

PhD Musings



Rod Pitcher

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Postings From a Serving PhD Student

Rod Pitcher

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Introduction

This book is a collection of the postings I've had on internet forums, so all of them have been found acceptable for publication elsewhere.

I cover a lot of ground, from the philosophical to humour to advice, but all the chapters are related in some way to my experience of being a PhD student.

I hope that you find the book interesting and that some of the ideas expressed herein are useful to you.

The subtitle of this book – “Postings of a serving PhD student” – came about partly as a description of the contents, that is, they are postings from various web forums. Also it satisfies my delight in words that have multiple meanings. ‘Serving’ has three relevant meanings here.

Firstly, ‘serving’ refers to doing ones time and duty in an important position such as that of a diplomat or in the armed services. It can also refer, of course, to ‘doing time’ in prison. I feel that, in one or other of these senses (take your pick), I am ‘serving’ my time as a PhD student.

Secondly, it can refer to delivering something to a person, such as a meal. I see this book as ‘serving’ up some interesting bits to you, the reader. I am ‘serving’ the postings up to you for your delectation.

Thirdly, in tennis, ‘serving’ means sending the ball across the court to one’s opponent for him or her to return and so to set up a backwards and forwards interaction. Thus I am ‘serving’ the pieces here to you, my readers, with the hope that they will join the ‘game’ and take part with me.

At the back of the book is a listing of the forums where these articles were first posted in case you would like to see the original publications. They have pictures and other graphics on them which I have not included in this book. Also there are feedback and comments from some of the people who read them that you might find interesting.

Doing a PhD and Living to Tell the Tale

There have been some great and important changes to me over the time of my candidature. I have learnt a great deal about the meaning of research, both as an activity within itself and in its effect on the person doing it. I now believe that it is not possible to do research without being changed by it. That does not only mean that the knowledge gained by doing the research will change the person acquiring it but also that the person will be changed in their outlook by being involved in doing the research. Thus research is a process that changes the individual doing it because it changes the researcher's conceptions of themselves and their world..

At this stage, nearing the end of my candidature, I conceive research as being a process of growth, not only in the knowledge produced but also in the researcher. I believe that no-one can pursue research for any length of time without growing and developing as a person. That, I would like to think, is one of the most important features of research, that it effects the observer as well as the observed. I believe that my research has caused me to develop as a person.

I have learnt that research is a painstaking process. It must be pursued diligently and with care, as well as honestly and with an open mind. That is the only way to achieve the required level of objectivity and validity. The researcher must always have those factors in mind lest s/he succumb to the temptation to 'massage' the data to give the required answers. There can be no justification for falsity. Only complete honesty is good enough.

Research as building and a story

I conceive of research as a process of building knowledge. Most researchers simply add a tiny bit to the overall edifice, but some, the geniuses, will add larger pieces to the building or even help to redesign it. Each piece of data gradually helps the whole edifice develop. One small bit might seem unimportant at the time of discovery, but might become vitally important at some

later date when others have either added to it or built up the structure around it.

Knowledge develops like a building. First the ground floors must be built and reinforced to support the load of the upper storeys as they are added. Then the upper storeys (and stories) can be added. The result will be like a building with different rooms and storeys devoted to different ends and subjects of research. Each room and story will have its own story of how it was started, developed and grew to be accepted as part of the network of knowledge. Sometimes part of the structure will collapse because the foundations are weak or haven't been built properly. Maybe part of the structure will have to be rebuilt due to faulty or inadequate workmanship, but the growth is ever upward. Weeding out the weak parts is also good research as it strengthens the whole structure. In my work I have taken the initial form of MIP and developed it further than the originators did. In that way I have, at least partially, replaced the original MIP with a more sophisticated version. That is part of my contribution to the building that is knowledge that I have replaced a useful tool with something better. My contribution is not a new storey nor even a new room, it is more like a cupboard in the room about metaphor analysis that someone in the future might open in search of new ideas. Perhaps then my story might stimulate them to produce a further development.

Research is also the construction of a story, and a never ending one at that. Each researcher adds or revises chapters and develops the story further. Some will completely rewrite the book on a particular subject or throw away the old book and start a new book by means of a revolution as described by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996). Even when a new book is started some of the old knowledge will remain as a core on which the new knowledge can form. The chapters will be the separate research projects, the characters are the researchers and the participants in their research. It must be remembered that the people who provide the data in the form of survey or interview transcripts are as important as the researcher. They are like the lesser characters in a story who are important for the development of the plot. Without the relatively minor players

there would be no story: Without the people being interviewed or surveyed to provide it there would be no data for the research. Therefore the interviewees are also an important part of the research story and must be treated with respect and courtesy, both in the gathering and the use of the data they provide.

When I started my candidature I had a very simplistic view of research from my reading as an undergraduate. Due to my background in anthropology I thought that it was only necessary to observe a group of people for a short time to be able to understand their actions and motives. I imagined that most of the data would be gathered by simply sitting talking to the people and forming ideas about what motivated them. This understanding was then used as the data for giving an account of the people involved. It came to me as something of a surprise when I had to arrange gathering my own data by planning the nature and delivery of my survey. It became plain that the planning part of data gathering is much more involved than simply asking a few people a few questions.

The need for planning

As part of the planning for my survey I had to obtain ethical clearance for my research. Answering the questions about who I would survey, what information I would elicit, and what I would do with the data after brought home to me the ethics involved in research. I realised then that research was more than just fronting up to the participants and asking questions.

Studying the responses to my survey, reading and re-reading the responses over and over again, sorting out the important parts and figuring out what they mean, brought home to me some of the tediousness of research. The result of that tediousness was a temptation to rush or otherwise compromise the work that had to be resisted.

Research requires care and attention. Sometimes that care and attention must be taken to extremes which are almost unbearable in their tediousness. However, only by persisting can a satisfactory result be obtained. The cost of research is the sometimes hard and tedious work that must take place; the benefits which result from the work are research in which pride

can be taken and which will be of value to the researcher and others.

My reading of the literature, against which to place my own research, was also a somewhat tedious process for me. I didn't want to sit reading other people's work I wanted to get on with my own. I soon learnt that a knowledge of the work done by other people is the cornerstone upon which further research is built. Only by understanding what has gone before can the researcher decide what to research next and how.

It came as something of a shock to me to see how often different researchers disagreed with each other. I wondered how I could ever make sense of the arguments and counter-arguments. That I eventually did so I put down to persistence and the pressure from my supervisors. It was a salutary lesson that I won't forget quickly.

However, I now realise that it is through disagreements over results and procedures that knowledge is built and tested for validity. If all researchers agreed on what is correct there would be no way of tearing out the errors in knowledge and replacing them with better versions of the truth. The new versions of the truth may eventually also prove to be wrong and have to be replaced, but each version of the truth will, hopefully, be better and more correct than its predecessors. It is through the discussion of differences in methods and results that progress is made.

Even when I settled on a method of analysis I wasn't finished. I found that the literature on my chosen method left much to be desired. I had to work out for myself what to do. I eventually ended up critiquing the method because that was the only way to make any satisfactory progress. In critiquing the method I learnt how to consider, add to and argue against the work of other researchers. Hopefully, in my critique of the method I have produced something worthwhile that will be my contribution to the edifice of knowledge and a better way of analysis. If other people can use my modified method usefully then I shall be well satisfied.

Over the time of my candidature, as can be seen from the above, I have changed my conception of research and the work

involved in it. Gone is the simplistic view I started with, to be replaced by a more sophisticated understanding of what research means and what it is meant to achieve. That understanding has changed me as a person, as well in that I have developed a deeper understanding of the methods of research and what it means to be a researcher. Perhaps most importantly, I have learnt that research is hard work when done properly and well. It involves much work in gathering data, analysing it and writing up the results.

The ‘New’ me

Before I started my candidature I had a vague idea that the data could be gathered, the results written up and publication take place all within a few weeks or months at the most. Now I know better. It can be years between the start of planning the data collection and the resultant journal paper seeing publication. If I wished to be cynical I might suggest that a lot of research is well out of date (Dare I say obsolete?) before it sees publication.

The long time between research and publication has implications for the growth of knowledge. Anyone referring to other people’s work only has information that can be years out of date, unless the latter researcher is willing to share the results of her or his work privately.

Thus it would seem that to stay up-to-date a researcher needs a large list of private contacts in the field who are willing to share their as yet unpublished work. However, sharing one’s work before publication can be unsatisfactory and dangerous since some important and original idea might be stolen by an unscrupulous competitor before it can see publication. Priority of publication is so important that it is not unbelievable that such theft does go on.

During the time of my candidature I have also become more able to make decisions regarding my work. At times I have had to make decisions about procedures and the writing up of results. Some of those decisions have been painful and worrying. However, it has all been a part of the learning process and I have gained from it in the long run. At times I felt myself unable to

carry out my own decisions due to having to come to a compromise with my Supervisory Panel. Mostly I had to bow down to their superior knowledge about the PhD and follow their instructions. Sometimes it irked me not being able to go my own way, but I suppose that it's all been for the best.

When I began my PhD I thought that my Supervisory Panel would tell me what to do every step of the way in matters such as my research and writing. However, I now realise that they are more like colleagues and co-workers who are working on a research project with me. They want to see what happens and what result is produced as much as I do. They also have a vested interest in me completing my PhD as it will reflect on their abilities as supervisors and academics if I do not complete or fail my PhD. The standard of my PhD work is a reflection of the care and attention which my Panel have devoted to my development as a researcher. I have a great deal for which to thank them, for their encouragement and their devotion to duty in teaching me the ins and outs of doing my PhD.

An ending. Or a new beginning?

It can be seen from the above that my research has changed me and my outlook. It has given me much to think about, and in so doing has changed my thinking about the processes and the results of research, both my own and other people's. It has also helped me understand better what actually goes on in research and how doing research affects the person doing it.

As well as a better understanding of myself as a researcher I now have a better understanding of my colleagues as researchers. I have some understanding of what motivates them and drives them to be academic researchers. In that way, as well as many others, my research has broadened my mind and my life. Never again will I be the same person as I was when I started my candidature as a research student. That person now appears to me to have been very naïve about research and the nature of knowledge. He had little understanding of the academic world, the world of research and the world of the researcher. He has

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grown into a person who now has some understanding and wants more.

Undertaking the PhD has changed me. I'm not the same person as the one who started three or more years ago. I have more confidence in myself. I have proven myself -- at least to my own satisfaction -- as a researcher. I've enjoyed the process -- most of the time. True, there have been low spots, but they are all part of the process of growing up as a researcher. I learnt as much from the low spots as I did from the good times. At least, about myself. There is now no way that I could go back to being the person who started a PhD all those years ago. I'm changed too much. It was all worthwhile. I'm glad that I did it and I would do it all again.

Coping with PhD Depression

All my life I've battled with depression. Unfortunately, I can't take medication for the complaint as it either makes me ill or more depressed. Some time before starting my PhD I had a year of weekly counselling sessions that, while not curing the depression, helped me to develop strategies that enabled me to cope with the depression better. Those strategies came in useful while I was doing my PhD.

According to the literature most PhD students suffer from depression at some time in their candidature. So, if you are suffering from depression you are not alone. It happens to most of us at some time or other. My intention here is to offer some strategies that I have learnt that might help you cope with it. Put the work aside for a while and try these strategies. Adapt them to suit yourself. Use them as a starting point for your own therapy.

The most important defence against the depression getting worse is not to worry about it. Worrying, together with the depression, generates a downward spiral that only makes the depression and worry get worse and worse. So the first important step is to stop worrying about being depressed and not doing any work. You can be sure that the depression will pass. It will get better. You will get over it and be able to work again. So stop worrying. Forget the work. The depression will only hold you back for a short time and then you will be able to get back to work and finish your PhD.

Secondly, don't make any important, irreversible, decisions while you are depressed. Yes, you will feel like dropping out. Yes, you think that it's no longer worthwhile. Yes, you will think that you aren't good enough to get the PhD. That's just the depression talking. You do want the PhD. You do want to finish. Why else did you start if you didn't want the PhD? You started because you want to get your PhD and you will feel that way again as soon as the depression passes.

Next, you have to take your mind off your depression and work. Find something else to do. Something that interests you, such as a hobby or talking to someone sympathetic. I know that it

takes a lot of effort to do anything while you are depressed and that you have no energy for it, but try. You will find it worthwhile if you can wake up your mind.

If you have neglected a hobby during your candidature due to pressure of work, now is a good time to go back to it. Thinking about your hobby will take your mind off your depression and worries. It's not wasted time, it is time well spent on making you better. Doing something you are interested in will brighten up your mind and help to chase off the depression.

If you can find someone to talk to about something that interests you, that will help, also. The topic needs to be something away from the work which is causing of your depression. You might find that, at first, you have difficulty holding up your end of the conversation, but persevere. It will come and your mind will wake up. But you need a sympathetic person who can talk to you while you are withdrawn and draw you out to start you talking. Unfortunately, such people are not easy to find. If you do find one, treasure that person.

There are small things that you can do that might help. When I'm depressed I have a craving for chocolate so I buy myself a chocolate Bavarian and pig out. Sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn't, but it's always worth a try. Perhaps you have a favourite meal that someone might cook for you. Is there a particular place that brightens you up every time you visit it? Now would be a good time to pay another visit. Give yourself a treat. The small things help. Sometimes it is something small that will suddenly make the depression go away so it is worth trying. Even if it doesn't cure the depression it will help you feel a bit better which helps in the long run.

I have lost a lot of time to depression during my candidacy, but I've always managed to bounce back and continue on. You can, too. It might take an effort to make up for lost time, but that is better than giving up. If you get behind in your work, explain it to your supervisor so that you don't get hassled too much. I've found that supervisors can be very understanding of depression. After all, they probably got depressed when they did their own PhDs.

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A final point. If your depression continues for a long time, or you are seriously worried about it, see your doctor.

Publication

Research is an emotional journey to which the good and successful researcher commits her or his heart and soul. Sometimes, as I found to my chagrin, it can end in the disappointment of the resultant journal paper or thesis being rejected. Yet, at other times, there is the great pleasure and ego boost of having one's work published and presented to a wide audience.

Before I started my candidature I had a vague idea that the data could be gathered, the results written up and publication take place all within a few weeks or months at the most. Now I know better. It can be years between the start of planning the data collection and the resultant journal paper seeing publication. If I wished to be cynical I might suggest that a lot of research is well out of date (Dare I say obsolete?) before it sees publication.

Increasing the number of journal papers I got published depended on improving my writing rate. It is sometimes difficult to find the time to work on a journal paper due to the other writing work, such as reports, the thesis and seminar presentations, that have to be produced. One of the most useful writing skills I have developed during my candidature which increased my production is multi-tasking.

In the past I wasted a lot of time being able to only work on one thing at a time. I often had to put a job aside and wait for inspiration or more information before I could continue with it. In the meantime I couldn't work on anything else and so got little done. I found that if I tried to work on more than one thing at a time I got confused and ended up making a mess of everything or had trouble going back to earlier writing jobs because I had lost track of where I was.

One of the advantages that came from handling multiple writing jobs was that sometimes one might influence another. Thus one job might provide inspiration for another, or suggest ways of breaking a block or just give me a break and allow my mind to process thoughts about the other work in the

background. Working on something different for a while can provide a welcome break when the work gets a little tedious. I've found it sometimes helps in breaking writing block as well.

Once I learnt how to work on multiple writing jobs my progress was much quicker and my production went up. I no longer have to wait to finish one paper before starting another so a lot of time waiting for information or inspiration is avoided. Thus my time is used much more efficiently, I get a lot more done and my production of journal papers has gone up.

Learning to write more journal papers more efficiently helped my development as an independent researcher as it meant that I could get my findings out into the wider community quicker and become known to my peers. It also helped with opening up avenues as a prospective academic after I complete my PhD, since the number of publications is important for gaining such a position.

Breaking the Writing Block

Not being able to work is the curse of the PhD student. And writer's block is one of the worst to deal with. We all get it. Usually, there's no reason apart from the inability to settle down and work. My supervisor told me that the way to beat not being able to write is to follow the 'take one small step' procedure. She told me that to get myself writing again I should take one small first step. This method works in breaking through writers' block and similar problems. I know because I've used it.

The first step might be something simple such as opening a Word file ready to write something, but without actually doing any writing. Once the first small step is accomplished, take a short break. Have a cup of tea. Then, take another small step. This one might be naming the file or putting in a temporary title. Have another break for a few minutes and then take another small step such as writing a rough abstract. And so on.

Eventually, the small steps will add up to something useful and you will have got started. Having done something useful you will be encouraged to do more. Then you can stop taking small steps and start taking larger ones like writing the first draft of the whole of a chapter, revising it and finishing it. The larger steps will follow naturally from the small ones if you take enough small ones. The important thing is to recognise that you are making progress with each of the small steps and should continue on with more of them. The many small steps will build up to a big step which will help to overcome the urge not to work and break through the block.

Sometimes, you can only take the first small step. Doing any more is just too stressful. That's alright. Take a break for a few hours and then take the small step again. This time you should persist and be able to do a little more. Don't get stressed. If the next step is too much, then stop, have a break and then start again. As long as in each working spell you take at least one more small step than the previous one you will be making progress.

Whatever your problem with starting to write, try the ‘one small step’ procedure. What the small step is to be will depend on what you are agonising about, but should become plain with a little thought. The important thing is to do something. What you do isn’t as important as doing something. Try it – what have you got to lose? Nothing but your excuse to continue procrastinating. Once you have started writing again it will all have been worthwhile.

The decision between writing and not writing is yours to make. Maybe this simple procedure will help you to break the barrier and get something done. Try it – one small step at a time...

The Use of Metaphors in Teaching and Learning

Metaphors are very useful in teaching and learning because they use already held knowledge as a scaffold upon which to build new knowledge or to illustrate some property of the new concept to be learnt. Metaphors are of use to both the teacher and the learner. They help in the process of both teaching and learning.

Metaphors in teaching electronics

Metaphors are common in teaching electronics. Radio waves are compared to ripples in the surface of water, electricity flowing in a wire is compared to water flowing in a pipe, spider webs are compared to communication networks. Each of these metaphorical objects has some property which casts light on the relevant area of electronics.

Although the metaphors aren't perfect they help the learner to come to terms with the new concepts. The metaphors use knowledge that the learner already has of the surrounding world to illustrate some property of the unfamiliar topic. Thus learning takes place by building on that previously held knowledge

Metaphors in teaching writing

A thesis or paper can be compared to a number of things when teaching writing.

One of the most useful is that of weaving cloth on a loom. Like the cloth, the paper has to be constructed properly, the individual strands have to be placed in the right places to do their jobs. When the cloth is finally produced it has to be trimmed and cut to suit the purpose to which it will be applied. Similarly the finished paper will have to be revised and cut if necessary to suit the audience to whom it will be presented.

A thesis might also be related as the story of a journey, showing the researcher's development as a researcher, the problems overcome in the progress of it and the thoughts of the person as they progressed. Like a journey the paper will have tough and easy stages, interesting byways and some entertaining digressions from the most direct path but will eventually reach the required destination.

Metaphors in teaching and learning

The type of metaphor used in teaching and learning depends on what is to be taught and learnt. The metaphor must be chosen to illustrate the required concept. Choosing the wrong one would be disastrous for the teacher and misleading for the learner.

Metaphors have a great place in teaching and learning. They should be used more as they ease the path of both. However, they should be used with care and discarded when they have served their purpose. If the use of a particular metaphor is prolonged past its useful time it may become misleading or confusing to the learner. Use them with care, but use them all the same.

The Metaphors That Research Students Live By

There are a number of ways of finding out students' conceptions of their work. I chose to use metaphor analysis of the responses to an on-line survey. In responding to the survey the research students were asked to describe their work as they would to an undergraduate student who had some interest in pursuing a doctorate at some time in the future.

Results

There turned out to be five types of metaphors used in the survey responses. The types should not be taken as absolutely clear cut and independent, as most of the responses tended to overlap two or more categories to some degree.

Metaphors of space

The largest group of metaphors found in the responses related to space. The largest single metaphor that occurred was 'field' followed closely by 'area'.

Metaphors of space suggest that the students using them see their research as opening up or developing into new areas of knowledge. They refer to their research as being in a particular 'field' or 'area' which is part of overall knowledge. Other metaphors that appeared in this category included 'regions', 'frontiers' and 'byways', all of which relate to areas and give the impression of openness and somewhere into which to develop the work.

This type of metaphor gives the reader an image of research being an investigation of a space, like a field is an open area of land. Thus there is a feeling of openness and space.

Metaphors of travel

The largest single metaphor referring to travel was 'steps' which occurred multiple times in nine responses. Similar metaphors are 'journey', 'path' and 'track'.

Metaphors of travel suggests that the student sees her or his research as a movement, as travelling towards some goal. Other metaphors that appeared in this category included 'flow', 'wading', 'embark' and 'sprint' all of which indicate a movement. The destination may not be clearly known but movement in some direction is part of the research.

This type of metaphor gives the reader the idea of exploration, of opening up new areas of research, of heading off into the distance to find new knowledge. It suggests a sense of movement involved in research, that research requires a lot of action to bring it to fruition, that nothing is found by sitting still, only by moving into the unknown.

Metaphors of action

There was a large variety of metaphors for action. These varied from descriptions of research as 'constructing' knowledge, from research seen as 'struggling', to research seen as 'scratching' for results. All these metaphors refer to actions that might be taken to conduct research.

Similar metaphors that appeared in this category included 'working', 'delve', 'reap' and 'combing', all which refer to some action involve to make the research develop in the desired direction. The metaphors of action give the reader a much more earthy feeling about research. It seems that the person undertaking it has to get their hands dirty and actually work hard at it.

Metaphors of the body

There were a number of metaphors that related to a human or animal body. There was 'body' itself and 'corpus'. Also in this category might be 'virgin' and 'drown'.

This type of metaphor suggests that the student sees his or her research as manipulating a 'body' of material as a body of a person or animal might be manipulated. Other metaphors that appeared in this category included 'infancy', 'struggling' and 'grasp' all of which refer to some bodily function or action.

This type of metaphor gives the reader the idea of research being constructed in some way like a body, where many

different parts come together to achieve some outcome. There is a sense that research is not a simple isolated field but is related across and between disciplines as one might consider the parts of a human body to be a composite of interrelated parts.

Metaphors of ordeal

There were a number of metaphors that referred to research as an ordeal. One student twice referred to research as a 'marathon' with its intimations of a struggle against the odds and the persistence required to complete the ordeal. Another referred to the 'struggle' of research.

Other metaphors that appeared in this category included 'crushing', 'drown', 'fighting' and 'safety net' all of which give the impression that the research is not easy and involves suffering to make progress.

The metaphors of ordeal give the reader the impression that the student is struggling with the research, that the research is like a marathon race which tests the staying power of the student to the limits, and that the ordeal of the research is something overpoweringly strong that has to be overcome to achieve the doctorate.

Conclusions

It is plain from the above results that research students show a wide range of conceptions of their work. Their attitudes vary from the more or less positive view of those who see their work as travelling to some destination to the more negative view of those who see it as an ordeal to be suffered. I suggest that this attitude might also be reflected in the student's approach to his or her work and commitment to completing the doctorate.

On Writing

Writing is not a simple process. It depends on a number of factors, three important ones of which are knowledge, incentive and the ability to write. I have never had any problems with the last one. I enjoy writing and do it well according to my supervisors. The others are not so easy.

Knowledge

It seems a truism to say that good writing depends on knowledge, but it is true, none the less. If you don't know what you are going to write about it will be difficult if not impossible to produce anything sensible. You need knowledge to frame the paper, give an account of what it is intended to illustrate and to provide information to the potential reader. A knowledge of others' work on your topic is necessary to provide the references that put your work into its context.

If you don't know what you are writing about, how can you expect to make sense? Whether the paper is factual, biographical or speculative you need to know the background to it. You must be familiar with the topic, the background and anything previously written on the topic so that you can place your work in the context of other's work on similar topics.

Incentive

Having gained the knowledge about your topic you must then have an incentive to write. Common incentives include finishing your thesis to gain your PhD, writing a journal paper to improve your publication list, or writing an application for a job that you would like after completing your doctorate. Note that the reward for doing the writing should be important to you, personally. The personal incentives are by far the best. Working to someone else's incentive is a recipe for disaster.

It is sometimes difficult to find an incentive to write, but it is important that you do so. The more important the incentive is to you the more incentive you have to write. Writing without a

good incentive can be soul-destroying as you try to imbue some interest you do not have into the work.

Ability

Lastly, you need the ability to write. If you have that ability without being taught then you are lucky. If not, you can be taught to at least produce good quality prose. Your university probably runs courses on it. Take all the courses you can. They can't do you any harm and you might find the spark that brings out the creative writer in you. Join a writers' group to get feedback on your work – and LISTEN to the comments, don't just let them pass you by. Take advantage of other writers' experience. Finally, practice writing. The more you write the better you will get.

Writing is not easy for most of us. We need help to produce our best. Even the best writers can use constructive feedback and comments about their writing. Use all the resources available to you to develop your writing skills. You will gain from it in your writing – and so will your audience.

Avoiding Your Supervisor

(Note that this posting is intended as a joke. I would never seriously recommend that you avoid contact with your supervisor.)

Some people enjoy seeing their supervisors. If you are one of those people you need read no further. If, however, you are like most PhD students, there are times when you will want to avoid your supervisor at all costs.

Even though, in general I enjoy talking to my supervisors and find the conversations stimulating, I have sometimes found that avoidance is the best policy. This usually occurs when I'm behind with my work or haven't finished a report that was due in two weeks ago. If you sometimes find yourself in the position where the best thing that you can do is avoid a meeting with your supervisor then read on.

The best excuses

One of the best ways of avoiding a meeting with your supervisor is claiming to have a doctor's appointment. Even the hardest supervisor won't argue too much about that one. But don't over use it. Save it for emergencies, such as the time you haven't done any work for a month and have nothing to report. Remember the next time that you see your supervisor to act sick and moan about how your illness is keeping you away from the interesting work you have waiting.

This excuse shouldn't be used too often or you will get the reputation of being a hypochondriac and your supervisor will ignore it when you really are. However, if you can convince your supervisor that you have some affliction that flares up at some times but is dormant at others you will have a very good on-going reason to cancel meetings whenever you feel like it.

Other ways of avoiding a meeting

Other ways to avoid your supervisor include going on short courses, attending conferences and teaching. These are

legitimate ways of keeping yourself busy and out of your supervisor's sight. S/he can't very well complain if you are doing something that is considered useful. It might even put your supervisor in a good mood the next time you can't avoid a meeting if s/he thinks that you have been doing something to develop your skills.

If you can't find any courses or conferences to attend make some up. Be very careful about making them sound too interesting or your supervisor might want to attend with you. Just make sure that they sound dull and uninteresting or you might be asked for more information that you don't have.

Using this method of avoiding your supervisor is easy. Send him or her an email saying that you are leaving tomorrow for some place far away for a conference. Then you must stay away from the university for a week to give the impression that you have actually gone to the conference. When you come back you will need to avoid your supervisor even more because she or he will want to know how it went, did you read a paper, did you make any useful contacts, and so on. This complication sometimes makes this method of avoidance more trouble than it's worth.

Short courses or teaching are better excuses. For preference they should be somewhere away from your supervisor's normal haunts. It's best to not tell him or her what the course is or where it will be held. You don't want her or him finding you. Genuine courses or teaching are the best as they will hold up even if your supervisor does find you. But if the worst comes to the worst and you can't find one, you will have to make one up.

The distraction gambit

The above ways of avoiding a meeting with your supervisor can be undertaken by email thus avoiding contact completely. Under some conditions even a phone call may be risky as you might have to answer some awkward questions. Not answering a reply to your email is far easier.

However, sometimes you might find yourself in a more difficult position where you are likely to meet you supervisor

unexpectedly. A different method of avoidance must then be undertaken.

If you find yourself being approached by your supervisor in the corridor or elsewhere then you can try to distract his or her attention.

If your supervisor is a woman you can try the chocolate gambit. I find that throwing a block of chocolate to one side will usually distract her and give you time to make a quick getaway. I find that dark chocolate works best, although almost any type will work in an emergency. If necessary, experiment a bit for the best effect. It might even count as research for your next journal paper or annual report.

If you want to avoid a male supervisor then a bottle or can of beer might be a better gambit, but be careful that you don't break the bottle. That would defeat the purpose of the gambit as well as causing a mess.

It will pay you to keep a block of chocolate or can of beer in your pocket just for such emergencies.

You should also be prepared to modify the gambit. Perhaps your male supervisor likes chocolate or your female supervisor likes beer. Be flexible until you find which works best for you.

Supervisors are people of simple tastes so either gambit will have the effect of making her or him ignore you in their haste to get at the chocolate or beer. Just be careful to throw the beer or chocolate far enough away that you don't get trampled in the rush to get it.

This gambit often works better if there are other people around. For one thing they will get in the way of your supervisor as she or he tries to get at their prize, and for another the other people might compete with him or her to get at the goodies. Either will enhance the value of the gambit.

While your supervisor is busy chasing the goodies you should make a quick exit down some other convenient corridor. It is important that you get away quickly. The distraction might only last for a few minutes.

Or else panic!

You can always try running away in a panic when you see your supervisor approaching. It's not always effective since he or she might call you back; in which case unfortunately you must return to face the music or you will probably suffer for it later. To use the escape strategy you need to be quick on the uptake and getaway. You must make your getaway before your supervisor catches a view of you. If you consider that you might need to use this escape route be sure not to carry heavy books or bags. Carrying anything heavy will only slow you down and make your escape more difficult.

If all else fails throw a fit, or otherwise cause a scene. Supervisors don't seem to like being made the centre of attention where it looks like they are causing problems for their students. They like to give the impression of being benign and caring. A panicking student will often frighten off a supervisor. But, again, use it with care. To much use will lessen its effect when you need it most.

Caveats

Unfortunately, you won't be able to avoid all meetings with your supervisor. You will need to have some contact to show that you are progressing in your work and to avoid having your candidature terminated. The occasional meeting is necessary and unavoidable, unfortunately, otherwise some of us would manage to never ever see our supervisors. The main use of the above is for those occasions when you need to avoid your supervisor because you haven't got anything to talk about, because you haven't done any work or because you just can't be bothered. Use them with care. Most importantly, don't over use them or they will lose their effectiveness.

How My Research Changed My Life

Research changes the researcher. It's not just a matter of gaining more knowledge, but actually doing research changes the researcher as a person. That might be obvious, but why and how does it change the person?

Doing research is an emotional as well as an intellectual occupation. As well as thinking it involves feelings. As much as we try to keep our feelings out of our research they do intrude. We make every effort to keep our feelings from influencing the results but we can't keep ourselves from being affected personally by the work and results of the research.

As I approach the end of my PhD candidature I have reason to think back and consider its affect on me because I am writing my thesis in the form of a story about my research and including how it has changed me. In my research I am using metaphor analysis to understand research students' conceptions as expressed in an on-line survey in which they answered questions about their work. I extract the metaphors and then consider what they tell me about the people who answered the survey and their conceptions. I consider metaphors to be very useful in this way as they express some of the personality of the person and provide insights into her or his thinking

Searching for metaphors in my survey responses has heightened my sensitivity to them. I am now more aware of them in my own speech and writing and those of other people. This has changed my own ways of talking and writing because I feel the need to control my own use of metaphors.

When talking to other people or reading their work I take more notice of the metaphors they use. I will often think ahead in the sentence to see what metaphors are likely to appear. This can sometimes interfere with my understanding as I am concentrating on the metaphors more than the sense of the sentence. I find this particularly galling when reading fiction when I find myself critiquing the author's use of metaphors and suggesting, in my mind, alternatives that could have been used and which might have given a more picturesque or colourful view

and helped the understanding of the topic better. I am certainly more sensitive to the colour added to the sentence by the metaphors, but I am also, with part of my mind, analysing the person's use of metaphors and trying to attribute meaning to it.

When I am writing or speaking I tend to look ahead and notice if any metaphors are on the horizon. I then often make an effort to avoid using them for fear that I am revealing something about myself that I don't want to give away. I find that this happens both in my academic and non-academic writings and talkings. I think that this has come about because I know that the metaphors reveal the user's inner thoughts and emotions, as they have done for me in relation to the survey respondents. It is not so much that I want to hide my inner thoughts as a desire not to let out too much of myself for public view, since I am very much an introvert and private person. It sometimes makes my writing or speaking a little stilted as I try to quickly rephrase the sentence to avoid the metaphor. Sometimes I have to allow myself to consciously insert a metaphor so that the sentence makes sense or so that meaning and colour is added to it. I sometimes use metaphors because I feel the need to aid my audience's understanding of what I'm trying to say.

This change in me also reflects a change in my attitude to the participants in my research. I have come to realise how valuable they are to me. Without them I would have no data to analyse, but I now see them as people rather than just sources of data. The act of observing my participants and analysing the data they provide has changed my attitude towards them.

If you think about your own research and its implications as I have above then you will surely find that you have been changed by it. If it is obvious that observation changes the observed then it should also be obvious that it changes the observer. How have you been changed by your research? Hopefully, the change has been for the better.

Metaphors and the PhD

Some supervisors have found metaphors useful in explaining what is required in the PhD research to their students. Two areas where metaphors are particularly useful is in aiding the student's understanding of the progress of their research and the formatting of the thesis.

Metaphors of planning the work

The PhD work can be described as a journey or as a story. Both are useful in understanding the progress of the PhD.

The PhD work can be described as a journey, in which a certain amount of territory must be covered by certain times, and where there are rest stops at certain places that have to be reached at certain times. Using this idea the student can plan the work of the PhD. The amount of work to be done each week can be planned and plotted. Rest breaks, at the end of each section, can be assigned times. Progress can be ascertained by comparing the actual progress with the plan.

Alternatively, the PhD can be compared to a story. Each chapter can represent a stage of the research work. Rest breaks can be taken at the end of each chapter. The chapters added together represent the work towards the completed research and the writing up of the thesis. If dates are assigned to the completion of the stages, represented as chapters, progress can be verified by comparing chapters that are unfinished with those completed. A useful timetable can be drawn up from the work ascribed to each chapter.

A metaphor for the thesis

A useful metaphor for writing the thesis is weaving. The long warp threads represent the strands of the thesis, such as the literature, the methodology and the intermediate results. The cross threads, the weft, represent the work done at that particular stage. The material, the thesis, can be seen to progress as more and more weft is added to the warp to produce finished material. If the warp and weft are imagined as coloured then a

pattern might develop in the material that indicates a useful direction in which to continue. The weaving can be briefly interrupted at any stage and then work re-started when new weft material in the form of results is available. Rests can be taken as necessary, and the work already completed can be viewed at any time to measure progress.

Conclusions

Metaphors are useful for PhD students as they can represent the two main problems that many such students have in organising their progress and understanding what the thesis involves. The illustrations above are useful in those areas.

If you prefer you can make up your own metaphors. Would you prefer the PhD to be voyage of discovery, stopping at various islands on the way? Would you like putting together the thesis to be like organising and cooking a meal and serving it up to your guests? If that suits your way of thinking then go ahead. I've just described the ones that I find useful. You might like something different.

Writing a Thesis is Like Weaving on a Loom

Writing a thesis is like weaving on a loom. The balls of wool and other material available are the data gathered from the literature, the research and thinking about the topic. The finished material is the thesis. The mechanics of weaving the material are like the processes of putting the thesis together.

The raw materials

The weaver gathers together the raw materials that will go into the finished cloth very carefully so that they will fit in with the required overall appearance of the finished cloth. The materials must blend together to produce the final effect required. Putting in a wrong piece of material, just because it is available, may ruin the whole effect. Every piece must be carefully considered to make sure that it fits.

So too the material that goes into the thesis must be considered properly for its proper fit and meaning. Putting in extraneous material where it doesn't fit will ruin the functioning of the whole thesis. Care must be taken that the parts will fit together properly and complement each other.

Putting it together

Each piece of raw material must be fed into the loom at the right time and place. Each piece will have a place where it fits and many, many places where it doesn't. Deciding which is the right place is one of the demands of constructing the finished material. If the material is to be properly woven and become aesthetically pleasing this must be done for every bit of material and at every step of the weaving. Anything else will produce a mish-mash of conflicting colours and textures that will bewilder and confuse the eye and mind of the beholder.

So too care must be taken that the right data is entered into the thesis at the right place and time. Putting the discussion of the theory where the conclusions should go will ruin it

completely. The data must fit and flow with the progression of the thesis as a story.

Completing the finished cloth

Even when all the raw materials have been fed into the finished cloth the job is not finished. The ends of the warp threads must be tied off, so that the cloth does not fall to pieces when it is taken off the loom. Any loose ends of threads have to be tidied up so that the finished cloth has a smooth appearance. Any loose ends must be either removed or sewn into the rest of the material. The final tidying up is as important as any other stage in weaving the finished cloth because it will affect its appearance and durability.

So too, the thesis must be tidied up to produce the final draft. A loose end, if allowed to flutter uncontrolled might break the whole of the thesis. The beginning and end must be tied together properly to produce the proper appearance and continuity in its story.

The final cutting

Even when the finished material is taken off the loom the work is not finished. The cloth needs to be cut for its final purpose. Without the cutting the cloth will be but an unfinished product. When the cloth is cut to make whatever is required it will then fulfil its true and final purpose.

So too the initial drafts of the thesis will require cutting and pasting and tidying up to produce the final draft that goes to the examiners. They will want to see a thesis that is properly completed.

The work only finishes when the final, examiners' revisions are done and the thesis is properly bound and placed on the library shelf for all to admire and read. Only then can the thesis writer relax and claim that the work is finished. As a reward s/he will then have the hard-earned title of Doctor.

Conclusion

Well, that's it. I'm still submitting forum postings so perhaps I'll have another book of them soon. I hope that you found this one useful and interesting.

If you are a PhD student or supervisor, just thinking about it, or just curious, you might find my previous ebook of advice useful and interesting. It is called *Advice to a Troubled PhD Student* and is available for free download from obooko.

Previous Publication

Doing a PhD and living to tell the tale. *ViewPoint*. 23 August 2011.

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Metaphors and the PhD. *The Teaching Tom-Tom*. 26 July 2012.

Writing a thesis is like weaving on a loom. *The Thesis Whisperer*. 31 July 2012.

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