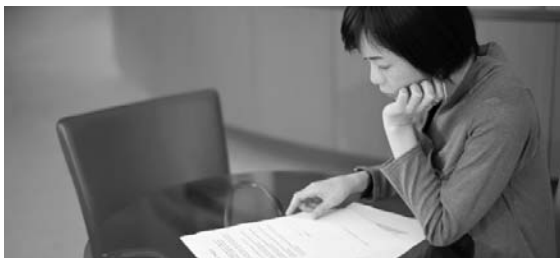
### **Back to China – experience and results?**

Fortunately, one of Ruth's research assistants had to leave and I was offered a two-month job. After that I had to rush back to Xi'an to keep Ni company as our baby was due in about two months. Originally, I had decided to be absent from the Graduation as the baby might be born then. Yet Ni wanted me to be there to 'wear the doctoral hat, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity'. So I was extremely frustrated and disappointed, having found out that I could not wear the hat at the congregation. My mood, nevertheless, was changed when I heard Professor Eric Thomas, Vice-Chancellor of Bristol University, speaking about the meaning of a postgraduate degree awarded by the university. I then realised that there was actually an invisible hat that would always be on my head, which is made of the academic integrity, the research abilities and all the educational and cultural experiences that I had acquired in my three and half years at Bristol, some of the best years in my life.

Ni had promised she and the baby would wait for me, yet my flight back was delayed and Yi'an (AKA William named by Ruth), our baby boy was born while I was still on the plane. A PhD and a healthy baby, what more could I ask? However, I certainly need to have a more solid career, now that I am a father.

Eventually I decided to come back to do postdoctoral work at the School of Education in Shaanxi Normal University in my hometown, so that I could produce quality publications and take my PhD research on underachievement and learning power to a Chinese context while being near to my family. At our first





meeting, my Chinese supervisor told me that I should not lose the research styles that I had achieved in the UK even though I might well want to be assimilated into the research culture at the Department. 'Because that's your unique strength' he said. While on the other hand, PhDs returning to China from the UK are certainly not rare any more, and the Department Dean said to me straightforwardly: 'Some British educated PhDs were only good at experience. But what we really want is the results'. I smiled and nodded, fully aware that for the rest of my career, like numerous academics all over the world, I would strive for *publications, publications and publications...*

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### Author Details

Kai Ren did his PhD at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol. He is currently a government funded postdoctoral researcher at China Shaanxi Normal University. His research interests include learning how to learn, underachievement, comparative education and academic ethics. He is an enthusiastic music lover with an elastic taste in music and he hopes to become a novelist after retirement.

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# The decisions we make: motherhood and international studentship



Georgina Yaa Oduro, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

## **‘Mum when are you coming home?’**

I can recall the number of times I was confronted with this question by my three young children<sup>1</sup> in my homeland (Ghana) as I pursued my PhD study with the University of Cambridge in the UK. What may sound puzzling is why a mother of three young children would opt to leave them behind under the care of a rather busy husband to pursue a PhD programme in a far away land?

Young (2009) cites the work of Crawford (2003) which describes the motives for pursuing a PhD programme as varied and including some of the following: seeking higher degrees to stand out from the mass of graduates; the suggestion and encouragement of tutors; for employment; for career enhancement; for promotion; to provide credibility to the lecturer’s teaching; carrying out an in-depth study of a topic; a challenge or opportunity at a particular

junction in one’s life; or a search for personal benefits such as a sense of achievement, affirmation or transformation (Crawford, 2003 cited in Young, 2009: 54). In this story, I share my experiences of pursuing a PhD programme away from the family in a foreign land (UK) and the socio-psychological and emotional challenges associated with the already daunting experiences of such an intensive academic undertaking. I particularly focus on some of the reasons that informed my decision to get onto the programme, the challenges associated with changing roles and status from a full-time worker and mother to a full-time student. I discuss how I managed the emotions, loneliness and isolation of the academic journey. For example, of concern are some of the worries and frustrations of learning about a sick child and yet not being able to do anything about it because of the distance. My major coping strategy was to exhibit the religiosity of an African by taking

<sup>1</sup> My children were eight, six and four years old respectively at the commencement of my study in 2006.

solace in God's providence (Mbiti, 1969). The sacrifice of missing important family events and making alternative arrangements for family care is also a point for reflection. I conclude by talking about how, through the support of my supervisors and other acquaintances in Cambridge, I turned my experiences around positively to motivate me to complete the programme on time.

My reason for pursuing a PhD programme resonates with some of the factors above in terms of the desire for career enhancement. I also saw it as an opportunity at a juncture in my life. I had a Master of Arts degree in human resource management and worked as an Assistant Registrar with the University of Cape Coast prior to embarking upon my PhD studies. However, as a condition for continued employment with the university, I was required to have a minimum of a rigorous research-based MPhil degree. This requirement compelled me to search for higher education opportunities and luckily I won a competitive scholarship for a PhD programme with the University of Cambridge. This study opportunity was highly welcomed because experiences from people who pursue PhD programmes locally revealed a rather lengthy completion period (more than five years on average). Apart from the potential of an earlier completion date, foreign training has the added advantage of exposing one to interacting, understanding and appreciating other cultures as well as training in current and alternative research methodologies outside the extremely quantitative research tradition prevalent in Ghana and many other African countries (Oduro, 2008).

Leaving a warm country like Ghana to begin studies in the autumn month of October when the weather had just turned cold, rainy and wintery was a daunting experience. One is not just greeted by the unwelcoming weather but also saddled with changing

clothing from gay, colourful and light ones for heavy, warm and sometimes dull-coloured clothing of the West. Whilst I was lucky to have had my master's programme in the UK and was therefore a little familiar with some of these geographical and cultural shocks and challenges, not all international students have had such exposure. Even though orientation programmes are usually organised for international students to offset the harshness of some of these challenges, they do not fully take away the shocks.

I also remember the many conversations I had with colleagues and other international students regarding the communalistic African culture where each person serves as the brother's keeper (Assimeng, 1999; Nukunya, 1992) to the more individualistic European culture (Tischler, 2007). The issue of food also comes to the fore as I tried to adjust from my traditional spicy, heavy and tropical Ghanaian dishes to light and sometimes bland English cuisine such as teas, French fries and sandwiches. Adjusting to the cuisine differential was really challenging. Grappling with these initial socio-cultural challenges had the added difficulty of making the transition from a full-time worker, married woman and mother to a single and lonely full-time student.

On the academic front, Smith (2009, p.10) argues that 'the process of transformational learning might happen for some adults learners at the undergraduate level, at an access course, or at a literacy course'. Like Smith (*ibid.*), I experienced this challenge at the PhD level as I encountered and navigated between people from different academic backgrounds with different teaching and learning styles. The teaching styles in many Ghanaian educational institutions are teacher-centred rather than student-centred without much discussion and interaction (Lewin and Stuart, 2003). Thus, the student was mostly the recipient of knowledge from



the teacher/lecturer who dominated the teaching and learning process. My first postgraduate classroom experiences exposed me to a deconstruction of the teacher-centred pedagogical style to a more interactive and group-based one. The deconstructed experience was not without shocks. How on earth could a student voluntarily cut in while a lecturer was delivering a lesson in the Ghanaian context? Yet, these were some of the surprises I encountered in my first classroom interaction in the UK. Students hardly raised their hands or waited for the lecturer's invitation before contributing to discussions. What was more shocking was the confidence with which some students challenged views expressed by lecturers and the relaxation that characterised the teaching and learning process. Whilst creating an environment for students to express different perspectives on a subject undoubtedly has the strength of building confidence in students and making them more assertive, in my cultural context where one cannot interfere in adults' speech without permission, a student's uninvited contribution to a lecturer's teaching could be interpreted as disrespectful.

Looking back, another experience that challenged me academically relates to the prominence given to a student's understanding of different philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, abstract texts and sometimes difficult readings, making sense of them and drawing on them for one's research project. This was particularly challenging for me because I did not have a

strong background in philosophy and theory prior to undertaking the programme. This shortcoming resonated with many colleagues from other African contexts that I encountered during my study and can be challenging as one grapples with different paradigms, as well as issues related to reflexivity and academic writing styles. I was, however, lucky to benefit immensely from the collegiate and supervision system operated by the University of Cambridge.

As a student-mother with my children away in my homeland, my supervisors empathised with me and worked tirelessly on my drafts to get me home. Through their commitment I was able to improve on my thinking critically and imaginatively, as well as acquiring a discursive approach to writing. I was also exposed to conference presentation and research management skills. These benefits notwithstanding, there was the challenge of getting acquainted with and adjusting to different accents from lecturers as well as the many international students with whom I interacted. Whilst all of us spoke English, there were many differences in accent and interpretations in expressions thereby making the contextualisation of meaning highly relevant.

Writers such as Gina Wisker (2005), Phillips and Pugh (2005) and many postgraduate handbooks have written lengthily on supervision at the postgraduate level which shows the value of this experience or function to the success of one's study. The supervision process involves guidance, the



development of appropriate research skills and successful outcome of a research project. Such writings centre on the expectations of the supervision process and its management. Personally, I happened to have two supervisors for my PhD project. Apart from the many advantages of having two supervisors in terms of expertise, prompt feedback and different perspectives on the same issue, there can be the challenge of negotiating between different opinions and ambiguities where critical judgement becomes imperative on the part of the student. As a study that focused on young people's social construction of the HIV/AIDS phenomenon and its relationship to their sexual cultures, I found the interpretive paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), particularly feminist phenomenology (Fisher and Embree, 2000) the most suitable methodological option for my study.

Reaching agreement on this research strand between my two supervisors was, however, not easy and the process subjected me to emotional and psychological challenges. Many were the times that I would return from supervision sessions so 'down' and 'deflated' without the strength to return to writing immediately. Such periods were associated with strong desires for abandonment and procrastination of the thesis writing. In managing my 'low and deflated ego' in an already lonely and foreign land, I enacted a number of coping mechanisms. I would normally put away the draft and comments from supervision for some time and psych myself up by listening to gospel and cool

music. I allowed the words of the songs to speak to me. As a religious person, I also read my bible for some encouraging words. Sharing my experiences with fellow students and learning about their similar experiences was extremely useful. It made me realise that I was not alone as we shared some commonalities. I would usually call home in times like this to speak to each member of the family individually – from my husband through to the children. Listening to their voices and happenings at home made me realise how much I was needed back home and my need to work hard and complete the programme.

My supervisors also provided emotional support with occasional invitations to dinner at their home. They also offered me their personal books for use. Such situations gave me renewed energy to forgo procrastination and tackle my work head-on.

In this final section of the story, I wish to focus on the theme of motherhood and family support in the PhD process and the successful end of my PhD programme. Motherhood occupies an important place in the Ghanaian socio-cultural context. Motherhood could be perceived from biological or social contexts. Biological motherhood which involves pregnancy and child bearing characterised my situation, however the social aspect of child-rearing was performed by others on my behalf on many occasions as a result of my absences. As a biological mother, I benefited immensely from the

African extended family system (Nukunya, 1992) in terms of the continual presence and support of aunts, uncles and grandparents. In addition to my husband/father of the children, I was lucky to have my younger sister and mother to help with child-care. These alternative family arrangements meant I could concentrate on my study knowing the children were in 'good hands'. This notwithstanding, listening to the voices of the children and their narratives of events at home always urged me to hurry up and go home. I missed many family events in terms of weddings and funerals of dear ones because of distance and the cost of international travel. The most painful of these events related to missing the wedding of my only sister who had sacrificed so much of her time to care for my children whilst I studied. I vividly remember the daily phone calls and encouraging words I received from my husband irrespective of the high cost of international calls whilst I studied away from home and how this contributed to the success of my programme. The factors enumerated so far instilled in me a strong level of determination and caused me to sit day and night to work on my thesis. The ultimate value of a PhD to the children's future and family's welfare were other considerations in times when I felt low.

Such determination and constant support from supervisors, the family in Ghana as well as local networks I had established with friends in Cambridge paid off hugely. I particularly benefited from the African/Caribbean network and the Cambridge University Ghanaian Society (CUGS). We marked important national events such as Ghana's Independence Day yearly with talks and parties. I was extremely fond of such gatherings as they partly bridged the distance between 'home and away'. Such events were opportunities to enjoy Ghanaian local cuisine and music and reports of events in the

'motherland'. I also benefitted from the social network of members of the St. Columbus United Reformed Church where I fellowshipped. Of great value was the support of the former pastor (the Rev. Dr. Keith Graham Riglin) both at church and college levels. My membership of the most international, cosmopolitan and friendly social ambiance of Wolfson College, Cambridge, where I lived throughout my study, added value to my social life and enhanced the sound completion of my programme.

While I acknowledge the commitment and sacrifices I received from my supervisors, which in no small way facilitated the completion of my study, I also remember the role played by others in my social life in Cambridge. I particularly remember the sisterly role played by my best friend 'Fibian' as we happened to find ourselves in similar circumstances on many occasions. Kathy, a family friend from the St Columbus church, was a real 'God mother' to me. Many were her phone calls, 'lifts' to church and back, invitations to dinner as well as encouraging cards. I perceive her as an angel from heaven sent to offer me psycho-social support during my studies. As a member of staff of the university, she knew of the rigour and demands of a PhD project and offered constant care and support. I am reminded of the words in her success card to me prior to my viva which read,

*Gina, I will be thinking and be praying for you tomorrow morning. I admire you so much for leaving your homeland and family to face Cambridge and all that it means to produce a PhD. You have triumphed! Good luck in the viva (with love, Kathy).*

After the success of the viva arrived another message:

*I am overjoyed with your success. . . Many, many congratulations. The long difficult labour pains of thesis-birth are over. You have done so well. You are a credit to yourself, family and country.*

That thesis writing is often associated with the metaphor of pregnancy and delivery is not new as enacted in Kathy's message above. Messages such as these were a constant source of energy, strength and determination to me. It instilled in me the need to triumph, for I saw my success as a 'collective/shared responsibility' (Assimeng, 1999; Oduro, 2010) and not an individual affair. My identity as a wife and mother accompanied me throughout my programme. It was, therefore, not surprising when congratulatory messages after the successful outcome of my oral viva from my two supervisors and other well-wishers made references to them. Thus argued supervisor 1:

*Dear Gina, an extraordinary achievement and one you've really worked for. Now you can look to the future as a mother and a Dr. Congratulations and best wishes.*

Supervisor 2 added:

*a brilliant performance and so well deserved. The very best for the future. Tell . . . his wife is a star.*

I recognise that the benefit of such huge support from diverse angles in no small way contributed to my ability to complete and submit my work within three and a half years. It also shows the need, especially for international students, to network and have good

relations to help uplift the soul when the loneliness and demands of the PhD journey become daunting and unbearable. Avoiding procrastination and instilling discipline and determination are important tools for the success of such an endeavour. I also recognise that, though the family had to endure my absence during the period, the sacrifice had long term benefits. Echoing the motto of a local school in Ghana which reads 'dwen ko kan' [think ahead], I saw my time on the PhD programme as a period of acquiring a gift for the family, particularly the children. In sum, is there a better way to show love to one's family than accomplishing a study for a PhD degree from a renowned University? I conclude this narrative by recognising the supportive role of my supervisors and the many funding bodies who contributed to this success story.

#### Author Details

Georgina Yaa Oduro holds a PhD degree from the University of Cambridge and an MA in Human Resource Management from the University of Westminster. She completed her PhD in June, 2010. Her thesis focused on *Gender relations, sexuality and HIV/AIDS education within the context of Ghanaian youth cultures*. Gina has an inter-disciplinary background in sociology, education and human resource management. She is a qualitative researcher with research interests in gender relations, youth cultures, sexuality, sexual health, marginalised youth, organisational cultures and social contexts of medical practice within African environments. Her PhD was sponsored by the following bodies: RECOUP (Research Consortium into Educational Outcomes and Poverty) of the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge; and the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust. She also gained additional support from the ADDRF<sup>2</sup> Fellowship of the African Population and Health Research Centre (Kenya), the All Saints Educational Trust and the British Federation of Women Graduates for which she is most grateful.

<sup>2</sup> ADDRF stands for African Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship

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# At the end of the tunnel, I look back and realise: the experience of a Taiwanese student studying in the UK



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## **The metaphor of pursuing a PhD**

The metaphor to describe the process of pursuing a PhD is: someone walking through a tunnel with blinking lights from the far end. The blinking lights roughly show the direction in which one should head. During the journey from one end of the tunnel to the other, there are sometimes companions but mostly one is on one's own. It is a lonely process. Supervisors and others can guide you, acting like a torch or a spotlight to tell you where the end of the tunnel is and how to get there. However, a person has to experience the journey by him/herself. This metaphor is not only for those who are doing a PhD overseas but also for those who study in their own country. However, doing a degree in another country is more challenging than doing a degree in one's own country because one is in a very different cultural and social environment and the adaptation to a different culture needs extra effort.

## **My background**

After spending six years studying in the UK higher education sector, I reflect on my experience of doing my PhD in a country far away from my own. Although it can be argued that different individuals have different experiences of working towards a PhD degree, this variety comes from different causes such as personal history, personal mentality and different expectations of life. Therefore, it is better to make my background more explicit from the beginning. I was educated in Taiwan from pre-school up to master's degree. Before going to London to pursue my PhD, I taught in secondary schools for a couple of years with only one overseas travel experience. At that time, I was clear in my mind about the broader field of my study, media education, which I came across while doing my Masters in Education. I did a search on the literature related to media education and identified one academic, Professor David Buckingham at the Institute of Education, University

of London, adopting the approach that I was interested in. Therefore, I started to communicate with him via email and prepared a proposal for him to comment on. After getting his approval, I then began an official application to do my doctoral study at the Institute of Education.

With little experience of living overseas and a limited understanding of what life in the UK is like, I decided to start my PhD journey in late August 2002. It was about two months after receiving the acceptance letter from the Institute of Education London. It cannot be denied that this decision was crucial to me because as a result I had to make a lot of changes in my life. I had to resign from a well-paid and stable job in Taiwan and go abroad for my studies. However, as it is said in the business world, 'high risk equals high reward'. My argument is that it may be more rewarding if international students open their minds to appreciate different cultures; they will learn more than fixed knowledge.

There have been some papers and books discussing how to get a PhD (Finn, 2005) or to deal with the relationship with supervisors (Lee, 2008). In this story, I am going to share some of my experiences and thoughts as an international student doing a PhD in the UK. The focus will be on moving from learning knowledge to learning cultures. Although this (inter)-cultural dimension has been explored by some researchers (Gill, 2007; Walsh, 2010), this story will provide an individual experience of the cultural dimensions of the doctoral journey.

### **Learning knowledge versus learning cultures**

There are various dimensions of doing a PhD in the field of social science in the UK. However, I would like to focus on one essential dimension: learning

British cultures. Based on my experience, I realised that some international students only study for the purpose of getting a degree from a prestigious UK university, which is highly valued in some Asian countries. What they care about is only getting the certificate and going back to their own countries. Based on my experience, some of them are even afraid of using English to communicate with international students from other countries and the local British people. These students tend to 'group in their national communities' as Otten (2003, p. 14) describes.

However, I cannot agree with this attitude while studying abroad. I use a simple but useful dichotomy – learning knowledge and learning cultures – to refer to two types of international students. 'Learning knowledge' students refers to those who just want the degree. 'Learning cultures' students refers to those who would love to open their mind and immerse themselves in the British culture.

As an international student, there is more to learn than just acquiring the knowledge and the research culture. I would argue that learning the language, the customs and the cultures in the UK are crucial tasks. These are the most invaluable experiences to me as an international student. Spending years living abroad should not only be for the degree. A lot of insight can be extracted from living in a different cultural environment and appreciating the cultures of the UK. It is especially true for research students in humanities and social sciences. The insights that we get from living in the UK culture will have benefits on the understanding of the origin of theoretical perspectives and the axiology. It is impossible to understand a culture's values and knowledge without adequate appreciation of the cultural context.

To learn more than knowledge, the first and most important step is to have an open mind. The logic is simple and everyone knows about it: if you refuse to keep your mind open, you will never see the different beauty of the world around you.

### **The importance of learning culture: some personal experiences**

I encountered many international students in the UK during my doctoral studies because for several years I conducted part of the induction day for the pre-session course for newcomers from different countries taking place at the Institute of Education. That experience gave me chance to interact with many international students from various countries. One of my tasks in the induction day was to show the new students around the campus. It took about one hour to show newcomers the neighbourhood and the University's facilities. During the tours I shared some of my experiences of being an international postgraduate student in the UK. In these sharing sessions I always reminded the incoming students of the importance of being aware of different cultural norms – i.e. there are different ways of doing things in different cultures. I sometimes shared an incident that I witnessed when I was in a bank near the Institute of Education one summer afternoon. The people involved in this incident were studying in the same institution as me. One was a doctoral student who had been in the UK for one year and the other was a master's student who had just started her pre-session language course; both were international students from the same Asian country.

In some Asian countries people can take an aggressive attitude towards bank clerks when they run out of patience. However, it does not work in the UK context because it is the policy of banks to protect their staff from being abused. The doctoral student was trying to help the master's student get her bank account application done. He took the master's student to the bank several times but there was always a queue. It was not good timing because it was the beginning of a new semester. Many international students were applying for a bank account. The doctoral student shouted at one of the bank clerks and requested to meet the manager of that branch. He required the bank manager to handle the application directly because he was tired of waiting. Apparently, his attitude was not very good. It might work in some Asian countries but not in the UK. They were, consequently, asked to leave the bank because his attitude was viewed as a kind of abuse towards the clerk. The master's student did not know much about the customs and the cultural norms. Her application, of course, did not make any progress and she felt quite frustrated. As I indicated above, certain ways of communicating with bank clerks may work in some cultural contexts but not in others. However, the international doctoral student did not realise the cultural differences and gave the wrong kind of help.

### **My intercultural experience and my anxiety**

The cultures in western universities are different from, at least, Taiwanese universities. I spent more than a year getting used to the learning styles in UK higher education. I found that the exchange of experiences between international doctoral students



extremely helpful. From the dialogue with my classmates on the doctoral training programme and some senior and more experienced doctoral students, I learned about different angles and interpretation of the supervising styles of my supervisors. Meanwhile, other international students from various countries also provided emotional support. During my six years of reading for my doctoral degree, this kind of dialogue comforted me many times when I felt upset and lost the power to move forward.

Many local doctoral students were studying part-time. As a result, I ended up interacting more with international students from other countries because it was not easy to find British doctoral students and I did not want to spend most of my time speaking Mandarin with my fellow Taiwanese doctoral students. The major reason for making this choice was to give me more opportunities to communicate with others in English. Other international students were often not native speakers however, but I could listen to and understand different accents. It was a good way to force myself to be familiar with various types of English. Meanwhile, I learned about their own cultures through my interactions with them. This was a very good intercultural experience. However, is it impossible to make some local friends and to get some flavour of British culture?

### **Some strategies for learning culture**

After three or four months studying at the Institute of Education, I gradually came to understand British English. However, I still could not follow conversations where I did not have the contextual knowledge I needed. To improve my understanding, I adopted several strategies:

1. Watching local television programmes and listening to BBC radio: I found these to be very good sources of learning British English and culture. I watched BBC news, football news, the Apprentice, Top Gear, Dragon's Den and other programmes. The more I knew, the better I could contribute to conversation with others.
2. Making good use of my supervisors: my two supervisors were my best tutors not only in learning disciplinary knowledge but also in acquiring some in-depth understanding of British culture. I asked them lots of questions and they mostly gave me very useful insights into British culture.
3. Taking part in various seminars and lectures: this is a good way of having more interaction with students, academics and professionals. Frequently, seminar participants found a local pub to continue their discussions. I found the pub experience to be one of the most authentic social activities in the UK.

However, I also wanted to know about British culture outside the university. The issue was how I could have access. Here are two of the strategies I tried:

- Joining HostUK ([www.hostuk.org.uk](http://www.hostuk.org.uk)). This was a very good way of expanding my intercultural experience beyond the university. Staying with local people offers a great opportunity to learn about the local culture. Moreover, the host would expect you to share some of your own culture with them. It is really an intercultural exchange process.
- Finding a language exchange partner; this is a common but effective strategy. It is crucial to point out that having a language exchange partner does not mean that the intercultural experience will take place automatically. I had three different language exchange partners while studying in London. Only one of them offered better cultural insights. However, having one is good enough to learn about the culture.

### Conclusions – at the end of the tunnel

At the end of the tunnel, I look back at my journey of doing my doctorate in the UK. In terms of academic learning, I have been alone for most of the time. It is really like walking through a tunnel. However, my cultural journey added a lot of fun and colourful memories to my six years living in the UK. When I put my studies aside and moved to the world outside the tunnel, I saw so many things and learned so much. For example, I travelled across the UK and tried various local foods in different areas. To a large extent, it was the rich cultural experience that helped me reduce some of the depression of working towards my PhD. To me, the importance of the intercultural experience is equal to what I have learned from reading for my PhD.

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Tzu-Bin Lin is from Taiwan. He received his doctorate from the Institute of Education, University of London in 2008. Then, he worked for Bournemouth University, UK. He is now an assistant professor in the Policy and Leadership Studies (PLS) Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE) Singapore.

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# Distance-learning: a Hong Kong doctoral student's experience



Kam Ping Leung, Kathy, City University of Hong Kong

I am a Chinese citizen who has lived and worked in Hong Kong for over 30 years. I studied in Hong Kong, where I received two degrees. When I enrolled in a distance-learning doctoral programme run by Bristol University in 2007, most of my friends admired me for balancing my job, my family, and my pursuit of a degree from a prestigious university. Despite this admiration, my friends also had the following concerns:

- Would there be a language barrier during intellectual exchanges with non-Chinese speaking instructors?
- Could dissertation supervisors be helpful if they resided in a different country than their students?
- Would students work effectively with dissertation advisers or would cultural barriers impede students' studies?
- Would there be useful techniques to motivate students to complete their course of study?

Now, looking back on the past three years, I realise that I both answered the above questions and grew personally and academically. This article will share my story of overcoming the impediments in completing a dissertation through a distance-learning programme, and will describe the most important lessons gained through this valuable experience.

## **'I want to become a competent educator in social work'**

In 2007, I transitioned from serving as a social worker to teaching courses in social work at an institute of higher education. After 20 years of practising social work, I was enthusiastic about my new career as an educator. I enjoyed sharing my experiences with young students, and I was especially touched when I watched them complete three years of training on social work theories and practicum. Over this three year period, the students developed into mature social workers. However, I wanted to be a better

teacher for my students, better than the teachers that I had during my own training. An inner voice urged me to pursue a doctoral degree in education to prove my own academic ability and learn new teaching methods. Although I desperately wanted to be a competent and effective educator in social work, I did not realise the challenges involved in distance learning for my doctoral education.

### **Impediments to distance learning**

I enrolled in a Doctor of Education (EdD) programme that was a collaboration between Bristol University, a British university, and City University in Hong Kong. City University was responsible for recruitment, administrative matters, and providing a venue. Bristol University provided the dissertation advisers and instructors for the courses. This programme involved distance learning. In this distance learning academic setting, students could only meet Bristol's instructors and dissertation advisers during the academics' visits to Hong Kong.

Distance study also poses other challenges because it requires students to be disciplined and balance their university work with non-academic commitments. Adult students in a doctoral programme of distance study mode in Hong Kong often have full-time jobs and family responsibilities. For example, during my doctoral studies I was a full-time teacher, a mother of a teenage daughter, a wife of a busy husband, a daughter-in-law of a terminal cancer patient, and a member of a publishing house committee. While some students coped with this difficult balancing act by extending their studies across a longer timetable, I challenged myself to complete my doctoral degree within four years. To achieve this goal, I had to overcome a language barrier and the distance separating me from my dissertation adviser.

### **Overcoming a language barrier**

I am Chinese and speak Cantonese. Although Hong Kong's education system exposes students to English writing, it does not provide many opportunities to practise speaking English. Therefore, I could easily use written English to communicate with my instructors, but I often had difficulties communicating complex and abstract ideas when I first began my studies. Fortunately, communication is a two-way street; both students and instructors in my programme worked to adapt expressions and communicate effectively with each other.

Over time, I found that the challenges of a language barrier promoted clearer thinking. For example, when my dissertation adviser visited Hong Kong, I had an opportunity to focus my thoughts in preparation for our meetings. During these meetings, I realised the importance of clearly presenting my progress. I made an effort to think through my questions, pinpoint problem areas, and specify the type of assistance I needed.

*My preparation not only facilitated discussions with my adviser, but it also clarified some of the ambiguity in my own thinking and writing. Ultimately, the challenges of a language barrier helped me to develop a more comprehensive dissertation.*

### **Working with a dissertation adviser who is based abroad**

Friends of mine asked, 'How could you communicate well with your dissertation adviser? How could you receive effective advice from her?'. My response to



these questions is that the accessibility of advisers is no longer limited by physical distance because technology allows people to stay connected. In my case, I kept in contact with my dissertation adviser, who resides in England, through frequent e-mails. My adviser quickly replied to my e-mailed questions and drafts. Her thoughtful feedback and concrete directions guided and enhanced my writing.

E-mails are also sometimes better than face-to-face discussions because they can filter out emotions, facial expressions, and impulse responses. A year ago, when my adviser returned my draft of my dissertation's methodology chapter via e-mail, she pointed out some loopholes in my proposed research procedure and challenged my conceptual support for a certain method. After reading this e-mail, I took a deep breath, turned off the computer, and did something else to ease my frustration. After this break period, I was able to respond calmly to my adviser. In my response e-mail, I wrote, 'I understand it is my responsibility to attain a doctoral level. I will try my best to rewrite this chapter'.

There are studies that propose that certain qualities in advisers lead to greater success of students. Advisers' support, warmth, and constructive critiques facilitate studies and allow students to gain more constructive feedback from their work. However, all advisers have unique work habits, communication patterns, and ways to present disagreements. It's not surprising that doctoral students with supportive and

helpful advisers benefit more than other students. I observed that most students are anxious over the appointment of their adviser because of the adviser's important role in dissertation development.

Dissertation advisers are engaged in a close, one-on-one working relationship with students, and they monitor and guide the dissertation from the research proposal stage to dissertation submission. Some students complain that their dissertation becomes challenging because of incompetent or incompatible advisers, and other students avoid their advisers altogether.

A good relationship between adviser and student is a major factor in academic success, and I was lucky in this regard. My adviser facilitated my writing by reviewing my drafts and quickly providing me with constructive feedback. My cooperative relationship with my adviser also gave me a sense of trust. This trust allowed me to send my adviser all drafts without procrastinating and worrying about how my adviser would judge my writing or whether she would be angry about receiving premature work. I sent my adviser each chapter on a planned schedule, and my trust of her proved immensely important in my dissertation work.

Working with an adviser taught me about boundaries in interpersonal relationships in other cultures. Chinese students are trained to respect teachers as their elders. In addition to respect for teachers as elders, Chinese culture emphasises reciprocity



between seniors and juniors; and by extension between supervisors and supervisees in study for a doctoral degree. In our culture, we expect seniors to take care of juniors and, in turn, juniors are expected to pay respect to seniors. During my master's degree studies, my thesis adviser was also my clinical teacher, and I was also on the staff of her teaching team. These multiple roles complicated our relationship, and I often felt confused during our meetings.

In contrast, my EdD dissertation adviser exclusively had a counselling role, which allowed me to focus on my research and dissertation writing. We rarely had casual chats in our meetings, which I originally interpreted as a cultural difference. I often wondered about the different expectations of Chinese and British dissertation advisers in terms of the adviser-student relationship and their contrasting styles of supervision. I found that establishing a clear boundary between adviser and student helped me to focus on my own writing and avoid being distracted by my adviser's concerns. Through my pursuit of a doctoral degree, I learnt that while a good adviser effectively monitors a student's progress and supports her work, a student's own motivation is the ultimate key to success.

### **Motivational techniques**

Some of my classmates were amazed with my efficiency in handing in my assignments and completing my dissertation in three years. I was surprised when fellow students often asked me what "tricks" enabled me to be so efficient. Although I do not think I really used many tricks, I did create motivational images in my mind and I made a point of finding fellow doctoral candidates who were experiencing similar struggles in their studies.

### *Making motivational pictures in my mind*

Once I decided to enrol in the EdD programme, I set a goal for when I would graduate. To achieve this goal, I developed a plan of action. As part of this planning process, I created different pictures in my mind to clarify and envision my goal and overcome any challenges I encountered. For example, when I began my studies, I was anxious about mingling with international students and was nervous about my ability to understand British academics. To ease my concerns, I created an image before my first class. I envisioned an academic with a smiling face who interacted enthusiastically with the students in my classroom. This mental exercise was encouraging and helped me commit to a higher degree of learning.

While working on a particularly difficult first assignment, I developed a second useful mental image. In this image, I pictured myself in my office, pushing a button on my computer to turn in the assignment. It may seem funny to imagine a grown woman playing this mental game, but it worked.

I also had a mental image that frequently entered my head throughout my dissertation. While I was writing the last paragraph of my dissertation, I saw myself wearing an elegant, red graduation robe. Unfortunately, I was not wearing any shoes! After this daydream, I went straight to a shopping mall to buy a pair of shiny, black shoes.

These mental images of studying and graduation motivated me to achieve my goals. They inspired me to dedicate myself to studying, writing my thesis, meeting deadlines, and submitting drafts and revisions. Until now, my use of mental imagery has been my little secret because, as a doctoral candidate and teacher, I felt embarrassed about this motivational technique. Nevertheless, it worked.

*Find friends who are also pursuing a doctoral degree for peer support*

Writing a doctoral dissertation is a lonely journey. It was hard when all my coursework was over and I started my research. I felt even worse when I began to write my dissertation. Fortunately, I had colleagues who shared their practical view on dissertation writing with me. They advised me to stop being a perfectionist and finish my dissertation as soon as possible. Every six weeks, I met with friends who were also midway through the dissertation process. We talked about our progress, cheered each other up, and shared our latest findings. These meetings were a much-needed respite from the solitude of dissertation writing, and my peers provided helpful empathy and encouragement. Both face-to-face meetings and discussions over the phone affirmed my decision to complete my studies. A sense of being united with my fellow students further committed me to my goal.

Despite the benefits of exchanges and mutual support between classmates, working with other students has its downsides. During group work, it is sometimes tempting to chat with friends about non-dissertation topics, and criticisms from peers are not always constructive. If the group does not stay focused, the negative effects of a gathering might negate the benefits of peer support. Fortunately, my peers were constructive and optimistic. We always appreciated each other's efforts, shared useful references, and ended our conversations with words of encouragement.

### **The road ahead**

While completing my dissertation, I also fell in love with writing. My EdD programme required students to complete eight assignments and a dissertation. While some students resented these additional

assignments as a drain on their thesis writing time, I appreciated the additional practice in academic writing. Meeting assignment deadlines was excellent training for future work on book chapters, journal articles, and grant proposals. I always had a bad feeling about my master's thesis that I completed years ago, it has been lying idly on the university's library bookshelf, never reaching interested readers; to avoid this disappointment in future I have begun to write articles in peer-reviewed journals on the same subject as my doctoral degree to keep my dissertation alive.

Gaining a doctoral degree is the beginning, rather than the end, of my academic life. My doctoral studies taught me many important lessons. I learnt how to work constructively with my dissertation adviser. She was an unfailing support throughout the dissertation process and continues to serve as a role model. To overcome language barriers in conversation, I developed a habit of listening to audio books and I became a practicum supervisor serving people from different cultures. In short, I have learnt much from this process and have begun an exciting journey which I could never have foretold.

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# The 'off again - on again' student: my journey as a 'sandwich' postgraduate



Sham Juhari, University of Birmingham

## Why this PhD just had to be done...

'That's it! I've had enough! Time to put aside those books.' I recall saying those words every time I completed a stage in my university life. But slowly, I found myself yearning to climb that next rung in the ladder of higher education.

After a couple of initial tries at different vocations following my graduation from university, I finally found my calling in the teaching profession and settled down as an educator. But attaining a post-graduate teaching diploma wasn't sufficient, so I went back to my alma mater, the National University of Singapore, to gain my master's degree. A couple of years down the road and again the urge to upgrade set in. But the choice had by then become more difficult. I had already established a stable teaching career with a wife and an infant daughter in tow. Burdened with the usual mortgage and car payments, the possibility of dishing out more money to embark

on a doctoral education did not seem to be a very rational choice.

Still, I had by then begun to look closely at the kith and kin around me. For someone coming from my generation, I seem to have made a breakthrough of some sorts – the first among my line of relations to complete Junior College education, and then the first to qualify and subsequently graduate from university. Not bad for someone coming from a family which was perceived to be the least deserving of any form of high expectations from the rest of the 'clan'. After all, while the other relatives had been led by able-bodied men of their family, my own father was a simple-minded man who stuttered whenever he spoke. (It was suspected that the speech impediment and the accompanying loss of clarity in thinking came about due to the bout of high fever that he suffered as a young child.) The situation was seen by everyone who knew us to be the stumbling block

preventing the family from ever achieving any means of progress. Little did they expect that two of my father's three offspring – myself, and later, my sister – would be the only ones who, in the end, qualified and attained university education from among their 'more fortunate' cousins. I had long contemplated the factors, which I think had contributed to my ability for achieving academic success. The conclusion was that while there may have perhaps been some presence of innate intelligence, overwhelmingly however, there was definitely motivation. But then again, what drives my motivation? I see it to be a combination of the desire to make up for what I saw as the loss in the family's social prestige due to my father's handicap, heightened by a somewhat 'incidental' role modelling by a graduate uncle who, with his young family, at one time shared our household during my formative years.

I guess the incidental role modelling bit requires some explanation. By virtue of his marriage to my father's younger sister, my Uncle Ismail received the honour of being the first university graduate in the family lineage. The two family units were then living together in a big house owned by my widowed grandmother. In my very young eyes, I recall seeing him as a learned but unassuming man who was very much respected by all those around him.

Uncle Ismail and his young family uprooted and moved overseas when he was offered a teaching position. I was only about five years old then. Nevertheless, though the two families went their separate ways, my uncle did leave behind a simple yet significant memento: a black and white photograph of himself wearing his university graduation robe and holding his scroll. The small framed picture was placed on a mantelpiece where, over the years, it blended into the background and seemed to receive no more than passing glances. Nevertheless, I've come to realise that it is this faded parchment, which

was to leave an indelible mark on my young life. Truth be told, in the midst of growing up, my gaze on the photo was actually more intense than everyone else's. With hardly any positive reinforcements in my young life then, I recall spending moments staring at it and daydreaming of myself one day wearing the same robe and mortarboard, and holding the scroll. Years later it finally dawned on me that this simple artefact was actually the inspiration for my pursuit of academic excellence.

### **The first time round...**

And so fast forward three decades on, I made the decision to pursue this doctoral education. Having received offers from several institutions, I realised that my choice had to be based on financial considerations given my limited means, and given the fact that I really wanted to expand my academic experiences beyond the borders of Singapore, my home country, I had initially thought that I made a reasonably wise choice in taking up the offer from a university in a neighbouring country. After all, it fulfilled all my criteria:

- The fee was lower and the fact that the currency exchange rate was in my favour was a big plus.
- Classes were conducted on Saturday mornings. So after a six-hour commute on Friday nights and a similar return trip on Saturday afternoons, I still got to spend my Sundays with my family.
- The culture of the local people was similar to mine, so I figured that I should have an easier time settling down with my studies.
- Most importantly, I was still able to handle a full-time job during the working week and therefore maintain a stable income.

Accepting the fact that I would have to juggle my focus and energies continuously, I was happy with my choice and for the next few months, plodded to make the PhD a reality.

Never would I have imagined that my 'perfect' choice wasn't so perfect after all. After six months of weekend 'border crossings', I realised that I was not adjusting as well as I thought I could. While it was easy to attach blame to the institution's learning culture and the lack of academic support, I have also myself to blame for only spending a few hours each Saturday in a weekend-deserted campus. And the fact that I had not really taken the opportunity to make real friends apart from passing acquaintances only added to the failure.

Thus, even after successfully completing two of the required three modules, I had already made up my mind to look for an alternative institution.

### **A second chance...**

One of the offers that I had received previously was from the University of Birmingham. Dr Michele Schweisfurth, the academic to whom I had emailed my thesis proposal, had been very open and encouraging of the research. However, the offer was for full-time studies in the university and thus beyond my financial means. Nevertheless, I got in touch again with Dr Schweisfurth and asked if I could be re-considered as a candidate for the University's Split-Site Postgraduate Research Programme. Such 'sandwich' programmes, as they are popularly known, would allow me to remain in my home country while still pursuing my education under the purview of the institution. The one main condition imposed is that I have to spend a specific accumulated period of time onsite in the campus. I argued that this is achievable if I were to take leave from work during my students' holiday periods so as to travel and reside in Birmingham. Fortunately, Michele was positive in her response and very soon, the offer letter arrived. The rest, as they say, is history.

According to my schedule, I will soon submit my thesis and thus complete the programme. I have been asked the reasons why this second PhD experience has worked out so well when the scenario seemed worse than my first experience with the previous institution. After all, the fee was expensive enough for me to take up a yearly loan from a local bank, paying it back on a monthly basis. The residency requirements, while not as daunting as a full-time student, nevertheless require me to make a journey halfway round the world at least once a year.

Upon reflection, I have come to the conclusion that there may be several reasons why this second endeavour was more successful. The University of Birmingham, as with most UK institutions of higher learning, benefited me in terms of the academic support that was made available to students such as the availability of postgraduate work rooms as well as access to a comprehensive repository of English-based research materials. More importantly, my supervisor this time round was professional yet personable, caring and understanding. Although it is a long distance Student-Adviser relationship, the wonders of technology keep me in touch almost as well as any onsite, full-time candidate. Apart from normal email communications, we regularly web conference using Skype software. I recall that I had once made a Skype appointment with Michele, however, near to the time when I was supposed to meet her online, an informant called to reschedule a meeting at a coffee shop across town. The interview however, took longer than expected and only ended just about the time my online session with Michele was supposed to begin. With not enough time to get back to my office, I whipped out my laptop, activated my roaming broadband and there you are, instant face-to-face conversation over coffee! (Well, coffee at my end in any case. I didn't see Michele holding a cup in the screen.)

But what makes the most difference is the company that you get to keep during your period of study. PhD work is a lonely affair. I felt this during my 'touch-and-go' visits to the previous institution, and especially so since there were very few international students. In my six months with the university in fact, I never did come across any other PhD candidates. The ones I came across were always students at master's level.

But my stay with the University of Birmingham began with a totally different experience. During my very first visit to the University and after an introductory meeting with my supervisor, Michele directed me to Helen, the Postgraduate Student Administrator who then showed me to my designated table in the Postgraduate Student workroom. There, I met not only local students; more significantly, I was introduced to international students from all parts of the world. Ever so welcoming and accommodating, we clicked immediately; some soon became my closest friends. There was Da from Thailand, Isaac from Spain, Eti from Malaysia, Saeed from Egypt, Christiana from Cyprus and Wei-Wei from China. (Isaac even visited me at my home in Singapore recently as he was attending a conference in the country).

Although more costly than my programme with the previous institution, my PhD education in Birmingham is still an affordable affair as I am able to retain my job and sustain a comfortable income to pay off my loans and support my short stays on campus. Nevertheless, it requires that I constantly structure my finances and forgo any kinds of respectable amounts in terms of personal savings. Based on the recommendations of my supervisor however, I was awarded a bursary that will enable me to have sufficient funds to effect a one-year study leave so as to complete my thesis in the UK.

### **Nearing the end of the journey: reflections from the 'mirrors' of multi-culturalism...**

As an educator and a member of an ethnic minority in my country, I had decided that my doctoral research should focus on an issue which addresses the problem of my community's lack of socio-economic progress. Specifically, the sociological study attempts to examine the impact of programmes or activities involving Malay youths, which have the effect of building up their capacity for critical thinking. While not exactly 'ethnically-neutral' in its objectives, the research endeavour does require that I get personally involved in some of these activities so as to experience and understand first hand their effects on the mindsets and perceptions of their participants.

One of the very first activities that I involved myself in was a series of interfaith workshops and seminars organised by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. I recall that in one of the breakout sessions, the following extract taken from a local newspaper was surfaced for discussion:

*A Muslim girl was accidentally scalded by a Chinese bak kut teh (pork ribs soup) seller. The situation deteriorated when in the confrontation which ensued, the stall holder was hurt in a scuffle with the girl's angry mother...*

The consumption of pork or pork-based products is considered 'haram' or forbidden in Islam. In Singapore's multi-faith society, such religious taboos are upheld, usually with relative discretion by most Muslims. In fact, many non-Muslim Singaporeans are also aware of such prohibitions practiced in Islam with some even taking precautions not to offend their Muslim friends through thoughtful actions such



as refraining from consuming pork-based dishes when having meals together. However, in the reported case, it was obvious that the child's mother was so distraught at what she perceived to be not only physical harm but more importantly spiritual 'contamination' inflicted upon her child due to an inconsiderate action resulting in her overly-aggressive and probably 'unthinking' response.

Though members of the interfaith discussion group – comprising adherents of the Islamic, Christian, Taoist, Buddhist and Sikh faiths – provided candid but politically correct viewpoints on the incident, I began to ponder on the role of culture and religion in preconditioning the mindsets of its members and how these, if uncritically discussed, might serve to inhibit the individual's ability to think openly and rationally.

In the ensuing years of research, many other activities followed: formal and informal visits to places of worship, interfaith dialogues with leaders and followers of various beliefs, get-togethers celebrating the joys of multiculturalism and diversity. In short, the research has enabled me to gain insights into the worldviews of not only members of my own community, but more so the other communities

making up my small multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation. Needless to say, the learning is further reinforced by my interactions with such diverse groups that form the rich cultural landscape of Birmingham student life where my doctoral programme is based. My research, I have to admit, has made me a much better person as there is now an increased conviction of the need for tolerance and understanding among 'Peoples of the World'.

Ending on the most positive note, I have to acknowledge that this continuing research has been fundamental in shaping my own transformation into the model of what I hope individuals in my own community will aspire to be – that of the 'New Malay.' I now walk the talk and in doing so, I hope others will too.

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#### **Author details**

Sham Juhari is a PhD candidate with the University of Birmingham's Split-Site Postgraduate Research Programme. Based mostly in his native Singapore, his time is spent juggling between his family, his full-time vocation as an educator and his studies. He expects to submit his thesis in the field of Sociology of Education in the latter part of 2011.

# Seeing with new eyes: insights from an inquisitive journey



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## Where one story begins

I began my MPhil/PhD programme in the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol in October 2006. I had a successful viva in September 2010, so it took me four years to complete my doctoral thesis. Since 2001, I have been teaching in the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), a science and engineering based public university situated in the southern state of Johor, Peninsular Malaysia. As an academic, I describe studying at postgraduate level as one of the means to accomplish my personal obligation towards my profession. For a university lecturer like me, obtaining a doctoral degree is part and parcel of my career development. Over the years, I learned that teaching in the context of higher education does not allow any room for intellectual stagnation, thus continuous personal growth and professional development are a lifelong learning process. In addition, pursuing a doctoral degree has always been my personal aspiration. Nevertheless, as I returned to university as a post-graduate student to experience student life all over

again, it had never occurred to me that the transformative learning experience during my doctoral journey would have such a profound effect on the way I see myself; personally and professionally.

In this narrative account of my doctoral journey, I present a story that depicts my personal experience as a Malaysian student who studied in the UK for the first time. I present my four-year journey as a metaphor of a traveller on an ancient sea voyage. Metaphorically, my doctoral journey started out uncharted. It was like preparing a vessel sailing towards a vast, open sea of intellectual inquiry. Despite the ambiguity and the unforeseen challenges, I was brave enough to set my destination and gradually I found my own course to sail. While navigating the way, I kept track of the chronology of the significant events that occurred along the course of the journey. Upon reaching the final destination, I had my journey mapped out, and this served as the layout for my story. My narrative is in three parts.



The first part gives the introduction to my experience before embarking on my doctoral programme, while part two highlights my critical reflections on my learning process during my doctoral journey. The opportunity to further my study had indeed broadened my horizon of thinking, thus facilitating me to see my teaching practice with *a new pair of eyes*. How I confronted and challenged my 'taken-for-granted frames of reference' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59) about teaching and learning during the course of my doctoral journey is presented in this section. In the final section I share the lessons I have learned throughout my intellectual journey. And so my story begins.

***Docked in a harbour, or set to sail on an open sea? The transformative time***

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has stated 'He who leaves his home in search of knowledge, walks in the path of God'. (Che Noraini & Hasan, 2007, p.6).

Prior to my academic endeavour, I spent a lot of time and a considerable amount of my savings in my attempt to secure a place in a couple of top American universities. After two years of trying, my applications to these two universities were unsuccessful. I was frustrated by the fruitless attempts, but refused to give up. I then shifted my attention to a number of universities in Australia and in the United Kingdom. The decision to study in the UK was my last choice, because I had the impression that I would never survive in this country's educational system. This pessimistic notion originated from the history of "casualties" experienced by a few academics in my university who had studied in various UK universities. I had always been reminded of, and hence intimidated by, the stories of these PhD failures by a group of senior academics. Their concerns over my future academic

performance and my survival in a PhD programme made me doubt whether I was good enough for UK universities. I started to question my own potential. My irrational worry was further backed by my perceived lack of experience as an independent researcher and my assumed mediocrity of English proficiency. At that particular stage of my career, I did not have many choices to consider, so I proceeded with my intention to study in Australia or the UK. Nonetheless, due to an unforeseen circumstance I was forced to abandon my plan for Australia. At the same time, my application was accepted by the University of Bristol, thus my way to the UK had been clearly paved for me.

Although I was proud that I had eventually secured a place to study overseas, I was still engulfed by my own uncertainties. In order to counter my lack of confidence towards my ability to carry out doctoral research in a UK university, I sought advice from a number of senior academics in my Faculty. I met and talked to the ones that I dearly respected and trusted. I should be grateful to them, because their thoughtful words and genuine understanding were the encouragements that I needed. The hours spent in all the meetings and discussions with them made me realise the two essential points they tried to pass on to me. Their opinions deserved my respect because they were the experienced elders of the Faculty, as portrayed by an old Malay proverb as the individuals that 'tasted salt earlier than us' or *dahululah dia merasa garam* (Lim, 2003, p.124). First, my seniors suggested that I should be thankful for the privilege given to me, because as an academic I was entitled to a full scholarship from the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education to further my study. Thus, the chance to study abroad is a golden opportunity that I should seize. Secondly and most importantly, they reminded me that as a Malay Muslim lecturer I am accountable for the acquisition and imparting of

knowledge. Therefore, the opportunity to study in an overseas university would provide a platform for me to acquire new experience in order to improve my knowledge about teaching and learning.

I was glad that my seniors were reminding me of my responsibility towards my teaching profession. As Malay Muslim academics, we are in fact, regarded by our society as scholars or *mu'allim*, the learned ones, the bearers of responsibility towards acquiring knowledge (Ab. Halim, 2007; Zaini, 2009a; 2009b). For this particular reason, we are given the trust and accountability for the acquisition and promulgation of knowledge. Furthermore, a Muslim teacher/lecturer like me is not only a *mu'allim* but also a *murabbi* (a trainer of souls and personalities) because I have 'an ethical duty' (Ab. Halim, 2007, p.376). I could trace the foundation of such an idea. It was embedded deeply within the Islamic worldview, one that upholds the superiority of knowledge (*al-'ilm*) and the notability of the pursuit of knowledge. Such notions had been deeply embedded in me, as a person who was born and brought up in a Malay Muslim culture. In Islam knowledge is infinite as it originates from and ends in God who is the Absolute Knower. A number of Quranic verses clearly accentuate this particular point, for example in chapter *al-Mujadilah* 58, verse 11 (Ali, p. 1436). Moreover, the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, peace be upon him, through one of his sayings or *hadith*, also emphasised that it is the responsibility of every Muslim to acquire knowledge. This famous *hadith* serves as the opening of this section.

The Islamic notions on the divinity of knowledge and its importance, as well as the benefits of pursuing it, parallel those propagated in my Malay culture. I realised that my decision to further my study was not about adding another degree scroll to my curriculum vitae. What mattered most was for it to be a

meaningful experience in order to enhance my teaching professionalism. With all of this in my mind, I accepted the offer from Bristol.

### **Journey in the midst: making meaning of experience**

*Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into.*

*(Dewey, 1938, p.38)*

I arrived in Bristol in late September 2006, and began my Master of Philosophy research training. Input from this research training helped to broaden my perspective on various qualitative research methods in social sciences, particularly in the educational context. With an academic background that was strictly confined to the positivist/empiricist paradigm, being introduced to the different 'alternative inquiry paradigms' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.109) in social sciences research was intellectually stimulating.

This new outlook towards research marked the beginning of my 'transformative time' (Schulte, 2005, p.31). It made me reflect on and re-think my own proposed PhD research. My initial research interest was to study students' experiences in learning *per se*. Having read my research proposal all over again with a new perspective on qualitative research, I started to re-examine the relevancy of my proposed research design to the research questions I had posed. One particular episode that sparked my interest on qualitative approaches was when I was introduced to an article by Phillion (2002). Admittedly, the course of my research journey took a different pathway after I read her article that described her journey towards becoming a narrative inquirer in a multicultural



landscape. Subsequent discussions with Sheila, my supervisor, and her suggested reading list about this particular genre in educational research, ignited further my interest to know more. I then became an enthusiast when I came to know that Sheila had already ventured into the genre for her doctoral thesis and her other writings (see for instance Trahar, 2006a; 2006b). All these early readings introduced me to the term 'narrative inquiry' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994; 2000). Upon reading these materials, I discovered that narrative research and the writings on narrative inquiry were very engaging and powerfully resonating. I could not help but think and reflect on my own experience when reading how other researchers wrote about theirs. To me, they were the travellers and explorers whose stories were the constellations of stars that I relied upon for guidance before starting my doctoral project.

Clearly, to me, my critical reflections on my learning experience as a doctoral student and my gaining new knowledge during my research training resonated with my responsibilities as a university-based teacher educator. While trying to connect what I was experiencing in my learning process in Bristol to what I had been doing so far in my years of teaching, I was actually being confronted with my own 'puzzle of practice' (Russell and Munby, 1991, p.164). Looking back at my practice, I realise that I had always been uncertain and doubtful, whether I had done my best

in my teaching practice to meet with the 'good teacher' expectation. From my inherent puzzle of practice, combined with the insights gained from my personal learning experience, I re-formulated my research puzzle. Specifically, I framed mine as a narrative inquirer's research into her practice, one that offered the means of making transparent an inquisitive journey towards reframing personal practical knowledge in teaching. Personal practical knowledge according to Connelly and Clandinin (1988, p.25) is 'a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions for the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation'.

My doctoral journey eventually brought me back to my familiar educational landscape. From July to October 2008, I was back in the university and the Faculty that I belonged to for my research fieldwork. It was during the four-month period that I revisited my classroom teaching experience and conducted an educational foundation course to a classroom of undergraduate students. During the research fieldwork I identified and scrutinised the core of my uncertainties, 'doubts and dilemmas' surrounding my teaching practice that became the foundation of my puzzle of practice. I challenged my habits of mind by embracing the role of a critically reflective teacher/lecturer (Brookfield, 1995). My lecturer/teacher self was not alone while embarking on this fieldwork journey. Travelling along was also my

reflexive researcher self (Etherington, 2004) who was convinced that unpacking my very own teaching practice through self-study was one part of the multiple traditions of practitioner research (Zeichner and Noffke, 2001).

**Reaching the destination: some lessons learned**

*We can improve our teaching by studying our students' learning – by listening to and learning from our students. (Ramsden, 2003, p.6)*

Now that I have reached the end of my doctoral journey, looking back, there are a number of important lessons that I have learned along the way. In reframing my personal practical knowledge in teaching, becoming a critically reflective teacher/lecturer allowed me to confront and challenge my assumptions about my teaching approach and my students' learning. The strategy of unpacking my teaching as the means to reframe my practice had indeed encouraged me to challenge my 'sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)' (Mezirow, 2003, p.58).

Re-experiencing my classroom teaching practice during my research fieldwork gave me tremendous insight. Through the weekly entries of my students' learning journals, I learned that truly understanding how students perceived their previous and present learning experiences could facilitate me in revising and expanding my pedagogical knowledge. I now acknowledge the importance of the prior learning experiences of students because the significant events and situations that they encountered within each

phase of their experiences shaped the way they viewed their current learning process. Listening to the stories told by my students also taught me to consider seriously the influence of cultural and socioeconomic background on their views about their learning. These were the elements of students' learning that I had taken for granted throughout my years of teaching. I come to the knowledge that I should seriously consider all these important elements about students' learning before adapting any new teaching strategies that I wish to implement in the future.

I also learned that although it is important to have an idealistic view about my practice, still I needed to be critical and not to be overly occupied by idealistic thoughts. These were the elements from the philosophical foundation of my practice that I could challenge, transform and reinterpret. Learning to negotiate the shift in my professional identity – from a traditional teacher to a democratic tutor/facilitator was an attempt to discard my perfectionist thoughts about my practice. I learned from this experience that I could always be transformative by learning how to reinterpret the meanings behind my philosophical ideas so as to rationalise my notions and my actions on my practice. I believe this was similar to the concept termed as 'dynamic stabilism' (Wan Mohd Nor, 2010, p.15) that suggests there is no harm in integrating contemporary thoughts into the existing traditional belief system, provided that one has a comprehensive understanding of the fundamentals of such a system.

Reflecting on this now, it is my personal view that I could not have such insights if I was not looking at the issue through a critical lens. Employing narrative inquiry as my methodology for this research had not only trained me to be a reflexive researcher, it had also served as the mechanism through which I

confronted and challenged my 'taken-for-granted assumptions and conceptual baggage' (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993, p. 14) which I had been carrying with me. Critical reflections on issues related to my teaching strategy and my students' learning experiences had also made me re-examine the influences of my culture and values. Hence by having done this, I learned that 'the making problematic of the familiar (was) an important strategy in moving beyond the mental bonds' (ibid.), ones which had, in the past, constrained me from thinking about my professional practice.

Embracing the role as a reflexive inquirer was also the medium that allowed me to acquire new knowledge about research. In general, qualitative methodology had challenged my conceptualisation of doing social science research. In a way, conducting narrative inquiry had taught me to value integrity and honesty from my role as a researcher. By juggling the dual roles of a practitioner and a researcher I was able to transform them into ones that were 'more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow, 2003, p.58). Narrative inquiry had in fact allowed me to explore 'what happens in my classroom (,)...the meaning of what happens...in the events and how that meaning is influenced by the ways in which we connect together past and present, self and other' (Trahair, 2006a, p.203).

I believe that highlighting my approach in reframing my personal practical knowledge, has offered a new perspective on this issue. My inquisitive journey towards self improvement, stemming from my own transformative learning experience, is an example of how such a small scale study could contribute to the existing knowledge concerning practitioner research. I found my doctoral journey to be one that has been

thought provoking; it was the voyage worth taking. I learned that 'the journey of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in seeing them with new eyes' (Proust, as cited in Freese, 2006, p.100). Through my story, I hope to pass this message to subsequent travellers and explorers who are seeking new knowledge of teaching and learning in higher education.

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