

Some of the Trials and Tribulations of Doctoral Studies

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Commonwealth Policy and Support for Music in Australia:
The Case of the Australia Council's
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Abstract of Thesis

The study analyses the nature of changes that have taken place in the artistic life of Australia and how well the Australia Council, as the Commonwealth Government's main agency charged with support and promotion of the arts, has responded to these over time. It also identifies what emphasis the Australia Council has given to both excellence/quality of achievement and equity of access and participation; and the music community's perceptions about how the Council has managed this dual policy. Perceptions were gathered first, by way of a national survey of individual musicians and music organizations and second, through follow up interviews.

Two central themes to emerge from the thesis are the need for improved communication to occur between the Performing Arts Board and the music community as a whole, and for the music community to work together as an integrated network to promote collective interests more successfully not only to governments, but also to potential private sources of support and to the public at large.

Introduction

This reflection provides advice for surviving the trials and tribulations associated with doing doctoral studies. It is not intended as an 'everything you ever wanted to know' paper, that would take many more words and time! It could have been entitled, 'questions that need to be answered, decisions that need to be made, and tips to help you

conquer the doctoral journey'. It might also have been labelled 'helping yourself, family and friends survive a doctorate, while maintaining your sanity and sense of humour'. Both titles reflect some of what you are likely to encounter along the doctoral path.

It has been almost ten years since my own journey ended, but recalling the experience and writing this paper, caused some of the anxieties and challenges associated with the whole process (which had for sanity's sake been relegated to the distant recesses of my memory), to become incredibly real and fresh again. The reality is each journey is different, but hopefully the tips provided herein, which are by no means intended to represent an exhaustive list, will prove useful.

Where will I do my doctorate and who will supervise?

The decision to embark on doctoral studies is usually related to career goals or demands. For example, academics are expected to gain a PhD or equivalent, in fact future career advancement and earnings depends on it. For others, such as schoolteachers, the motivation is in all likelihood to be based more on personal satisfaction, because relatively little is gained—financially or otherwise, from the PhD.

The two questions of which university to select and who to approach to be a supervisor are usually addressed simultaneously. Candidates may decide on the university based on its overall reputation and prestige, but often this is secondary to choosing the 'right' supervisor. From personal experience as well as much anecdotal data, choosing a university in close physical proximity to your work/home is an advantage. Long distance doctorates can potentially add to the isolation of the already lonely study. There is the issue of access to a whole host of support mechanisms to consider such as: supervisors; library materials; other doctoral students; seminars/colloquia; and so forth.

Whilst there are university protocols that must be adhered to when enrolling in doctoral studies, and ultimately it is the university that assigns the supervisor, students often contact the potential supervisor in advance to talk through the topic and gauge their interest in supervising the study. My own experience revealed that having a 'high flyer' or someone in a senior administrative role as your supervisor is not always the best choice. They are *inter alia*, usually very immersed in their own research, are often difficult to pin down for regular meetings, and too busy to devote extended time to reading

and providing detailed feedback about drafts of your work when you need it most. The ideal supervisor: has research credibility and is well respected in the field; is well connected and can if needed, provide useful introductions to people and organizations critical to your study, or during and afterwards provide commendations to help get your work published; is a mentor, who teaches you how to research; is generous especially with their time; and is able from time to time to pick up and help rebuild your shattered ego.

It is fairly standard practice to have a principal supervisor and at least one associate supervisor. These people must be able to work together and be of a similar mind in relation to the thesis although may possess differing expertise and strengths. It is also useful to meet together with both supervisors from time to time so that conflicting messages are not provided about your work and you do not spend time unnecessarily going between the two clarifying issues. Your supervisor should also be someone you connect with on both a professional and personal level, because you will be 'working together' for a number of years.

Most universities expect supervisors and students to comply with, at a minimum, annual quality checks about thesis progress. However, scheduling meetings and sending regular progress reports is the students' role not the supervisors. Having crossed over to the supervisor role, I can testify that supervisors do not appreciate students who work in isolation for months and then suddenly reappear and demand your undivided attention and time expecting you to read a complete draft of their thesis within a week!

What will my topic be?

Choosing a topic is the most important, potentially very exciting, yet often the most difficult decision of all to make. In the humanities it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a completely original topic. The latter is not absolutely necessary, however, the research approach you intend to take to study your topic should be innovative. A lot of time can be spent sitting and thinking in the hope that a topic will come to you. On the other hand you may have many potential topics you could happily pursue. In that case, just pick one and live with it! The topic should, however, at the very least interest you, even if you are not passionate about it. If not, chances are you will fail to complete the study or change topics a few times along the way and

lose both valuable time and (maybe) money. For some, the topic chosen sets the scene for future research undertaken and establishes the field they become known for as a scholar.

Ideas for topics can present themselves from a variety of sources including the workplace, publications and from discussions with colleagues. To help make an informed decision it is essential to conduct a literature review in the initial planning stage to provide you with three important types of information. First, to identify what studies and research have already been done in your field(s) of interest; second, to identify 'gaps' in the research which may provide direction for you in the topic you decide on; and third, to determine the availability of (primary, secondary and tertiary) sources for research on the topic you potentially will select. Journal literature and recent higher degree theses are good sources for providing this information. The latter are especially helpful in providing reference lists, especially if the study has some relationship to yours, as well as information about thesis structure and presentation. It helps to remember you do not have to read every book or every article in every journal ever published on your topic, but it is expected that your reading include works considered seminal in the area.

After immersing myself in the literature for four months I concluded it was too politically sensitive to continue with the topic of first choice, especially when it became apparent that essential sources of data would be denied to me. This was a particularly deflating experience especially when it entailed having to revisit my timeline for completion. However, the effort was not wasted and the result was conference and journal papers based on work researched thus far, along with the development of a more 'doable' topic.

As part of the literature search, another valuable tip at this early stage of the journey is to establish the library staff as your new best friends. This helps ensure you are notified of new, relevant publications as they arrive and if needs be, are provided with extra borrowing privileges at critical times. While on the topic of cultivating important new friends, also ensure you treat university administrative and technical support staff with the utmost respect and kindness because it is they who you will turn to when your computer doesn't do what it is supposed to, or you need professional looking tables added to the text.

Is the topic clear and worthwhile?

This question is really about making sure the purpose and aims of the study are unambiguous and the research to be undertaken is adequately refined. It is essential that you answer honestly the questions the thesis examiners will ask, namely, *are the problem/research questions clearly stated? Does the study make a contribution to knowledge in the field?*

Keeping focussed on the topic problem/question and not being swayed by other fascinating data you unearth can be difficult at times. One personal strategy resorted to was to tape the central research question to the home study wall directly above the computer and to read it each time I turned the computer on to commence work on the thesis. Another was to have boxes on the study floor and computer files set up in which to place data deemed interesting, but not specifically related to the study. The intention was to explore these after the thesis.

What methodology do I use?

Whatever study design or methodological framework adopted, it should be appropriate to the topic and question/problem under investigation. There are a multitude of research designs to choose from, usually divided according to whether the focus is predominantly quantitative or qualitative. In music education, it would be a fair assumption that most doctoral studies employ qualitative (historical or ethnographic) research principles, although there are certainly examples of experimental or empirical studies, as well as combinations of the two. Whatever method chosen, it should suit the topic and help 'solve' the problem and/or answer the question being posed.

It is absolutely necessary to thoroughly understand whatever methods you use. The latter may necessitate undertaking some training for it is not expected you are expert on all methods. The training may inter alia, help you to understand and apply statistical tests, design questionnaires or reliably interpret data. Collecting, analysing and living with your data can be the most frustrating and confusing part of the thesis. It was this part of my own doctoral journey that caused the most tears of desperation and doubt. It demanded many hours in front of the computer screen analysing and

reanalysing statistical data trying to make meaningful sense of it all. The best advice anyone can provide about this stage is to seek expert advice to validate your data and analysis. The latter may, but not necessarily be your supervisor, however, such critical feedback, even if you have to pay extra for it, is invaluable and may in the long run save your sanity!

If your methods entail contact with living persons by way of for example, interviews, surveys, and/or experiments, then ethics clearance will be required. The latter generally entails a university committee reviewing the research design and validity of the methodology chosen. It can be to the detriment of your study or at least its progress if you do not take this stage seriously. It is especially important to be cognisant of ethics committee meeting dates and deadlines for submission of proposals so that your research is not unnecessarily delayed.

How do I get started?

The best tip to share about getting started is to commence writing as soon as you can. It forces you to organise and refine the topic, and outline the research plan. That is not to say that the direction will not change along the way.

There is no best thesis template. There are many writing styles, methods of reporting research, and rules that govern thesis presentation 'imposed' by different universities. Most theses follow a fairly standard format. At the same time, no thesis looks and reads exactly like another, although as one of my supervisors relayed 'there is the front bit (contents page, acknowledgements, abstract and so forth), the end bit (bibliography and appendices) and the *muddle* bit in between'. A good way to get started is to prepare a chapter outline in the early stages of the study to provide a guide for planning the thesis, what you will need to do, and how much time you anticipate will be needed to complete each section.

How will I survive?

Be prepared for three things to happen throughout the duration of the study. First, to feel completely overwhelmed by the sheer size of the task you have taken on; second, for your self-esteem to take a battering; and third, to lose motivation and get truly sick and tired of the whole thing—the topic, the endless data collecting and analysing,

the writing and rewriting of chapters. Another tip specific to this last point is to keep old drafts of chapters that have supervisor's comments and suggestions. This 'evidence' can prove extremely worthwhile and save you much time when your supervisor's notes on draft four of chapter two request changes in line with what you submitted way back in draft one!

An absolute essential for surviving the journey is to have your own physical space in which to work. This demands assurance from family members that your study space is off limits to everyone, and as in the case of a friend, is safe from unwanted additions by a small child wielding scissors and a box of colourful crayons! It can be especially helpful to have two areas—one at work and the other at home to house your readings and data. A strategy I found particularly useful was to make charts as visual reminders of the key objective(s), problem(s) and data finding(s) of the study and place these around my office walls.

Another useful survival device employed right from the very early stages of writing was to keep two notebooks—one on the bedside table and the other (in my case) in my handbag. It became increasingly frustrating trying to locate serviettes on which I had written key research breakthroughs. These notebooks contained what turned out to be a mixture of useful and useless ideas, comments and thoughts that would present themselves while driving to work, attending meetings, cooking dinner or in the middle of many sleepless nights.

Doing doctoral studies can be an extremely lonely activity. Unlike students engaged in scientific doctoral study, music education students tend to work alone on a self-contained topic. Some people function incredibly well under these circumstances, but others prefer or even need to share their anxieties, triumphs, highs and lows with others who are encountering similar experiences. Support groups often grow from formal postgraduate get-togethers such as colloquia. Some faculties/schools or even supervisors with large supervision loads, organise informal sessions at which students are able to not only voice concerns, but also share words of wisdom with others about critical points encountered along the thesis journey. These formal and informal events serve the important function of making you realise you are not the only one struggling with your topic, methodology and data analysis. It can also be especially gratifying to acknowledge and

mark milestones with others enduring the same pains and gains as you.

Finally, it helps to expect the unexpected. My unexpected 'nightmare' came in the form of a house robbery in which the computer that held my thesis was stolen. While I had diligently backed everything up on another computer in my work office (an absolute 'must do'), I had not had enough time to complete this task with the latest chapter I was working on at the time. Surprisingly, the couple of months added to the overall workload was nowhere as distressing as the knowledge that others had access to my thesis—my intellectual property.

How will my family and friends survive?

There is no doubt that doing doctoral studies impacts on those around you. It is not outside the realms of possibility that after five or so years you have both a doctorate and a divorce. It is in essence a very selfish, self-absorbing and time-consuming activity.

While it is incredibly difficult to completely switch off from the doctorate, taking time out with significant others is essential. Sometimes it is enough to go for a walk, attend the cinema or a concert to feel refreshed and raring to get back to the study. On occasion, however, it is best for all concerned to have a few weeks off.

Will I ever finish?

At various stages throughout the doctoral journey you will hear yourself saying "I'll never get this thing finished", but you do, through perseverance, discipline, and a commitment to achieving the end goal.

A key consideration is ensuring the study you choose to pursue can be completed within the allocated time you set yourself. Remember this is not the *only* piece of research you will ever do—in fact, now doctoral completion is increasingly equated with providing the necessary license to conduct 'legitimate' research. Longitudinal studies, therefore, may be best left for post-doctoral research. Another consideration that affects completion time, is whether the study involves interviewing and/or surveying subjects, and if so, their accessibility and availability. The latter includes a related factor of costs associated with doing a doctorate. It is useful to find out early in your candidature what financial support is available to help cover

travel (to collect needed data), printing, postage and other assorted costs.

How do I know I have really finished?

A decision that can be difficult to make is when to stop reading new materials, gathering and analysing more data, rewriting chapters and editing the thesis. However, there comes a time to stop. Once you and your supervisors are completely satisfied with the final draft—keeping in mind that before reaching this stage you probably submitted what you considered to be at least two previous final drafts; call on someone who has not been associated with the study to act as a critical friend to read the thesis, locate research gaps and/or slip ups and generally assume the role of an examiner. While at this point in the journey you are likely to be very defensive of the study and the last thing you want is honest, subjective commentary, unless it is of a positive nature, having your work undergo such scrutiny can save time and heartache later.

There are also administrative processes to work through before finally 'letting go'. Some important don'ts should be mentioned at this time. First, don't leave it until the last minute to check the procedural handbook for rules and regulations specific to thesis presentation; second, don't forget to fill out all the necessary forms and paperwork that accompany submission; and third, don't forget to factor in costs associated with multiple printing and binding of the final copy, including all those copies you promised to (long suffering) family and friends.

Who will examine 'it'?

Examiners can be your best or worst nightmare. In some universities candidates provide input into the selection process for examiners, in others they do not. A colleague chose her own examiners after spending an extended period of sabbatical time at their institutions of employ, during which time she spoke with them frequently about her study. This sort of 'familiarity', which might be considered disreputable, is, however, the exception rather than the norm. If you have opportunity to input into choice of examiners, ensure you are aware of any prejudices or preferences they may have about methodology and design. Increasingly there is an expectation that one of the two or three examiners is external to the country in which you

studied. This can provide important international standing to the study, but at the same time can prolong the examination process.

It's gone, now what?

Initially, delivery of the thesis provides an overwhelming sense of relief, but then the waiting starts. After a month or so, you start to wonder what stage the examiners are up to. After about three months you start to make general enquiries of your supervisor to gauge if they have heard anything. In some cases, and I speak from personal experience, it can take nine months or even longer!

It helps to expect and anticipate the need for some corrections and even revision and rewriting. It is indeed very rare for a thesis to be perfect and completely error free. Some students use this 'wait and see' period to publish and share findings from their study; others publish at different stages along the way, while still others wait until confirmation has been received to confidently reveal research findings. The important message is to publish. Research indicates that if you do not publish within the first 12 to 18 months of completion, you are not likely to ever publish from the thesis.

A concluding comment

Just like childbirth, nothing really prepares you for the trials and tribulations of the doctoral journey and the euphoria associated with successful delivery of the thesis. It is one of those experiences you just have to live through. For me, the thesis came first and exactly nine months after 'delivering' it, I delivered another more amazing work—a beautiful baby boy. So for those of you just starting out, or in the middle of the muddle bit, there really is life after doctoral studies!