

The Whisperings of a Doctor of Philosophy Student's Phenomenography

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Abstract

“Yes, I’m going to enrol in a PhD”. There are those who relish the proclamation, and others who shiver at its mere whisper. From the position of the whisperer, this paper traces my doctoral journey from the budding concept through the public announcement and resting to taking a breath at the position of attaining full candidature. In this article I capture and express what I have used to sustain me thus far against the conceptual challenges that I have experienced along the way. This journey through my inner terrain depicts a kaleidoscope of decisions and emotions that have produced a diversity of ideas, some of which have flourished and others of which have died. Yet it is those ideas, seeded from past experience, which have sustained and been partly kind. These have a strong emotional component, and it appears that they have fuelled my progress, yet also fuelled degrees of doubt, a paradox that facilitates and restricts. Phenomenography is used to make sense of this experience. This is my struggle for conceptual ground and workspace. This paper describes the resources that I bring to bear in reflecting and reflexing around my choice of topic, my sense of identity as an academic, my doctoral progress and my collaborative alliances, as I make guesses as to ‘what might be’ and stand to take another step forward.

Introduction

This paper uses phenomenography to articulate the characteristics of the structure and content of my conceptions. From a holistic perspective, this is my conception of being whilst experiencing doctoral design at the early phases of doctoral studies. As “[p]henomenography seeks to explore...different conceptions...which people constitute from the world of their experience” (Entwistle, 1997, p. 127), my orientation is to limit the focus to my conceptions as the main interest of the paper. I describe knowledge from my individual understandings resulting from experiences both past and recent in relation to meanings around doctoral studies. This position is “...irrespective of the status of the experienced meaning in relation to demands for objectivity or intersubjectivity....[It is based] on the assumption that knowledge fundamentally is a question of meaning in a social and cultural context” (Svensson, 1997, p. 163).

In thinking about my external reality, I take the position that knowledge is dependent upon context and perspective (Svensson, 1997). I wish to explore the relation between my thought and external reality as I know it, in order to describe the personal themes that pervade this experience, themes which readers may or may not agree with but which they may grasp and explore as they attempt to understand their own beginning

doctoral experiences. In order to categorise these themes into some semblance of order, I have turned to the work of Stephen Brookfield.

Brookfield (1994) conducted research into the critical reflections of adult educators using phenomenography and found “five themes to emerge from journals, conversations and autobiographies: impostership...cultural suicide...lost innocence...roadrunning...and community” (p. 203). Because these themes harmonise with my experience, I use them here to frame my self-exploration. My challenge is to navigate the personal space where the reasons for revisiting the study, and my experience around doctoral studies, lie. Entwistle (n.d.) suggests that this is the space of “Academic orientation [and] vocational orientation” (p. 1). He contends that these orientations lead to notions of why students have to learn, which in turn leads to notions of how they learn. For me the jury is still out on how I learn, but I can attempt to articulate the why.

Why do I have to learn? ‘Have’ is such a strong term for me. It implies little choice. In reality I don’t have to undertake doctoral studies, but as I inhabit an academic position at a regional university there are cultural pressures that conspire to influence my choice toward this end. My choice is also personal. My freedom to choose to reclaim postgraduate studies is perhaps best explained through the concepts of Maxine Greene. From Greene’s (1995) perspective we define ourselves through the projects that we become involved in. I engage in my project – doctoral studies – as a way of endeavouring to construct myself in the world. This engagement attempts to develop an attitude of wide-awakeness that contributes to the actions that I take that lead to self-formation. This freedom to choose is part of me exercising responsibility in constructing my self. Learning for me is also personal. It is to seek responses to the challenges of what my doctoral studies throw before me, and as I undertake this process I come to various understandings of myself and my place. This understanding places me in a tenable position in which to challenge most strongly those whom I teach. As Greene states, “[Students] are most likely to be stirred to learn when they are challenged by teachers who themselves are learning...” (Greene, 1995, p. 51).

So now to Brookfield’s (1994) themes derived from the conceptions of adult educators. In what follows I deal with the themes of impostorship, cultural suicide, lost innocence and roadrunning by relating how these themes – themes that may be perceived by some as offering conceptual malaise – have impacted upon my conceptions of self as a doctoral designer. I respond to these themes with personal antidotes and note how important the final theme of community has been to maintaining my forward momentum.

Impostorship

Announcing to my friends, relatives and colleagues my move into higher education by way of a recruitment process where others, *bona fide* academics on a selection panel, actually chose me over a pool of applicants was easy. Culturally and personally, it was a public affirmation that I was okay. This announcement was more a shout than a whisper. It was not until these ‘pats on the back’ subsided and I walked down the hallowed halls of the faculty (which are quite dingy in fact) that the sense of impostorship began to take hold. Brookfield (1994) tells us that adult educators report experiencing this feeling of inauthenticity when taking on the role of critical commentator. This appears particularly so if they hold an idealised image of

academics being omniscient professionals. He also notes that the feeling never really entirely leaves.

Many experiences have provided me with invitations to experience impostorship – for example, having the Dean publicly announce my (apparent) ability to move things forward as a result of being considered an expert, and after contributions to faculty assemblies when I reflected on my supposed academic contributions. Beginning doctoral studies was another invitation. Doctoral study impostorship began with my apparent inability to articulate what my focus of study was. On the eve of admission as a doctoral student an associate professor struck up a hallway conversation:

“So what will be the focus of your PhD?” he asked.

“Critical spirit,” was my reply.

“What’s that?” he probed.

Keen to make an impression but conceptually tongue-tied I replied, “Stay tuned”. I made the excuse to leave, and walked away asking myself about the validity of the staff selection process mentioned above!

My antidote was (and is) to reflect on what moves me. I ask myself the question, “What am I passionate about?”. When I do this I am enlivened by the emotion and energy that these thoughts bring. I suppose that my choice of antidote comes from my human service background where in case work I would use this mantra when dealing with clients and issues that kept them stuck. It was time for my own medicine.

What ‘moved’ me in the past (and now) is my criticality. Elsewhere (Tyler, 2006a) I articulated how my journey within the human service and the teaching professions was pitted with instances of the application of criticality – for example, in resisting bureaucracy, enabling emancipation and giving voice to alternative curriculum and pedagogies. This deploying of criticality is about endeavouring to shape a different future by challenging the *status quo*; it is critical action (Barnett, 1997). By tracing and reflecting upon my footsteps I realised that criticality was something that I was comfortable with, something in which I had collected implicit and explicit knowledge and something that aligned with my identity; there was congruence between how I saw myself and the actions that I was engaged in.

It was through the elements of criticality, resonating with my teaching experience, that I began to develop the conceptual resources that shaped the subject of my doctorate. “Critical spirit manifestation in TAFE teachers and their work” is the working title of my thesis. The title clearly connects with my past experience in teaching within a technical and further education (TAFE) environment. It also reflects the critical nature of this engagement. My experience within TAFE was partially tainted with interactions between managers and teaching staff where I perceived a lack of engagement by “good reasoning” (Siegel, 1988). I often wondered about the voice of contestation, and how it might play out in an active rather than a passive way during these engagements. I started to explore active engagement in relation to good reasoning and begun to wonder about what would move people to deploy their critical thinking skills. My research led me to the concept of critical spirit, which is considered to be the habits of mind, dispositions and attitudes of critical thinkers (Oxman-Michelli, 1992; Siegel, 1988, 1993). The publication of an account of this conceptually rich position around the subject of TAFE teachers (Tyler, 2006b) won one of my major battles with impostorship.

Cultural Suicide

Brookfield (1994) describes these situations as times when you put yourself up to be counted. That is, filled with the zeal of intensive reading, interaction with other intellects or deep thinking, you put your money where your mouth is – for example, you publicly announce to the faculty your critical appraisal of how faculty norms and cultures should change and evolve or put your vision of where “we need to go”. Brookfield notes that cultural suicide is a threat both perceived and real where as a result of questioning the status quo too far people “will risk being excluded from the cultures that have defined and sustained them up to that point in their lives” (p. 208). Going through a doctoral proposal defence, where I put my conceptual deliberations on the table for the faculty to critique, for me had elements of cultural suicide.

My experience of the doctoral proposal defence was firstly to work up a written proposal, submit it to a panel of academics at the university I am enrolled at and present the proposal to an open forum of interested academics. The second phase was to engage with suggestions from my examining panel and the suggestions received from the forum’s audience. I refined my proposal and submitted it beyond the faculty to the university committee responsible for bestowing candidature. Certainly, prior to and during the public presentation the notion of cultural suicide applied. The best that I thought that I could hope for was a bemused acceptance.

The actual experience brought out individuals who appeared to see my presentation as an opportunity to widen any conceptual and methodological holes, which I may not have filled, into chasms. It reminded me of those individuals who tended to use opportunities such as this to privilege their own voices. But unexpectedly others saw the presentation as a developmental educational experience for the student – me – and added their voices to scaffold my thinking towards other possibilities. This was the voice of intellectual engagement, interest, support and academy, which challenged and extended my thinking but which also gave me academic licence to continue.

In reflecting now, there were conceptual and methodological holes at that stage of my thinking (and possibly still are!). This I believe was only natural given the early stages of my research. The challenge for me was to deal with those who, by their actions both intentional and unintentional, invited me to wear once again the jacket of impostorship whilst falling on the faculty’s sword of credibility. Granted, I was not my calm and collected best within the vulnerable and lonely space of a public presentation to peers. I hoped that I would finish with a modicum of credibility and not succumb to cultural suicide.

The irony was that the actual resource that I deployed to deal with this position of vulnerability was one that I learned years ago during my days as a human services undergraduate. Alder, Rosenfeld and Towne (1986) offered a stepped process for dealing with critics. Noting that the critic’s most ardent need is to be heard and to know that s/he has been heard, I chose to deploy the skill of paraphrasing. But consciously I chose not to engage further with those who sought to offer critique without its constructive relative. It was those who offered support and scaffolding around my ideas whose voices I paraphrased and chose to engage with further. This produced the effect of inviting others to offer their perceptions and join in with what developed as a lively discussion in the areas of possibilities. Because I was the

facilitator of this discussion, I privileged these voices over those who appeared not to hold any developmental principle in relation to doctoral candidature presentations. For me the reality of cultural suicide is that it is ever present. The writing of this paper could also be considered another act of cultural suicide.

A postscript to the above is worth mentioning. With the ensconcing of a new doctoral coordinator, the process mentioned is now acknowledged as a 'doctoral confirmation of candidature' process, one that endeavours to position the presenter and audience as developmental partners rather than as critical opponents.

Lost Innocence

With no *double entendre* implied, this element speaks to me and possibly other doctoral designers in relation to their first and continued acknowledgment of uncertainty. Uncertainty in this sense is that the truth of what we are investigating can never be nailed down once and for all. Brookfield (1994) reports on adult educators whose notion that 'truth resided out there somewhere' provided them with much solace. Those who accepted a position at university (both as staff and as students) did so with a sigh of relief. "There was the feeling that if truth didn't reside in the heads of you guys [academics] – then it couldn't be found anywhere" (anonymous, as cited in Brookfield, 1994, p. 210). These very people articulated an agonising phase where they struggled with a "loss of epistemological innocence" (Brookfield, 1994, p. 210), as they repeatedly found that dualistic thinking along with an acknowledgment of varying contexts did not produce the concrete schemas that they were after. Dialectic thinking, multiplicity and ambiguity were (and are apparently still) the order of the day.

For me this notion was not an epiphany, but rather a realisation over time through my immersion within the higher education culture. Once again I hearken back to my days as a human service worker where I began to understand the value that the concept of diversity had for me. Being open to diversity in client intervention meant for me degrees of freedom in the sense that I was not tied down to someone else's version of the truth but instead we (the client and I) could experiment on what best fits the client's situation. Taking this notion of 'construction for context' and applying it to doctoral design, I conceptualised critical spirit as it applies to TAFE teachers and their work. In exploring what methodology and method best fits this situation, I explored a plethora of possibilities. I sought methodologies that once deployed would give a contestable version of the truth, but nevertheless a version that would sit comfortably with me. Below I outline the epistemological position that I take.

My position is framed by a constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1995) orientation towards TAFE teacher identity. Therefore I hold that TAFE teachers are independent but situated constructors of their knowledge and learn through reflection on their experience. Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning is of interest to this interpretation of constructivism with his concept of critical reflection on experience. The methodology is interpretative, sitting within a postmodern perspective. Specifically, this will be a form of discourse analysis. I align myself with Wood and Kroger (2000), who believe that "Talk creates the social world in a continuous ongoing way; it does not simply reflect what is assumed to be already there" (p. 4). They emphasise "talk as action...[and] talk as an event of interest" (p. 4.). In this sense the world is constructed discursively, an intimate construction that aligns with

postmodernism in that it deals with uncertainty and ambiguity and is comfortable with contingencies.

Roadrunning

Brookfield (1994) speaks of roadrunning as being the toing and froing of progression in relation to moving forward with the challenge of critical reflection. Not unlike Mezirow's (1991) incremental progress through transformative learning, this is the 'three steps forward, two steps back', or drastically the 'three steps forward, four steps back, collapse', concept. Even though this label might be foreign to some, I would be surprised if the experience was a foreign concept to any doctoral student! If I were to use the metaphor of the roadrunner cartoon as Brookfield has, I would see myself as more like the coyote, getting close but never close enough. My falling from grace – picture the coyote plummeting to the canyon floor at the realisation of being unable to cheat gravity as the roadrunner has done – is more akin to my notions of not having the conceptual horsepower to: one, pave a doctoral path; two, find the appropriate vehicle to take me along that path; and three, envision what things will look like when I get there so that at least I will know when I arrive!

But it is not just a matter of conceptual horsepower. It is a matter of juggling other demands that invade the space where the alchemy of my thoughts takes place. These demands – some controllable, others warranted and still others thrust upon me by the forces of authority – appear to have a life of their own as they seek to leach me of the momentum that I might begin to gather. For example, upon the beginning of my appointment as an academic in higher education, and because of the fact that I did not hold a Doctorate of Philosophy, those in leadership positions continually pushed the discourse that 'attaining a PhD is a high priority not only for yourself but also for the faculty and university as a whole'. The attracting of Doctor of Philosophy students and the overall kudos for the faculty were mooted as reasons. There is another voice that runs in parallel to the above and that provides the tenured doctoral student with a paradox. This is the voice that pushes 'the attraction and retention of greater numbers of students through quality products and service' and the 'publish or perish' imperative. Both of these views have another competitor: 'what you do, do it with fewer resources'. This, the economic rationalist discourse, results in the micromanagement of my workload where I have to justify in quantifiable terms the outputs of my academy so that it fits arbitrary benchmarks set by those who appear to display little knowledge about the development of social capital, let alone academic capital. The tension of having to juggle 'get your PhD' with 'work more with less' as well as carrying on life outside academia produces many a coyote type journey into the abyss, with its accompanying sudden halt. In these cases something gives; more often than not in my case, it's progress with my doctoral research.

What resources do I deploy that enable me to continue the chase? The interesting thing in the coyote metaphor is that he experiences no blood loss! I on the other hand do, and have to self-administer liquid replacement first aid regularly by way of a good Australian wine! Nevertheless I acknowledge that as a part-time student the planning required to fit study in with work and family life requires the massaging of boundaries. Work boundaries offer the greatest resistance; therefore the family territory becomes consumed in order to give way to doctoral space. Structuring study space and time at home is a task that most would be familiar with, yet the travesty is that family territory also becomes consumed by work. Working longer hours with less

support, and being straitjacketed by bureaucratic processes that impede timely and flexible decision-making, make a mockery of the family friendly workplace discourses implied in the new organisational mantra.

What resources I deploy in order to survive within these constraints relate specifically to the final element identified in Brookfield's (1994) research: community. Without community I would remain on the canyon floor.

Community

Brookfield (1994) declares community as a bright spot that "emerges from...tales from the dark side" (p. 212). He reports that time and time again educators identified a community of peers who emotionally sustained them during times of tension, particularly when the educators were "experiencing dissonance, reinterpreting their practice, challenging old assumptions and falling foul of conservative forces" (p. 212). It appeared to be that it was the sharing associated with the not so good times that was of value. Brookfield saw that these educators didn't rely on their community for answers, but knowing that they were members of a group that experienced similar discrepancies and tensions provided them with much solace.

Oh how this resonates with me. My community of like-minded colleagues has given me much solace and productive endeavour. A listening ear here, a prod there and a well-placed question elsewhere serve to move me beyond self-incrimination and into action. But the motivation comes only if delivered from an authentic colleague, one who has experienced/is experiencing similar tensions, and from one with whom I have built degrees of trust. I accept their invitations to think and react in certain ways, by acknowledging my own responsibility to them as supportive colleagues. As a doctoral designer I have used their collegiality to keep moving forward. One of the major motivators has been the co-authoring of publications that indirectly relate to my doctoral research. The thrill of the conceptual chase is enhanced tremendously when accompanied by respected participants. And the sheer enjoyment of actually publishing together is increased because it is shared. But also this collaboration provides many lessons regarding the process of publishing.

One specific member of my community, whose presence is a strong motivating force in moving myself forward, is my primary doctoral supervisor. Co-author, mentor and friend, my supervisor plays for me an exceedingly important role in the progression of my thesis. His availability, respectful challenging, privileging of my voice, proofing, silent space and confidences all positively contribute to our supervisor/student relationship. I consider my supervisor as someone who exudes critical spirit (Oxman-Michelli, 1992). And for those of you who are looking for similar qualities in a supervisor, critical spirit in this sense is the disposition of one who is independent of mind, open-minded, wholehearted, intellectually responsible and respectful of others.

One final note with regard to community: the work community that I belong to is at arms length. I can reach for their support at will. They occupy my workspace and neighbouring offices. They do not cloister themselves behind closed doors. They welcome distraction and intellectual challenge. They rally to calls for help and comfort. They are accepting of diversity and display true professionalism. If you can find real estate that is situated in this type of environment, I suggest you pay the going price!

Conclusion

Whilst the focus of this paper has been on the more personal and emotional aspects of my reflections on the conceptions of impostorship, cultural suicide, lost innocence, roadrunning and community, it offers less in terms of technique in relation to designing the doctoral project. This is a deliberate choice. This choice resonates with my belief about good teaching. Parker Palmer (1998) tells me that good teachers have a “strong sense of personal identity [and that this identity] infuses their work” (p. 10). Palmer’s proposition that “we teach who we are” privileges the knowing of oneself over the techniques of teaching. Palmer states that, “as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes” (p. 24). I align with this perspective, and hold that my personal identity infuses my work. The paper has afforded me an opportunity to make explicit aspects of my identity and to acknowledge my subjectivity in the research that I perform. This sense of identity helps me learn why I “gravitate toward certain ways of doing things and why...[I] avoid others” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 32). My assumption is that you as reader will respond to my musings in ways that reflect your own subjectivities, and that in doing so you will make connections with, discard and/or re-interpret my subjectivity within the contexts of your own experiences. I am under no illusions that the usefulness of this paper is limited by its capacity to resonate with your own reflections on the conceptions of impostorship, cultural suicide, lost innocence, roadrunning and community.

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