Begin with The End in Mind: Storying The Post-Pandemic PhD

Tara Brabazon[1]

[1]Professor of Cultural Studies, Flinders University, Australia
Correspondence: Tara Brabazon, Professor of Cultural Studies, Flinders University, Australia
Email: Tara.brabazon@flinders.edu.au

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Abstract: This article probes the value of stories, storytelling and storying the PhD. While policies and procedures – rightly – punctuate a doctoral candidature, it is the stories that move a student beyond individual experiences, disappointments and traumas, and into meaning, reflection and propulsion into the future. As the 'new normal' of the post-pandemic PhD becomes clear, there is a necessity to understand, support and enable the very specific cohort of students enrolled during Covid-19. The first half of this article introduces 'storying' as a reflective practice for PhD and post-PhD students, to configure alignments between beginnings and endings, decisions and choices. The second half presents ten mantras, slogans or triggers to commence meaningful storying in and from doctoral education. The goal of this paper is to move (post)pandemic, (post)PhD students beyond remorse, blame, guilt, anger and shame, and to find resonance and purpose in and through decision making.

Keywords: Storying, Storytelling, Doctoral Studies, Post-Pandemic PhD

1. Introduction

Covid-19 revealed unexpected outcomes for PhD students. Some enrolments, projects and completions were slowed or stopped. Data collection in many disciplines was blocked through the closure of labs, the cessation of fieldwork, or restricted on campus activities and support structures. Ethics modifications were required as face-to-face interviews could not be conducted. Teaching opportunities transformed, shifting – at speed – to online learning (Brabazon, Quinton, Hunter, 2020). For other students, Covid-19 radically increased the time available to complete their research. For scholars using unobtrusive research methods or digital research methods, such as digital ethnography, their available time may have increased, without the necessity for commuting and meetings. Some scholars gained enormous freedom over their schedule. Others – often women – managed home schooling and disrupted timetables (Letzel, Pozas, Schneider, 2020). The emotional consequences of these disruptions are being recognized and published in the refereed literature (Kee, 2021). Beyond these immediate and short-term consequences, the expectations and hopes of a doctoral programme have also transformed (Aucejo, French, Araya, Zafar, 2020).

Research into the future is always problematic, particularly noting that there was not a singular international experience of COVID-19. The pandemic was managed very differently through divergent

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national public health policies. Even within one nation, states and provinces mobilized differing responses to the public health emergency.

Through these complexities, the PhDs completed through the pandemic were – and are – distinctive, marked and scarred by an array of social variables, spanning from caring responsibilities, childcare responsibilities, unemployment, underemployment, homelessness, sickness, grief, and economic insecurity. These inequalities are gendered, classed, raced and aged. But the separation from the 'doctorate as usual' is clear. Just as some academics have produced more research during COVID-19, some colleagues have produced so much less (Cui, Ding and Zhu, 2022). The pandemic intensified the liminality and instability of doctoral education (Atkinson, Brodie, Kafcaloudes, McCarthy, Monson, Sefa-Nyarko, Omond, O'Toole, Pavich, 2021). For some – this bizarre period in history has allowed the completion of a quick degree. They have worked hard on their thesis. Their leisure options were restricted. They stayed at home and completed their PhD. For others, a 'normal' candidature has expanded, transformed, angered and confused.

Time matters to a PhD. Described as a time-based degree, doctorates are not organized by semesters or terms. Students enrol, and the clock commences on an enrolment. It is a distinctive academic calendar. Each PhD student maintains a singular enrolment clock. Even students that start on the same day may finish some months or years apart. Students may move from full time to part time, or part time to full time. There may be sick leave, suspension or intermission for health or work reasons, parental or caring leave. These events, described as variations, shift the clock of the PhD. It is important for students to use these variations for reflection, recovery and recalibration. Attrition is the great unspoken reality of doctoral programmes (Lovitts, 2001). While these failures through non-completion of the programme are individualized, the system can remain unchanged and unchecked.

Universities – sadly and frequently - confuse standards with standardization. There is the assumption that to reach the scope and scale required for an original contribution to knowledge during a PhD candidature that a minimum time period is required. Maximum enrolment periods are also specified. But this confusion of standards and standardization impacts on students in higher degree programmes because every PhD and every PhD student is different. This article probes beginnings and endings, and the stories that provide meaning in the space between these arbitrary temporal markers. Doctorate education is punctuated by milestones, confirmations of candidature, examinations and vivas. But the doctorate is more than these peak events. This article probes the value of stories, storytelling and storying the PhD. While policies and procedures – rightly – punctuate the candidature, it is the stories that move a student from their experiences, traumas, worries and fears (Lee and Williams, 199), and into reflection and reorganization for the future. As the 'new normal' of the post-pandemic PhD is revealed and understood, there is a necessity to understand, support and enable this specific cohort of students and their experiences. The first half of this article introduces 'storying' as a reflective practice for PhD and post-PhD students, to configure beginnings and endings, decisions and choices, and activate fresh frames of meaning. The second half presents ten mantras, slogans or triggers to commence meaningful storying in and from doctoral education. The goal is to move beyond blame, guilt, anger and shame, and find resonance and purpose in and through decision making for a (post)pandemic, (post) PhD future.

2. Storying the PhD

Storying. Storytelling. Narrative. These three words build divergent relationships and connections between reading and writing, thinking and behaviour, living and research. To build reflexive, honest and accountable alignments between a person and a researcher in doctoral education, requires answers to three questions.

What are the stories you tell yourself about yourself?

What are the stories you tell others about yourself?

What are the differences between these stories?

The answers to these questions are important. They inform, challenge, socialize, guide and transform the activities we conduct as researchers. Sharing stories shares meanings, providing a door – a gateway - to the understanding of our context, and the context of others. Stories translate and negotiate between colonialism and neo-colonialism, race and racism, age and ageism, nationalism and xenophobia, class and inequality. Stories problematize a stable and safe sense of self. We gain awareness of different research questions, methodologies, epistemologies and ontologies. Stories are a door, and when we listen, think and reflect on these stories beyond the self, we open and walk through that door, and into the lived experience and consciousness of others.

Stories are a mode of communication. They emerge from a place and a time, and create relationships. Stories can be spoken or written, danced or sung, sculpted or painted. Stories are different from narrative. Narrative is a word and trope that carries credibility in disciplines like history, literature, business, health and education, including doctoral studies (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Scholars such as Propp (1968) and Todorov (1971) add gravitas to the theorization of narrative. A narrative has credibility and carries power with it. Some of these empowered narratives are termed history (Jenkins, 2003). Fact upon fact upon fact – organized through a chronological narrative - has propulsion and power through its relentlessness. But the objective of a chronological narrative is to stop critical thought, to block consciousness that there are other truths occupying the spaces between the benchmarked, verifiable, credible facts. These other facts destroy, critique or crush the credibility invested in these chronological narratives. They are not myths, fictions or imagined vistas. Instead, they are the stories told outside of formal teaching environments and the refereed research literature.

I have skin in this game. My first two degrees were in history. I graduated from an elite and conservative university. I did not have the right accent, dress appropriately, or attend the ‘appropriate’ school in preparation for this institution. While enrolled in these degrees, I was taught European history, summoning chronological narratives that cut away most of the world’s population. Social history, oral history and women’s history were just emerging in undergraduate programmes, and poststructuralism as a theory was only introduced in one seminar in my honours year. Through all these courses and assignments, where were the colonized, the unemployed, the underemployed, the sick, those with impairments or disabilities, the migrants, the loners, and the lonely? The answer is that they lived outside of footnotes, and beyond the margins of scholarly monographs. Therefore, external to my coursework, I read wildly unusual research from cultural studies and popular cultural studies. A radical academic from

Manchester, Steve Redhead, was a particular focus. I would later marry him (Brabazon, 2020). Decades before meeting him, I read everything he wrote, and then read everything that Redhead referenced. This intellectual journey led me, in the third year of my history degree, to sit in the library coffee shop with a book that I bought but could not afford. It was not included on any course reading lists, but I was drawn to the title and the cover. This book was Greil Marcus's Lipstick Traces: a secret history of the twentieth century (1990). I remember reading a paragraph on page six. This paragraph changed my life. I remember where I was. I remember the table where I was sitting. I remember the angle of the light arching through the windows. I was hyper sensate. The paragraph transformed me.

> What is history, anyway? Is history simply a matter of events that leave behind those things that can be weighed and measured: new institutions, new rulers, new winners, new losers, or is history also a matter of those things that seem to leave nothing behind, nothing but the mystery of spectral connections between people long separated by place and time. If the language they are speaking, the impulse they are voicing, has its own history, might it not tell a very different story from the one we've been hearing all our lives? (1990, 6).

My intellectual axis – my scholarly trajectory – was shifted through this paragraph. In many ways, the rest of my professional life responded to this paragraph on page six. My path as a scholar has been to listen for, to read, and to write those un/popular, ephemeral stories that are dissonant from the empowered narratives that stiffen our lives, views and perspectives.

Discovering these emerging 'spectral connections' is the gift of storytelling pedagogy and andragogy, challenging the boundaries of the discipline of history. Storytelling questions master narratives and activates different research methodologies and writing strategies. For doctoral education – and research training more generally – this flexibility of mind adds methodological complexity and scope and scale to research. Writing groups create and develop these spaces (Aitchison and Guerin, 2014). As scholars construct research questions and literature reviews, questions hover around our desks that we rarely grasp and action in our publications. What does it mean to live, to work, to dance, to sweat, to feel fear, to love, and to grieve? Narrative is a word of credibility, power and prestige. Storytelling activates diverse voices to be heard, listened to, and valued, enlarging our ways of knowing. Too often there are inelegant separations of academic narratives and everyday storytelling. Davies and Gannon described this differentiation as academic "totalizing truths" against the "local situated truths" of everyday life (2006, 4). Recognizing the cost of demarcating academic and daily life, Greil Marcus asks researchers to consider the consequences of totalizing truths. From this reflection, we ponder who is excluded from methodologies, publications and doctoral theses?

These correctives are not only developing but transforming knowledge. Louise Gwenneth Phillips and Tracey Bunda, in their remarkable book *Research through, with and as storying* (2018), defined storying as, "the act of making and remaking meaning through stories" (2018, 6). Meaning is not imposed. It is not inherited. Stories are alive and fluid. All academic disciplines gain through this process of making and remaking consciousness. Stories activate the ethical responsibilities of scholarship, that researchers are accountable and do not actively select one data set over another because it is more convenient, palatable or easier to access. Instead, researchers must justify the construction of the data set, demonstrating the

accountability involved in the selection of research questions, research literature and methodologies, and explain how and why this research matters to diverse audiences.

From experimental physics and civil engineering through to theology, art and design, storytelling is crucial to research projects, and the wider intellectual life. Daniel Kahneman stated that, "no one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story" (2011, 2). Too often, particularly from the empirical sciences and social sciences, data sets 'speak' through the amplifier of positivism, rather than dispersing the opportunities for diverse interpretations. The key is to understand and log the stories moving into and out of a data set. Mark Carpenter and Darrell Harmon asked scientists to be master storytellers. They stated, "storytelling is sense-making" (2018, 8). This is a key distinction. Stories demonstrate the importance of a data set and its impact. To ensure that research is disseminated, relevance, clarity, connections and communication strategies must be clearly defined and activated. Harrison Monarth stated, "data can persuade people, but it doesn't inspire them to act" (2014, 250). Storytelling answers the crucial question in our lives: Why?

Such questions are profound and important for Indigenous researchers when deploying an array of storying methodologies to shatter colonial narratives of 'discovery.' These methodologies include yarning in some Indigenous Australian nations (Shay, 2021), or sharing whakapapa to build relationships between Māori citizens in Aotearoa / New Zealand (Graham, 2009). The epistemological value of storying and storytelling for Indigenous scholars and citizens transforms the conventions of research and demands that all researchers probe – deeply – our epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions. Stories are important, but there is not guarantee they will be heard or valued. To recalibrate the value of knowledge, Phillips and Bunda log a definitional distinction between storytelling and storying (2018). Storytelling enables connection because stories contain and sustain languages and cultures. Storying is research, offering a reflection on storytelling, theorizing the research in the stories. Therefore, storying is a methodology that offers epistemological correctives, disassembling assumptions about academic research. Therefore, storying probes and questions the shape and frame of ontology. Indigenous research and researchers are leading university researchers into new spaces, shapes and textures for knowing and knowledge outside of colonial frameworks. A university is a colonizing framework. Therefore, this reflection on the positioning of research and researchers is pivotal to the arc of doctoral education (Acker and Haque, 2015).

Storying translates knowledge between different communities with particular attention to the voices of those who are silenced and marginalized. As Alerby has argued, silence is powerful and ambivalent in pedagogical settings (2020). Academic lives validate individual achievement and success. Inelegant proxies are deployed as supposedly objective metrics. The intellect – the mind – is prioritized, cutting away the corporeal – the body - and the sensory information we gain. Stories and storying activate communities, subjectivities and corporeal knowledge. Storying demands that researchers work harder to communicate, to connect, and to ask why. Storying is transparent, accountable and honest because it necessitates vulnerability. We as researchers are not in control of the facts or their interpretations. Learning about loss, pain and regret empowers others to share their loss, pain and regrets. It enables doctoral researchers in particular to know that they are not alone. Matthew Dicks described this as, "living out loud" (2018, 16). He developed a technique of journalling that holds immense value for doctoral

students. He asks that every day we answer a question, "What is my story from today?" This is a powerful question, that not only reflects on the meaning from the day, but also confirms that no day is without purpose.

When doctoral students answer that question – "What is my story from today" – the 'what' question transposes into the 'why.' These reflective questions action powerful techniques while studying and researching. Folktales, fairy tales and fables do not require vulnerability. Storytelling and storying necessitate intellectual, personal, professional and social vulnerability. Even more importantly for those who teach in formal education at any level, how do we become better teachers of storytellers? How do we enable the next generation of doctoral students to tell their hardest, most troubling but most authentic truths?

A story is not about events. It is not about a chronology. A story is about change: how we began as one version of ourselves and became something different. This storying has an agenda, values, and a vision. When doctoral researchers find a beginning, they also can locate their ending. Beginnings are rarely found in a birth or the day of enrolment into a degree. Often, a beginning of a story is a five second transformative moment: a realization, a decision, and a pivot. A great question for researchers to answer is, where does the story start?

Stories have an arc. The shape of that arc determines what is at stake. Stories are active. They are not a passive (re)telling of facts. Kendall Haven, in *Story Proof*, stated that

> The elements that define story structure create context and relevance. Those elements create motivation in the reader or listener to pay attention, process, absorb, and remember the incoming information (2007, 15).

This motivational imperative is why great leaders use stories to summon meaningful and inspired followership. Trust, validity, accountability and reliability emerges from vulnerability. Our culture – our families, our workplaces – validate strength and toughness. While respect may be gained through strength, trust may not follow. Storying and storytelling are crucial to building trust because stories are inductive. They move from a premise or maxim through to examples, to reveal wider assumptions goals and truths. As Stephen Denning has stated, "storytelling is an amplifier" (2011, 37). When researchers tell stories, they build connections and collaborations, and stop being a stranger. But further, researchers must be conscious, compassionate and careful with the vulnerabilities of others (Velardo and Elliott, 2021). Storying creates these spaces for reflection. Therefore, the second half of this article explores beginnings and endings in doctoral education, offering prompts for reflection and storying in our (post) pandemic PhD present. It begins with my story and is punctuated by personal vulnerability, confusion, loss, and resolve.

3. Beginnings

I finished my PhD quickly, in 18 months of full-time enrolment. In practice, I was enrolled for one-year full time, and one-year part time while in full time work as a contract lecturer. This completion was urgent, as I needed to finish the doctorate to be competitive for the academic job at the conclusion of my year-long contract. I woke up at 3am and completed two hours on the thesis before my working day. Then –

as now – finding a more permanent academic post was an important consideration. The precariousness of academic work means that the ability or inability to pay bills frames and shapes doctoral enrolments (Adsit, Doe, Allison, Maggio, Maisto, 2015).

Reaching academic standards to enable submission and a successful examination has little to do with standardizations of the enrolled time taken. The risk with an early – or timely – submission is always scope and scale. This is a legitimate risk. As an examiner, I have failed three theses in my life, all on the grounds of scope and scale. In the case of those three doctoral dissertations, they resembled an honours thesis or a capstone project. The challenges revolved around intellectual range, complexity and depth of research, and the reference list (Brabazon, 2007; Brabazon, 2015). There were also theoretical issues: the theoretical matrix was under-developed or dated. The methodologies were naïve and basic. There was little presentation or confirmation of disciplinary literacies (Lent, 2016). The organizational structure of the argument was chaotic. What was the knowledge being presented as 'original'? It is easy to assume originality and innovation if little research has been conducted. As Bortolotti has confirmed, delusions – including educational delusions - exist in a context (2018). Scepticism, reflection and verification are required (Bergstrom and West, 2021). To ensure that the standards of a PhD are reached, an original contribution to knowledge must be clear, overt and precisely constituted. Research questions must be answered in a robust fashion, with an alignment of ontology, epistemology and methodology. While the doctorate is a time-based degree, this compound noun does not ensure excellence. Time does not guarantee quality.

Therefore, I offer ten provocations to not only enable the storying from PhD students to reflect on the candidature through and beyond the pandemic, but to also ensure a successful PhD is submitted, with integrity, family and life intact. I focus on the final year of a PhD and how to plan for it. The challenge remains, when does 'the final year' commence? How does a student know that they are at the beginning of the end? The PhD presents many challenges, barriers, achievements and outcomes. It is one of the few moments in academic life – or life more generally – where so much time is mortgaged to one outcome. This reality adds stress, fear, worry and often a bit of self-disgust. The final year of the PhD is traumatic, stressful and difficult for supervisors and students. It is intense and disturbing, emotionally and intellectually. Therefore, ten questions provoke storying strategies to organize and reflect on the final year.

3.1 What is the Point of Planning?

Backward mapping is integral to constructive alignment between learning goals and assessment. For a doctorate – where the 'assessment' is a large thesis that confirms an original contribution to knowledge – intense backward mapping is required. The project is too large to conceptualize. If students can start with the end in mind, then the difficult early months of the candidature have meaning and momentum. It is important in the first year to assemble small scale successes, using milestones, posters, conference presentations and seminars. These early successes cascade to those that follow. Constructing low stake deadlines weaves a thesis. Storying allows a reflection on each stage.

Small deadlines assist PhD students. The key is to make sure that the micro 'assessments' are clustered in the SOCK (significant original contribution to knowledge) of thesis. This clustering creates efficiency

with and from every proposal, presentation and publication. The areas of key focus include gathering a data set, then assessing that data set, and logging and addressing gaps and challenges. At the start of the final year, students diagnose the weaknesses and strengths of the thesis, scaffolded from these earlier micro-achievements. The priority is to minimize the weaknesses and create a plan of work to do, alongside the work already achieved.

Focusing on the final year and the submission of the thesis may create pressure on students. However, the alternative is not pleasant. Long candidatures activate many problems. From the financial barriers locking students into poverty to the stability of supervisions in a volatile time for higher education, long candidatures also hamper motivation. The strongest way to sustain motivation in research is to focus on its ending and know that it is composed of a collection of strong days. Students can wake up in the morning knowing that they are one day closer to finishing. Breaking down a thesis into components allows a segmentation that reveals micro-achievements and success. Backward mapping is possible. Motivation is maintained.

Doctoral education begins with hopes, aspirations and ambitions. It concludes with exhaustion, fear and confusion (Hunter and Devine, 2016). Therefore, it is important to align beginnings and endings, goals and outcomes. It is important to read and learn from the experiences of others, understand PhD policies, and plan for a diversity of outcomes. This is – as Rowe confirms – part of the "realities of completing a PhD" (2021). Therefore, probe the role of planning in a doctoral candidature, and answer Matthew Dicks question: "What is my story from today?" (2018,16)

3.2 How do you assemble your priorities?

One of the reasons that a PhD programme stretches beyond the planned time frame - or students formally apply to suspend or intermit their candidatures – is that priorities are vague, diffused and confused. The Doctor of Philosophy is a rare qualification. Very few people enrol in this degree and even fewer complete it. Therefore, it is difficult to find mentors or role models who can enable and explain the vagaries and complexities of a doctorate. A supervisor can be of assistance, but considering the generational profile and age of permanent academics in universities, this historic and experiential view can be dated and weathered of relevance.

A PhD is difficult to start, and even harder to complete. When writing a PhD, all other professional tasks, roles and responsibilities must be secondary, including teaching and publications. The priority must be the completion of a PhD as quickly as possible. Saying 'no' to interesting and intriguing, if marginal, tasks is an empowered decision. Saying 'yes' to an opportunity or responsibility to avoid fear or embarrassment will block the completion of a PhD. It is relatively easy to be enrolled in a PhD, talking with intelligent people, impressing guests at parties, drinking coffee and thinking. Finishing the PhD is the achievement. While suspensions and intermissions of candidature are important – enabling students to recover from family tragedies, illness or financial issues – it is important to recognize that the first indicator that a student will not complete their PhD is that they intermit or suspend from their enrolment. Because of the volatility of the higher education sector, if a student disconnects from a university for three or six months, the institution will not be the same place upon their return. Every student must move into an intermission knowing that their supervisory team may have changed during their absence. Academics

are retrenched, removed or retire. They transfer to another post. That is why students must work as hard as they can – as early as they can in the enrolment – to give themselves a chance of completion and examination.

There are many important reasons to finish a PhD at speed. One key imperative is so that students can return their life patterns to a more normal schedule. Similarly, the sacrifices made by family members must reach a conclusion. But the second rationale for a rapid completion is so that the supervisory / advisory team is as stable for as long as possible. The longer a student is enrolled, the less likely the supervisory team will remain intact through the process. While, as Sellar and Cole have confirmed, "accelerationism" is a provocative problem for the sociology of education (2017), iterative university restructures mean that the academic workforce is not stable. Therefore, the more expedited the PhD, the more likely the supervisory team will remain intact through the candidature. Configuring priorities, writing them down, and reflecting on them each week ensures that students are aware of their choices and their consequences.

3.3 Why is it important to remember that a PhD is a degree, not a life's work?

Research never ends. A PhD could extend indefinitely. That is why the best PhD is a finished PhD. They are small and bounded. Therefore, a clear sense of an ending is required. A PhD is not a person's best research project. It is the first research project. This project ends. If a student enters an area where they know that the ethics process is lengthy, then that is detrimental to the completion of a timely PhD. Students must demonstrate awareness that when they select a topic that cannot be finished, or finished in a finite period, they are determining their future.

A rapid PhD requires a topic that is clearly bounded, ethics is possible to attain, even through COVID-19 limitations. For students starting a programme of research, the warnings and issues caused through the pandemic must be noted. The PhD is not an outstanding research project. It is research training. It is a qualification. It is a degree. It begins so that it is finished. Obviously, tragic events punctuate life. People die. Family members become ill. Housing insecurity and unemployment destroy lives. Therefore, noting these tragedies, it is valuable to work in spurts. Research, read and write with intensity when the context and environment are strong. Work hard during the good times, so when the challenges arrive, the schedule is not impacted. Students with caring responsibilities use the spurt method with great effectiveness. An hour of power is a vertebra in the spine of a thesis, and provides structure and scaffoldng for tough times.

3.4 How do I maintain emotional evenness while remembering my supervisor is not Yoda?

The Doctor of Philosophy is an isolating programme. It always feels like the student is alone, worried and no one understands. The key strategy to manage this isolation is to spend time constructing a robust communication system. It is important to express feelings to supervisors. The final year of a PhD is difficult. Most supervisors have experienced it multiple times. Sharing emotions allows the supervisory team to assemble solutions. It is important to express the concerns, rather than sit and seethe in worry. The best strategy to manage emotions is to complete a full first draft. The relief reached at this milestone is transformative. Once this stage is reached, new strategies can be assembled to move from the first to the last draft. While Baltazar Boeuf stated that "writing is rewriting" (2022, 17), in doctoral education, it

is important to separate these stages. Conceptualizing the arc of an argument is important. But that arc must be written. From that completed writing stage, rewriting, drafting and editing can emerge.

The goal is momentum, moving beyond the anger, rage and fear. Most of the students I have seen in my career as a dean, head of school and head of department, blame their supervisor for something: lack of feedback, authorship disputes, or a lack of teaching opportunities. Sometimes – indeed, quite frequently - this blame can be ill-aimed. I once had a student complain that I cancelled a supervisory meeting for my five-day honeymoon. Students are hooked into what their supervisors should be doing, and this stops the realization about what the student could be doing. I finished my three research degrees without supervisory contact, and finished the degrees quickly. This success was built on the decision to not judge or attack the supervisor's behaviour. I did not have time to complain. I had to get on with the completion. What the supervisor did or did not do was irrelevant, because I had to finish to have any opportunity to gain stable employment. Anger or complaining do not finish the thesis. Reading and writing finishes the thesis.

Too many students relinquish power to their supervisor as the all-knowing messiah. Supervisors are human. PhD students are intelligent and focused. If students work hard, and commit to productive patterns, then roles and responsibilities become clear. The troubled students are reliant on their supervisor, particularly for motivation or push. Yet motivation is not enough. It means little if it does not create productive behaviours. Certainly, it is beneficial if students experience high quality supervision. Students complain – a lot – about supervisory behaviour. However, instead of investing in this complaint culture, which places the attention on a supervisor and their misdeeds, there is value in focusing on the student's behaviour and the thesis.

There is gift in maintaining low expectations. Instead of being disappointed about what a student is not receiving, it is more valuable to understand the context of the higher education and grasp the parameters of the support that is possible. For example, I now understand that my incompetent supervisors – from over thirty years ago – lacked teaching and learning qualification and any expectations or opportunities for professional development in supervision, advising and creating a context for higher degrees. This was a university environment with little regulation and accountability over authorship and professional and personal relationships. My supervisors taught me how not to supervise, and to appreciate an array of learning options and opportunities. My first lesson in supervision was learning how to supervise myself. For my research masters, I had two supervisors. One immediately went on Sabbatical and I never saw him. The other did not meet with me in two years. He missed fifty meetings in succession, and when I submitted the bound copies of the thesis on Christmas Eve, 1992, I handed the bound copies over to a kind professional staff member.

My PhD was even messier. I had a supervisor who was incompetent. When meetings were held, they had to be in a coffee shop rather than his office. I would buy him a coffee and allow him to talk about himself. Sometimes he launched into career narratives and gossip about other academics. Thankfully – early in my PhD candidature – I obtained my lectureship in Aotearoa / New Zealand. I left my PhD institution and the country to finish my thesis at a distance. This was a long time ago. The digital doctorate was not a concept, theory, trope or option. Even online learning was at its early stages of development, before WebCT, Blackboard, Moodle or Canvas (Brabazon, 2006; Brabazon, 2008; Brabazon, 2013). With no

feedback or connection to the home institution, I gave myself the task of finishing a chapter every three weeks. There was no option, no support, no wellbeing or mental fitness training or facilities. Beasy, Emery and Crawford have shown the long-term consequences of this absence (2021). They are correct to recognize the impact of this lack of support. This was a real and brutalizing moment in higher education and my career. Without a doctorate, there would be no chance of attaining a job at the conclusion of this one-year contract. I earned little, with most of the salary chewed up by Wellington's expensive rental market.

I spent what little money I had sending the printed copies of my completed chapters every three weeks - by post – to the supervisor. Through this tiring and expensive process, I never heard from him. No feedback. No letters. No calls. I kept posting the chapters until the thesis was completed. As my contract was ending in Wellington, I wrote to the supervisor and confirmed I needed to submit my completed thesis. Again, there was no response. Therefore, I submitted. At this point, the supervisor replied that he would not sign off the submission because he had not read it, and I needed to resend all the chapters. At this point, I was desperate. I had no money. Indeed, I was in debt from working the year in Wellington. There was no time. No money. No options.

Once more, the thesis was submitted, and remarkable professional staff managed that examination. The thesis was returned without correction. Even after this result, I never heard from him. This man was opinionated, lacking personal and professional control, yet was promoted through the university system at that time. This was a system that validated opinion without evidence or research, delusions, self-absorption, name calling and neglect. This is a bizarre story, nearly thirty years in the past. Tragically it is true, but it is also brilliant, ironic and darkly humorous that the person who experienced this situation became a dean of graduate research and a researcher in the field of graduate education.

Poor supervision is not rare. It is common. It has many causes, particularly in the ruthless, exploitative, neoliberal university sector (Brabazon, 2016). Chandler and Reid's research has focused on the importance of systems demonstrating resilience and adaptability, rather than an individual suffering through difficult, challenging and unworkable situations and contexts (2016). This is the ideal. Most universities fall far short of this goal. Doctoral students must begin with the understanding that they may have elevated expectations for supervision. However, the context, training and the personal and professional responsibilities of academics will tell a different story and summon divergent scenarios. Students are the stars of their own life. It is important that they activate storying to reflect on their candidatures.

3.5 How to learn the lessons from earlier degrees and build a story of research training

Policy makers use an odd, inelegant and ambiguous phrase to describe the structure of doctoral education: "research training." It is a problematic phrase, but it encases tropes, theories, concepts, processes and practices that are complex, intricate and evolving. Through an undergraduate degree, honours and capstone units, students are taught skills about reading, writing, analysis and interpretation. These skills are important, but so is gaining meta cognitive abilities in methodology, epistemology and ontology.

I learned new skills and could assess myself through a research masters before my PhD. I gained research training on a smaller project – at a length of 50,000 words – and I could move into a PhD with greater confidence and ability. For current students, there is rarely the ability to complete both a research masters and doctoral degree. The cost in fees, living expenses, and loss of income is too great. But that means that students rarely have the capacity, currency and confidence to complete a doctorate at speed. The scaffolding and academic literacies must be embedded into the doctorate. Therefore, every opportunity to read, write, and learn about research should be taken. These learning opportunities enable meta skills.

Days, weeks and months of a student's life will be wasted sorting out technical issues, such as issues with endnotes, bullet point alignments, font selection and footnotes. In the final year of a PhD, storying will enable students to recognize their strengths and challenges in hardware, software and wetware. These are important initiatives. However, it is important to complete a check-up of academic literacies. Information literacy skills are crucial to efficiency and ability. Deploy the expertise of librarians as early as possible in the degree. Enrol in professional development programmes designed for graduate students. Learn from experts in information literacy. The time that is saved through such skill development is measured in months, perhaps years.

3.6 Why is it important to read university regulations?

When a PhD enrolment commences, it is based on assumptions. A PhD completion and examination is based on regulations. Therefore, at the start of the final year of the candidature, find and read the submission requirements. Be clear about word length, structure, and the requirements about reporting publications and authorship. Students have problems completing a PhD if they are overwhelmed by it, as it becomes a Mount Everest that they can never reach. Actually, a PhD is made up of daily, basic, mediocre and completely predictable tasks. Storying reveals the value of these daily advances. A PhD is constructed through writing a sentence Then another. Then another. Paragraph after paragraph. Leave Mount Everest to Tenzing Norgay.

3.7 How will I verify health and mental fitness?

Never neglect exercise, walking, and quality food. Mental health is framed by physical health. There are technological platforms – like Fitbits and the iWatch – that provide reminders of movement. A series of strategies can create connections and support teams beyond supervisors and supervision. In the first month of the candidature, meet librarians, enrol in their training and courses, and let them teach information literacy and high-quality search strategies. It is also important to know the names and understand the organization culture of the institution, including higher degree coordinators, deans, the academics that make professional development available. Gather support services. The reason it is important to invest in a learning culture is so that we know what we do not know. By being proactive and creating cultures of learning, students become more autonomous, creating pods of support away from the supervisor.

It is crucial that students never isolate, and never confuse their identity with the success, failures or challenges of the thesis. A PhD is not a life. That is why it is important to professionalize the relationship between students and supervisors. If a supervisor offers feedback, then students must not take it personally. The thesis is a job to complete. Universities must not be romanticized. They are workplaces

– and pretty troubled ones at the moment. Therefore, students must ensure that their research progress does not determine their mood, or their attitudes to a successful life. Many supervisors are – themselves – incredibly unstable at the moment. They may care for their students, but if they are made redundant, then their mortgage will remain more important than a student's thesis. Students must be prepared to finish the thesis with little supervision. It will be a grind. It will not be pleasant. It is work. Do the work. Each day, through storying, check on mental, emotional and intellectual fitness and health.

3.8 How are you planning for your post-thesis life and career?

Completing the PhD is a priority, but it is also important to recognize and prepare for the emotional states that emerge after submitting a doctorate. Understanding the possibilities and trajectories are crucial (Castello, Sala-Bubare, Pardo, 2021). Formulating a plan is a priority. In the final year, take one week and one meeting with a supervisor / advisor and put in place a post-thesis plan. Be concise in organizing the period during the thesis examination. Activate the scenario planning for all the different options that emerge through the examination. The thesis is crucial: a foundation for any future career. However, career chances increase and stress reduces by talking through scenarios. Short and intense PhDs offer the only possibility for many students to complete a doctorate. Money is tight. Scholarships are rare. Particularly, there are consequences for students whose scholarship runs out, but the doctorate is not submitted. The result is frequently a cascade into poverty, mental health issues, homelessness and relationship breakdown.

I understand this intensity. It is important to finish the thesis in synchronicity with the available funding. If the funding sources run out, then the research project will cascade into some troubling intellectual, emotional and social places. Therefore, a quick PhD is of benefit to health and mental fitness, but also the financial present and future. There is so much material – that I respect - about work and life balance, and wellbeing. But the cost – the deep cost – of a long PhD is also clear.

3.9 How will you prepare for a post-PhD relationship with your supervisor?

A great supervisor can save a student years of enrolment, candidature and life. If the supervisor knows the field and can enable the student's academic literacies in reading and writing, years can be saved through the enrolment. Time is the most precious resource possessed by humans. If a supervisor understands and can apply the required standards of a doctorate that moves through examination, is able to read drafts at speed, and maintain the teaching and learning expertise to enable rapid improvement in research education, then that person can save students months, or years.

To create this reflexive and responsive culture, supervisors must continue to learn. Research transforms at speed. Research training is enabled by international Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and Scholarship of Supervision (SoS). Policies, procedures, theories and procedures for academic and research integrity, academic and research misconduct, have transformed. Indeed, Appadurai described the "social life of policies" (1986). What was an acceptable level of contribution to be an author a decade ago is now transforming and being regulated. The website Retraction Watch reveals the consequences of mismanagement of ethics, data, privacy and dissemination. To add one crucial example: the ethics encircling Indigenous knowledges and research are transforming the colonial assumptions of

methodology, epistemology and ontology. Co-design is gaining momentum and theoretical complexity. Postcolonial theory is transforming dissemination pathways and decision making.

A supervisor who is not current and careful in contemporary engagements with knowledge and ethics is wasting time. The student will have to supervise the supervisor, or advise the advisor. But relationships beyond the supervisor also matter. It is important to send the key emails and build Twitter links with colleagues around the world. A minority of academic posts are advertised, particularly without the career prophylactic of a head hunter. Therefore, researchers need to know the important people around the world, and they need to know us. The thesis matters. So do relationships. Each day, spend ten minutes building and maintaining digital links, particularly on Twitter and LinkedIn. Build a network that can enable new relationships and career pathways. Disintermediation matters, allowing new peers and relationships to be created (Brabazon, 2014).

3.10 How will you recognize your ending?

Relationships matter. The relationship with a PhD supervisor matters, and it is important to finish it effectively and well. This person can be useful for thirty years of a professional life. They can also hurt students and colleagues for thirty years. If possible, it is important to maintain a positive relationship, noting that a supervisor cannot accomplish or achieve everything for a career in challenging times, but they can do something. However, they can – and will – do nothing if the student breaches the relationship with unprofessionalism or disrespect.

Students in the final year of their thesis really matter, and their time really matters. Planning is a necessity, and it is the only way to move to a completion. Personal health is crucial. Professionalism with colleagues is integral to relationship building in the present and the future. Boundaries are necessary. A PhD supervisor is not a spouse or a friend. Relationships must be professional, decent, ethical and respectful. Care and decency are also required for professor staff. Administrators, or support staff, are crucial to a student's success. In the case of my PhD, it was the administrators – the professional staff - in a graduate school that enabled my thesis to be submitted and examined. They deserve respect, as do all colleagues, peers and friends who have enabled a candidature.

4. Conclusion

So many students are not receiving the supervision they desire or they deserve. The waves of redundancies and restructures have meant that supervisors are losing their university posts, and leaving supervisions, or being convinced to continue in an Emeritus or Adjunct role, completing the same tasks, without payment. This is neither right nor appropriate. But this instability has a consequence on students, as they demand service, care, compassion and time It is important to remember how many supervisors are fitting a free service around the responsibilities of the rest of their life.

I once heard a student describe themselves as a self-saucing pudding. To grow and transform independently requires a predictable and methodical mode of benchmarking and reflection that storying provides. There is immense pride of supervising ourselves. Overcoming adversity. Getting on with it. No excuses. No complaints. My experience in supervising myself has transformed my life. I never give up or acknowledged the version of my life that others imposed on me. I learned from my PhD to expect

poor behaviour from academics. Each day – decades later - I am not disappointed when it happens. I can fight hard and finish, often against the odds. In tough times, for international higher education, this is important knowledge, experience and expertise (Brabazon, 2022).

There is also another gift of being a self-saucing pudding PhD student. When I started my PhD, my supervisor used the usual ridiculous line that because he was supervising me, he had the right to be the co-author on everything I published, because he was the supervisor. I was incredibly young. I was not stupid. I knew that this claim was rubbish. I was also staunch that this was not going to happen. Because he disconnected and never read a word of it, and admitted he never read a word of it, I published from the thesis on my own. After it was examined, I published thirteen articles from that thesis, as the sole author.

This example is not the worst behaviour I have experienced in my career. My final story is about an education research master's degree. I wrote the entire thesis on my own, with no contact from the supervisor. As a courtesy, I sent the supervisor the thesis – the full and complete thesis – in which they had no role. This thesis became my book *The University of Google*, the monograph that made my career. The supervisor stated that she did not understand the title, as "there was no university of google." Even noting that she did not understand the title, she confirmed that she would be the co-author on all publications. This event happened 15 years ago. I was a full professor at the time. She made a major mistake. I reported her to her dean. I reported her to the DVC Research. She had no grounds for her authorship claim. The email where she confirmed she had not read the thesis, but was claiming authorship, became a moment of revision in supervision for the Faculty.

If we claim the right to be a self-made person, with our own stories to write, then we produce our own research. No one can take our research from us. Incompetent supervision gives us the gift of clarity, particularly in a tough environment for authorship. It is terrific if we have a great supervisor. They can write great references, open doors for jobs and publishers, and make the candidature a positive experience. Great supervisors are brilliant, amazing and change our lives. But many of us do not have that opportunity or chance to experience this excellence. Do not give up. We can supervise ourselves. Learn different skills. Take pride that we did not give up. Get on with it. This moment prepares us for the future of our universities. Use storying to understand – and make – your present and future

The gift of doctoral supervision is to be the teachers of future storytellers. Therefore, trust is a "currency" (Jiwa, 2011: 56). The relationship between a PhD student and supervisor is built from trust, as uncertainties can be negotiated. Trust is constructed over time, through iterative interactions. But if we can start with the end in mind while focussing on telling a strong story each day through our research, then the craft – as much as the art – of academic life can be revealed. The best PhD students assemble a strong SOCK (significant, original contribution to knowledge), but also understand what to leave out, and where to position the frame around the thesis. What beginnings and endings teach us, is that stories are all we have to leverage us to the future of higher education. PhD students are our future. Never question the meaning, purpose or value of doctoral education. PhD students are important. They matter, and will carry us to that future.

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