

How To Get Through A PhD Journey: A Personal Reflection And Experience

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Abstract

Being the highest degree programme in education globally, a PhD degree programme has the highest requirements which the candidate has to fulfil. Therefore, studying towards a PhD may be a very demanding, tiring and tedious experience for many candidates. One factor which contributes to a PhD being that challenging is that it is research-based and candidates are supposed to conduct it independently, with some guidance from research supervisors. In addition to that, some candidates may not have enough information on what is expected of them and, therefore, may not know how to approach it. This article is a reflection on a PhD journey and focuses on how the different aspects of a PhD research can be approached by PhD students based on personal experience with a PhD journey.

Key words: PhD, research, research problem, academic writing, voice, supervisor, feedback.

Introduction

Given that it leads to the highest degree in education globally, the PhD programme has the highest requirements and expectations from students. As a result, studying towards a PhD may be a very demanding, tiring and tedious experience for many candidates. One factor that contributes to this journey being daunting is the independent nature of the programme: being a research-based programme, the candidates have to do it independently with 'some' help from their research supervisors. This 'research loneliness' may leave the candidates in the dark regarding what they need to do in order to meet the universities' expectations which themselves are not always made clear (Hunma & Sibomana, 2014). This article is a personal reflection on a PhD journey and aims at helping PhD candidates and aspirants to know what awaits them and prepare accordingly. I also offer some hints on how certain challenges and difficulties can be dealt

with. Indeed, one way of helping PhD candidates to understand a PhD journey and its various aspects is to get the people who were there before to talk about what they went through and how they 'ate the elephant'. In this article, I will cover the following aspects: facing the new study requirements, identifying a research problem and writing a research proposal clearly, managing a PhD supervisor, growing from feedback and dealing with 'stuckness', types of support from the university, publishing from a PhD thesis and the role of PhD colleagues and friends.

Facing the unknown

Every PhD candidate comes to the programme with some information on what is required of them. Some may even come with a 'readymade' research proposal. However, I have noted that this information is not always enough for candidates to assess their abilities vis-à-vis what they need to do before the degree can be conferred upon them. Thus there is no doubt that candidates will face some unknown issues ahead. Nevertheless, this information, however limited it may be, brings PhD candidates to have various attitudes, hopes and fears towards the programme. For example, if a given candidate has achieved good grades in their previous studies they may have self-confidence that makes them think that they can easily succeed. On the other hand, they may have a low self-esteem if they assume that the new study requirements are beyond what they can manage on their own. Both a high level of self-confidence and a low self-esteem will inform and/or determine the candidate's work and expectations of the support they feel their university and research supervisor should offer in the PhD journey. Ultimately, the onus is on the candidate to make his or her way through the new and often challenging postgraduate study environment.

The best way to approach the new study environment is by trying to have an objective picture of one's own strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to one's studies. Objective self-evaluation is not easy because previous academic experiences may have given candidates a false perception of themselves. In any case, the candidates need to be emotionally prepared for a way which will not be smooth: along the way, they may feel that they are required to do too much, that their research supervisors and university are too demanding and/or they are not providing enough support, etc. Candidates may even think that they have made a wrong choice and may want to quit. If this happens to them they should not be very much surprised: it is a normal stage in the PhD journey. They need to look beyond these and keep their eyes on the ultimate goal of their initiative (Nsanganwimana, 2018)

One way to reduce the weight of the requirements and challenges is to find out what the dominant research discourses are within the new study environment by reading research reports, published work and theses which were produced by current staff and previous students of this environment (most of which should be available online). In case the candidates constitute the first PhD cohort in the institution, they should find out what and how things are done in other institutions because PhD requirements are more or less similar in different institutions. An extensive conversation with research supervisors may also be useful; it will help candidates to know what the supervisors expect from them in addition to institutional general requirements. It will also help to know the kind of support they will provide or, in other words, what they will and will not do for the candidates.

Identifying a research problem and conceptualizing a research proposal

The concept of a research problem is very central because, without it, the research is not worth it. However, candidates need to understand that it is not any problem that can be a subject of research, especially at a PhD level. The problem needs to be researchable, relevant and original though not necessarily new!¹ The key question is how to find a researchable, relevant and original research problem (Aslam & Emmanuel, 2010).

Choosing a research problem in order to start writing a research proposal is one of the first challenging tasks that PhD candidates have to do. The image that students have of a PhD degree as the highest degree brings many students to come up with a very broad problem which is not practically manageable. I recall a friend of mine who wanted to look at the use of English as a medium of instruction and its effects on learning in the East African region (Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania and Kenya). Convincing him to reduce the scope not to one country but to very few schools in two districts (not provinces) in Rwanda was not an easy task for his supervisors. When I chatted with him as he was analysing his data he said, 'I didn't know what I was talking about! Even what I have now is so challenging to analyse'. The lesson that what matters for PhD is not the width of the research problem but critical depth with which one engages with it is learned after so many hardships.

Once a focus is chosen, there comes a key element determining the success of a candidate and boosts his/her morale: research proposal writing. Being a concise and coherent summary of the proposed research setting out the central issues or questions that are to

¹ For more about originality in PhD research, see Sibomana (2016).

be addressed², a research proposal is a useful road map for the candidate. However, it does not come easy; it goes through ups and downs all of which provide lessons to candidates and help them grow. My experience with proposal writing was not very different: I wrote it and submitted it for examination but it was rejected mainly because the theoretical framework which I intended to use to frame my study had not been well chosen. I had to re-write it using texts written by a scholar whom my supervisor herself had difficulties in understanding (I will come back to this). This experience has taught me that reading, reading and reading finally lead to understanding.

It has been mentioned that PhD is a research-based study programme. As many candidates may know, the completion of a PhD means a completion of an original, extensive and relevant research project carried out in a methodical and systematic way. Thus, in order for them to be able to bring a PhD programme to the completion, the candidate need to be able to tell a layman the story of what he or she wants to research, where, how, with who and for who and why. One way to check whether the story is understandable is to write it and share it with a colleague or a friend and see whether they understand it; if they do not, then the candidate should be ready to answer their questions, give clarification and incorporate the answers and explanations in the new version of the story. It is this same story which will enable him or her to understand and make his or her *research problem* understood clearly. The ability to tell the story to a layman will enable the candidate to write a good research proposal, which is, actually, the same story but now written for academics, who will read and question every point which is made and the way it is being made, before they can accept it as an academic text.

Write clearly: how to get there

While I have found all aspects of PhD challenging, I have realised that the one of the top challenging tasks is to write 'academically' and make one's readers understand what one wants them to understand or make them understand things the way one understands them. As a number of researchers have indicated, a writing process is a recurring one going back and forth (Hedge, 1993) and the secret of good writing is in doing enough revision and editing work for one's own text. While I agree with this suggestion, I have found it difficult to revise and edit one's work: since the writer will tend to read from the mind. In this case, he or she may think that the text is understandable for an external,

² Retrieved from <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/law/courses/research/research-proposal.aspx>, on 26 November 2019.

which may bring him or her to miss some of the things which need to be fixed in order to make the text more understandable and meaningful.

Thus, a foreigner's eye on one's text is always useful. This time, it does not have to be a layman but someone who understands the area and can challenge what and how you are writing. Another PhD fellow, a former lecturer, a work colleague, etc. are some of the people who can have a critical look at your text and provide you with relevant feedback. In addition, candidates should try to read as many academic texts as possible to acquaint themselves with academic writing which, according to Zamel (1993) quoting Bartholomae (1986), is a particular kind of language which, according to Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint Martin (1994, p. 8), is 'no one's mother tongue, not even that of children of the cultivated class'. Indeed, research has indicated that the good readers make good writers (Daane, 1991; Weck, 2013). They should make it a point that they do not submit to their research supervisor a text which contains mistakes which could be easily fixed; it may misrepresent their abilities in their supervisors' eyes and give them bad impression that could influence the way they subsequently view the students' work.

Making one's own voice heard

Including the researcher's voice³ and making it heard in one's writing is another important element of research report, dissertation and thesis writing. In this regard, the candidates may wonder whether they have anything worth saying besides or about what renowned scholars in the field have written. If this feeling overcomes them, they may end up losing their 'self' in their work, taking 'references' as guidelines which they have to follow and agree with all the time. However, renowned scholars themselves disagreed on various points; they are engaging in debates on different issues from various and diverging perspectives in such a way that there is not one definitive perspective on anything. Thus, PhD students can also enter the debate and contribute their ideas and the research project gives them an opportunity to do so without fear as there is necessarily no 'right' or 'wrong' academic arguments. They should start making their arguments for and against some of these claims with valuable reasons. Before they realize it, their voice will already be evident in their texts. In other words, they

³ Voice is referred to as distinguishing between one's thoughts and words, and those of other authors (http://services.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/471298/Voice_in_Academic_Writing_Update_051112.pdf, 18 May 2018). This means having one's own thoughts beside those of others in writing.

should dare to be different (Sibomana, 2016). However, they should be aware that it may take time for them to be confident in doing so. Sometimes they will wonder whether their own voice is really evident in their texts because they cannot identify it.

How to work with and/or manage a PhD supervisor

The students who are studying towards a research degree always have a research supervisor from whom they receive assistance in dealing with the various aspects of research. Lelieveldt (2003) defines a research supervisor as someone who *helps* in writing a good dissertation. He or she assists in formulating the research questions, planning one's work, organizing fieldwork and experiments, and analyzing and interpreting the results. However, knowing the amount of help to expect from a supervisor is not always easy and may be a source of 'conflicts' between the two sides.

It was difficult for me to know what to expect from my PhD research supervisor. I recall my supervisor once giving him a book from which I had to identify the theories he needed to develop a theoretical framework for my PhD research. The supervisor said to me, "I think this scholar's theories can help you build your theoretical framework. However, his writing style is not easy to understand; I myself struggle to understand him. But go and do your best and see whether it can help you." This remark got me disappointed and surprised at the same time but also got me to think deeply about the kind of support I should expect from her. The thinking brought me to realise that I was the key player in the PhD research process and that my supervisor was just a helper who would intervene after I have got somewhere. Indeed, my supervisor always had more questions to ask than answers to give about my research, which helped me understand it better. From this experience, I came to realise that research belongs to the researcher (the student) and he or she is the one who knows best about it. Therefore, instead of telling their supervisors, 'please tell me what to do' PhD students should tell them, 'I want to do this in this way; what do you think?' In short, "students should not expect the supervisor to be a kind of headmaster who hands out orders and expects them to report back every week" (Lelieveldt, 2003). As this scholar continues, students will have to do the work themselves as they are responsible for the planning and progress of the project. Therefore, when they think that the supervisors are not helping enough, they should first check whether they have done their part effectively. If they find that they have, then it is advisable to discuss the supervisory relationship with their supervisors.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the student and the supervisor may not always be smooth; the two may have diverging views about certain issues and/or aspects of the PhD research or the way to engage with each other. I was lucky that my supervisor would always give her opinion about certain issues which we did not agree on but give me a liberty to decide. But this may not always be the case; some supervisors may 'impose' their perspectives to students because of various reasons. Without contradicting the fact that the work belongs to the student, I suggest that students need to comply because it is part of the supervisors' responsibilities to guide the student according to what they believe is appropriate. After all, supervisors are supposedly more knowledgeable in the area than students and, therefore, there may be good reasons for such decisions, which students may not necessarily understand at certain stages.

Things may become different and worse (maybe) when one has to deal with two or more supervisors who they have diverging perspectives on the thesis and, as was the case for Niyibizi (2018), it is not clear who is the main or co-supervisors. The onus is on the PhD candidate to find a way of striking a balance in the way they deal with their feedback and perspectives on the thesis. One way they could achieve this is to request for a meeting with all the supervisors at the same time, which could lead to a common conclusion and way forward (Niyibizi, 2018).

Dealing with inferiority feelings and growing from feedback

The first experiences with postgraduate studies and/or research may not match students' expectations, which may alter their feelings and affect their response. In my case, these experiences raised inferiority feelings, which would surface whenever I had to say or write something about or alongside what other scholars, including our supervisors, said or wrote. These feelings can be counter-productive, especially when they increase self-doubt and the fear of being judged. Before they write or say anything, students will always wonder whether this will not be another opportunity for the people who are listening to them or who will read their texts to judge them. As a result, the level at which they filter their ideas may increase and they may drop some important ones in the process.

Feelings of inferiority may not just cause PhD students to self-censor; it may bring them to have low self-esteem upon what they do. Low self-esteem may make it difficult for the students to think critically and have a productive outlook on comments, observations and viewpoints, which challenge their ways and work. Instead of being a source of improvement

for their work, these feelings can be stumbling blocks on the way. This can happen in two ways: they may uncritically follow all suggestions and comments as gospel truth. In addition to confusing them (as suggestions from different people may be contradictory), this approach is likely to limit their deep thinking. Alternatively, such suggestions and comments and questions may make them feel 'useless' and unworthy for the programme. For instance, if the supervisor says that he or she does not understand certain sections of their work they may come to the conclusion that these sections do not make any sense at all, or that the students' entire submission is worthless.

As postgraduate research students, PhD candidates need to understand that such comments and observations are part of a research degree process (and of life) and help them take their research to the next level. Instead of a protective or a submissive stand on feedback, they should find a way of chewing and turn it into nutrients for their study and research process. Nevertheless, coming to a point where they can chew and swallow these comments effectively does not come easy; it always takes frustration and even 'crying' moments. A careful reading of the comments and suggestions for deep understanding is one way to benefit from these. The more these are read, the more these comments make more sense to them. Students need to ask for clarification on these when they find that they are not able to address or respond to them adequately. In short, they may have to admit not knowing and then be ready to learn. They should never keep or return their draft to their supervisor or any other person who has made comments and/or suggestions to their work without addressing these. I did this on occasions with my supervisor's comments but I later realized that by so doing I was robbing my work of some quality, as well as my wasting supervisor's time spent giving me the feedback. These comments and suggestions could make a significant difference if they could be understood and responded to effectively. Indeed, when I received the examiners' report on my thesis, I noted that some of their comments and criticisms were related to my supervisors' concerns of the kind mentioned above. If you are PhD student don't be like me: be ready to ask questions no matter how 'stupid' they may appear, accept challenges and be ready to change your viewpoints and understanding if necessary.

Spending considerable time and effort in reading the literature related to their work is another way of making these comments and suggestions easier to chew. This practice will progressively build students' self-confidence. In my case, this increased my self-confidence to the point of taking 'risks'. For example, I decided to submit two abstracts for conference

papers, without seeking my supervisor's views as I had always done previously. These two abstracts were eventually accepted and related papers presented. Now, the two papers have been turned into a book chapter and a journal article which have now been published. This initiative and related fruits taught me that if you are a research degree student, you sometimes need to take 'a risk' of trusting your abilities; after all, there will come a time when you will work on your own as an academic and other people will rely on your assistance for their academic development.

'Stuckness': what to do about it

One other aspect of a research journey is getting 'stuck' from time to time. PhD candidates may sometimes reach a point where there seems to be a closed gate ahead and, therefore, they cannot move forward. This could be a result of various factors including failure to understand a concept or a theory which they need to build on in presenting subsequent ideas and claims; not being able to find a way forward after exhausting all they have to say and yet feeling more is needed; not knowing where to start in order to start discussing a new aspect or topic and inability to understand their supervisor's comments and suggestions and/or to know what to do about them. As much as being stuck may be a challenge, my experience brought me to view it as an indication that some progress as being made: you have moved from point A and have come to point B and in the process of getting to point C, you are stuck. Being stuck can also be a source of inspiration and a trigger for deeper thinking.

In trying to unlock the closed gate, I have discovered that the key may not necessarily be in the particular section or aspect one is stuck on. Stopping working on the section or aspect for a certain period of time and working with what one is more comfortable with at that time is one way of dealing with any 'stuckness'. Working with other sections or aspects will sometimes give hints which will help understand the issues in the section one is stuck on. All sections, aspects, concepts and theories of a research project are related to one another to various extents. I have also noted that it is difficult to think creatively and thoroughly the moment one gets stuck, which is likely to prevent some alternatives and perspectives from surfacing. Leaving the section or aspect for a while in order for it to 'ferment' in one's head is another way of dealing with 'stuckness' which may often be fruitful.

At times when one is stuck, they can share their work with fellow students. Since all are facing the same challenges, they may understand each other better in both formal and informal

conversations about their studies. For instance, when I was grappling with understanding what a theoretical framework is I overheard and then joined a conversation between two fellow PhD students about this particular concept. This conversation made things clearer for me because the colleagues could use their respective topics as examples. Along with informal conversations, students can also benefit from taking part in conferences and other academic forums for continuously shaping their research. PhD students should not just be passive participants; they should throw their ideas in, inquire, question, friendly criticise, correct, and explore. They need to be ready to share their work with others in such forums no matter how inadequate it may seem to them. They need to remember, it is through comments, observations and criticisms that their work gets improved and this is the best place to get the most relevant of these.

The support from the University

Different universities provide their PhD candidates with various types of support which can include one or more of the following: a PhD supervisor, PhD scholarships, PhD seminars, conferences funding, academic writing support (such as writing retreats and writing mentor/consultants), publication fees, etc. The more the types of support the university provides the easier the life and work of its PhD candidates becomes. My university provided students with carrels as a working space, a personal computer and a shared printer. It also provided them with regular opportunities to present their work in PhD workshops and get feedback from various categories of people including fellow PhD candidates, university lecturers and other scholars. In addition, the university provided students with funds to attend, and present papers in, conferences in and outside the country/continent if their conference papers have been accepted. I remember that the first conference which I attended was funded by the university, and this led to my first publication. Moreover, the university would pay publication fees for students' whose papers have been accepted for publication.

In the final year of their PhD completion, candidates could apply for a PhD completion grant to help them with the final stages such as paying editors, printing, and meet some other expenses especially because many exceed the completion time agreed by their sponsors. On top of this, the university had different types of scholarship available for PhD candidates in the different faculties. In short, I can say that my colleagues and I had privileges which many PhD students in other universities did not have. Nevertheless, candidates need to make the best use of whatever support is available in their universities and try to find other sources of

support for what the university does not cover. For instance, they can use their own income to pay for conference attendance, editors, etc.

Publishing from a PhD thesis

Universities require (or at least encourage) PhD students to publish from their theses. This is a daunting experience for many because completing a thesis itself is challenging enough. Thus, without support from the university some students may never publish. In my case, for example, had I not been supported and encouraged by my PhD supervisor to submit a paper from my MA dissertation for a conference, it would have been difficult for me to enter the publication world. She helped me from the inception of the paper to the last version which was published: she proofread my drafts, helped me understand and address reviewers' comments and advised me in various ways. Furthermore, the university always organized PhD seminars whereby established scholars would cover the different steps and aspects of academic writing and publication, including turning a PhD thesis chapter into a book chapter/academic article. This boosted my confidence and competence in academic writing and brought me to a stage where I could conceptualize a paper and have it published. As a result, publishing from my PhD thesis was not very difficult for me. However, this kind and level of support may not be available in all universities for all PhD students.

One important stage of the publishing process is dealing with the response on the submitted manuscripts. When the manuscript is rejected, the students may feel disempowered especially when it is their very first submission. It may bring them to seriously doubt their ability to publish and, eventually, affect their readiness for subsequent submission. However, students should understand that the rejection may not necessarily be due to the inadequacy of the manuscript itself but to other factors as well. For example, it may be due to a wrong choice of the journal/issue. After all, some articles that are rejected by some journals get to be published by others. In addition, it is unusual for a manuscript to be rejected without the reviewers giving their feedback which can be used to revise and improve it for submission to a different journal. For example, one of my manuscripts was rejected by two journals, but I improved it at every rejection using the reviewers' feedback. When I submitted it to the third one, it was accepted with revisions.

On the other hand, a manuscript may be accepted with major revisions which vary in types: revision/change of the theoretical framework, addition of data or going more in depth with

analysing these, adding some literature aspects, change of structure, etc. In short, some revisions require as much work as writing the article anew. Thus, this may be challenging for the students because by submitting a manuscript they may have thought that they were done. But the bottom line is that publishing is another way to learn. Thus, by responding to the reviewers' recommendations and suggestions the writers are not just satisfying the requirements of the journals/publishing houses; they are also deepening their understanding of various concepts and theories in the area. Thus, both a rejection and acceptance constitute learning opportunities.

The role of PhD fellow colleagues

According to Vygotsky, knowledge is a social construction: it is developed and learned through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and human cognition and learning are social and cultural rather than individual phenomena (Kozulin et al., 2003). As Johnson and Golombek (2011, p. 2) argue, learning "originates in and emerges out of participation in social activities", which suggests that social contexts play a central role in learning. However, it is noteworthy that some learning programmes encourage social activities and involvement than others. Research-based programmes (such as PhD programmes) are among those which give little room to social interactions because students generally work on their projects individually. Thus, PhD candidates in different university departments and schools need to increase the opportunities of working together by establishing communities of practices which will sustain mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998).

With the current technological progress, the contact between members of the communities does not necessarily need to be physical; it can also and especially be virtual because PhD candidates may not be working from physically close contexts. Different media can be used to this end and they include Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, etc. A community like this will benefit PhD candidates in several ways. Since the members are going through the same process and, possibly, facing the same challenges, they can understand one another best. Thus, it is a place where people can share their confusions, frustrations and weaknesses and ask any questions without fear of being judged. As has been pointed out, the members are bound by the engagement to one another and this helps them to grow. For instance, if there is a Facebook group to which a student belongs and where people post different things related to the group's practice, it is uncommon to find a member spending weeks without posting

anything. In this way, the mutual engagement keeps everyone active, which implies progressive work (or at least thinking) on the PhD project.

By reading about the challenges which different people are facing, students come to understand that they are not the only one finding the programme very difficult and challenges may be normal for the programme. This is likely to boost their morale. They will learn from one another's challenges, failures and successes and they will benefit from one another's expertise. For instance, if a group member is an expert in statistical analysis, he or she can help those who are struggling with this kind of analysis. Members can also share resources such as references and data collection materials (such as audio and video recorders). Finally, they also celebrate together because one person's achievement is a community's achievement. For instance, when one member has submitted their thesis, it gives hope to the rest that one day they will also make it. At the university that I attended, the connection between PhD students was facilitated by the fact that they had carrels in the same space. This provided them with opportunities to interact and discuss the various aspects of their work and thereby encourage one another in different ways. Thus, universities (and students themselves) should increase the opportunities for PhD students to meet regularly both formally and informally.

Bid farewell to social life?

While studying towards a PhD degree, students remain social (and maybe professional) people: they may have job responsibilities, families to take care of, friends to socialize with and some other social and professional commitments. All these social and professional fellows may not expect less attention than they used to get from the PhD students before registering for a PhD. If anything, they may want to see the students not changing because they are doing a PhD, to make sure that them being PhD candidates and, subsequently, PhD holders does not mean that they no longer belong to the community. So how do they balance these two sides? In any case, they are the master of it all. Thus, they need to understand that while doing a PhD requires a constant focus, taking a short 'holiday' from it and engaging in social activities for a while actually may make a difference regarding the progress of the PhD research. It refreshes the mind by releasing it of tense and routine activity and offering an opportunity to think about and work on something different. Therefore, they should go to church, sing in a choir, do sports, attend weddings and birthday parties, take you family or friend(s) out, visit relatives, or go to a night club if that is convenient for them. Nevertheless, they should not

improvise these activities; the latter should be built in their plan and allocated time which has to be respected. Moreover, academic and social lives should not impact on each other negatively. For instance, if a student decides to go and share a drink with friends one weekend, they should make sure that its effects are not carried over the next day: they need to drink responsibly. Even in a pub, they remain a PhD candidate.

Conclusion

Doing a research degree is a journey which may not be easy to take. It goes through ups and downs, all of which have important lessons. A 'fall' is not necessarily a sign of intellectual weakness and/or a premature end of the road but an occasion to rise and take another step forward. PhD students need to view any event or incident as an opportunity to learn something which will help them push their work ahead. They may fall and find that they need to take a different direction when they rise. Therefore, they should be ready to be criticised and challenged and, eventually, change their viewpoints if necessary. All they need is to objectively assess and believe in their abilities, and use these as such with a determination to make them work no matter how difficult the task which lies ahead may be.

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