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Reasons for Doctoral non-completion; one non-completing Doctoral student's voice on limitations in the academic literature

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Abstract

Timely completion has recently been an important focus of academic literature on supervising Doctoral students. This paper is a reflection on the academic literature on timely doctoral completion by a former Doctoral student who has been a serial non-completer. This reflection explores whether academics' constructions, reported in the research literature, of the causes and symptoms of doctoral non-completion relate to this student's experience. The reflection concludes that there is a significant blind spot in the Doctoral non-completion literature. This blind spot relates to a possible mismatch between students' and academics' conceptions of research. In addition to this conclusion, the paper is a small exemplification of educators using their own autobiographies as learners as a method for critical reflection on practice. It also considers the possibility of developing this approach into autoethnography.

Keywords

Doctoral students; completion; concepts of research; autobiography as a learner.

Introduction

Timely completion has been an important focus of academic literature on supervising research students. Concern in this area has grown as funding requirements have become more stringent and have been linked to completion rates (Green and Usher, 2003; Ahern and Manathunga, 2004; Manathunga, 2005; Deuchar, 2008; Rodwell and Neumann, 2008; Green and Bowden, 2012; McCallin and Nayar, 2012).

As a Doctoral student myself, I missed several completion deadlines and had to make requests for several long extensions. In fact, I eventually took twice as long to complete as originally scheduled. While my Doctoral supervisor was supportive, insightful and helpful in every respect, with hindsight I believe I would have benefited from a firmer line in relation to timely completion. This firmer line was needed not in the form of refusing to support the extension requests but in terms of developing a 'completion mindset' (Green and Bowden, 2012) earlier during my progress as a student.

Methodology

Autoethnography is an approach to research that uses the researcher's subjective experiences as data (Denzin, 2014). In autoethnographic data analysis, these subjective experiences are related to the wider culture of which the researcher is a part. Autoethnography is a broad church with a diverse history. Different autoethnographers have different epistemologies and ontologies and use different methods for data generation and analysis. Although autoethnography is a broad church, I am not sure it is broad enough to claim with a clear conscience that what follows is autoethnography. However, this paper does use my subjective experiences as a (one time) non-

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completing PhD student as data to reflect on the academic literature on PhD completion. It also relates these subjective experiences to the wider sociocultural context in that it represents the voice of a (one time) non –completing PhD student rather than the voices of the academics (i.e. PhD supervisors) who dominate literature on this topic. The academics may construct the phenomenon of the non completing PhD student in one way but, as a former non-completing PhD student, I would construct myself in another way.

In the interests of openness and transparency, I need to declare that as well as a former non-completing PhD student, I am also an academic and a PhD supervisor (reader, I did eventually complete that PhD). So perhaps my claim to represent an alternative voice in the interests of democratic and participatory research is slightly suspect. However, in my defence I would cite Brookfield's (1995) work on reflective practice in education. Brookfield (1995:2) argues that the goal of reflective practice is 'hunting assumptions' in our practice that are preventing us from working in the most useful ways. One of the 'lenses' (Brookfield 1995:29) that Brookfield advocates for hunting assumptions is our own biographies as learners. By re-occupying our former subject position as a learner we can gain a different perspective on our practice from the one we habitually take as educators. This is one way of uncovering the socioculturally situated ways we have of making sense of educational practice. That is to say, we make sense of them one way as learners and another way as educators. So, in this sense, it is perhaps not too far away from autoethnography after all.

Why don't students complete doctorates on time and what are the signs of a non-completer? The views of supervisors versus the experience of a one time student.

It is frequently argued in the academic literature on research student supervision that it is beneficial to align supervisory styles with the needs of the student and that this alignment needs careful monitoring and regular adjustment (e.g. Gurr, 2001; Deuchar, 2007). This alignment of style to the needs of the students will be important in relation to timely completion as much as to any other aspect of the research process. However, reflecting on my own subjective experience as a student leads me to believe that the literature on timely completion has a significant gap in the models it constructs of aligning tutor actions with students' needs and that my own experience was situated in this gap.

Manathunga (2005) identifies early warning signs to which tutors should be sensitive to alert them that completion might be a problem. These are:

1. constantly changing the topic or planned work
2. avoiding all forms of communication with the supervisor
3. isolating themselves from the school and other students
4. avoiding submitting work for review

(Manathunga 2005: 223).

It is important to note that these are all behavioural indicators not conceptual as I will argue for later. It is also worth noting that they are all about avoidance. As a PhD student, I worked in a sustained and committed way on the same topic, I communicated regularly with my supervisor, welcomed contact with fellow students and was happy to submit work. So these behavioural early warning signs do not seem to fit my case.

Manathunga goes on to argue that students may conceal their completion difficulties because of areas they 'felt they would not or could not discuss with their supervisors' (Manathunga, 2005: 224). These include

1. personal issues
2. supervision relationship issues
3. research project issues
4. accessing the research culture

(Manathunga, 2005: 223).

By 'research project issues' Manathunga means lacking basic competence to carry out tasks necessary for the project. It is important to note that, just as the warning signs were all absences, these are all deficits. Reflecting on my experience, none of these were issues for me and none of these were the cause of my late completion.

Ahern and Manathunga (2004) focus on 'stalled' students. They conceptualise non-completion problems in terms of 'blocks' that may occur that prevent students from moving forwards. They locate these blocks in one of three domains: cognitive; affective; and social. They develop a series of flowcharts from this that are intended to help supervisors identify the exact nature and location of the block to assist in 'clutch-starting' the stalled students. Again, the problem is conceptualised as an absence of something happening and students at risk of non-completion are seen as inactive.

Johnson, Green and Kluever (2000) in their study on procrastination in doctoral students have a similar concern with students who are not moving forward. They identify three key sources of non-completion: procrastination; perfectionism; and fear of leaving the graduate school. Procrastination and fear of leaving the graduate school are clearly both forms of inactivity. However, perfectionism could be a form of industrious activity that is unhelpful. I will return to this point below.

Green and Bowden (2012) research ways to develop 'completion mindsets' in doctoral students. For the most part their approach is one that focuses on supervision procedure. They explain that:

In essence ...this means ... that every decision point, the candidate and supervisory team together calculate what would be the best strategy to ensure timely and successful completion, irrespective of any other influences

(Green and Bowden, 2012: 71-72).

However, one aspect of what they write has resonance with my own experience. They write that:

A completion mindset takes into account *the balance needed between timeliness and quality*. If such a mindset is not developed until late in the candidature, it is more likely that the two elements will be in conflict

(Green and Bowden, 2012: 72, italics added).

This focus on quality at the expense of completion could also be indicated by Johnson, Green and Kluever's (2000) identification of perfectionism as a correlate with non-completion. Perfectionism might result in delayed activity or inactivity. It might result in perpetually reworking one section of a Doctorate rather than moving on. Equally it might result in continued purposeful, focused activity (unlike the topic changing activity that Manathunga (2005) identified) that nevertheless prevents completion. So these two insights open up the possibility that non-completion could result from an overabundance of focused purposeful activity rather than inactivity or avoidance.

I indicated near the start of this paper that I thought that there was a gap in this literature in relation to models of non-completion. Part of that gap relates to the fact that most aspects of the models are based on absences or inactivity as indicators of non-completion. Self knowledge is a difficult

thing, but in my own experience I think my non-completion was a result of over activity rather than inactivity. The second part of the gap I have referred to relates to the absence of conceptually based explanations for non-completion.

Meyer, Shanahan and Laugksch (2005) report on postgraduate students conceptions of research. One of these conceptions is 'discovering the truth'. Lee (2008) bases her conceptual approach to research supervision on Brew's (2001) work on academics conceptions of research. Significantly, discovering the truth isn't one of the conceptions of research that Brew finds among academics.

I think my non-completion problem resulted from my conception of the process I was engaged in. I think my personal motivation became to discover the truth. Given the misguided nature of this pursuit, based as it is on the erroneous metaphysics of presence (Derrida, 1970/2001), the end result was that I became engaged in a possibly endless pursuit of an ever receding final grounding for the area I was working in. Green and Bowden argue that the completion mindset requires 'tunnel vision' (2012:71). In my case I had tunnel vision in abundance but it was the kind of tunnel vision that an eager terrier has chasing a receding rabbit through a never ending labyrinth of tunnels. My conception of research was the obstacle to completion. What I needed was to be encouraged to adopt a 'trading' conception of research (Brew, 2001) and to see that I needed to be engaged in producing not an ultimate truth but a product of given (and limited) dimensions and quality that could be exchanged for a qualification. This conception of research is found among academics (and, therefore, Doctoral supervisors) according to Brew but not among research students according to Meyer, Shanahan and Laugksch (2005). So in contrast to most of the solutions for non-completion in the literature I didn't need to start doing something, I needed to stop.

There is agreement in much of the literature on research supervision that tutors need to monitor the specific needs of students and adjust their supervision accordingly. In relation to completion, an overlooked area is that conceptions of research could create completion problems. Given the mismatch between academics conceptions of research and postgraduate students' conceptions, suggested by a comparison of the work of Brew (2001) and Meyer, Shanahan and Laugksch (2005), this means that part of that monitoring and adjustment could usefully be in relation to differing conceptions of research. Personally I have some scepticism, that the 'trading conception' of research is not held by any students. However, I believe it is likely to be more common among academics (for whom research is a trading commodity) than it is among students. This means that attending to conceptions of research early on in the supervisory process could be beneficial.

Conclusion

I believe this paper makes two relevant contributions to the study of higher education by practitioners. Firstly, it argues that understanding the different conceptions of research as a process and product that may be held by student and supervisor can help us in supporting students to avoid non-completion. Although differing conceptions of research held by supervisors and research students has been suggested as an important factor in the supervision process (McCormack, 2004; Kiley and Mullins, 2005; Meyer, Shanahan and Laugksch, 2007) this is an under researched area and is not sufficiently acknowledged in the academic literature that focuses explicitly on non-completion. I arrived at this conclusion by comparing my own subjective experiences as a PhD student with the academic literature on the topic. This revealed a difference of perspective between the subject position of these academics as supervisors and the subject position of a student. This is the basis of the second contribution that I think this paper makes. Practitioner research often involves reflecting on our own experiences as *teachers* in order to improve our teaching practice. However, practitioner research in higher education could be conducted more frequently through reflecting on our own biographies (former and current) as learners. This allows us to take a perspective outside of our current role and, therefore, to see the world in a different way. It is less common for

practitioner researchers to reflect on their own experiences as *learners* in order to improve their teaching. If we find this a fertile approach, we could perhaps develop this one stage further and use autoethnography as a method for reflecting on our practice and how it relates to the sociocultural context in which we work.

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