Living in Liminal Space:

The PhD as accidental pedagogy

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PhD

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AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD Degree
II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
III. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree.
IV. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree.
V. this thesis meets the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.

Signature: …………………………………………………………………………………………………

Name:……Mary-Helen Ward ……

Date: …………………………………………………………………………………………………

I have included a list of all publications informed by my work on this thesis as Appendix 7.
Abstract

The journey of development that researchers and scholars take within the institutional framework of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Australia has, in the last thirty years, attracted the attention of both academic researchers and bureaucrats, and a small but diverse body of literature is the result. This thesis is an attempt to reflect on this literature in the context of a research-intensive university and in the light of PhD student experience.

The student experience was captured by blogging; the students involved in this research kept blogs, and also read and commented on each other’s blogs, for eighteen months. My analysis of the resulting text is framed by the notion of the liminal space occupied by people undertaking PhD study, and asks how and what they might learn in their study. Although students may encounter a well-structured approach in parts of their development as a researcher, much of what they encounter and learn from is almost entirely unstructured. This leads to their learning often being accidental.

As I have been a PhD student while I have been researching the PhD experience, and was an active member of the blogging community that generated the data, this study is deeply reflexive. I have used ethnographic methods to research and situate the experience of doctoral students in Australia. As well as textual analysis of the participants’ blogs I conducted interviews with key informants in the University community. I also analysed both institutional and government documentation and practice relating to the degree, along with the literature on the PhD in Australia.

Student voices have not often been heard in the literature about PhD in Australia. This thesis is based in the reality of what PhD students experience during their candidature and on the demographics of the student body nationally. It also takes into account academic, disciplinary and institutional cultures, institutional realities, and how government policy plays its part in shaping the development of individual scholars.
Acknowledgements

This thesis has been a work of love. I have enjoyed almost every minute of the time I’ve spent on it, largely because I have been so well supported.

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Inger Mewburn (@thesiswhisperer) has proved to be an unexpected friend, an inspiration and a cheerleader. My supervisors Judyth and Peter had crucial input into my key ideas, and their comments on my drafts have been invaluable. The late Alison Lee kindly contacted me after I had mentioned her on my blog to discuss my work and continued to take an interest in it.

My key informants, academics and administrators at the University of Sydney, shared their insights into the working of HDR study at Sydney, and helped round out my understanding of why things are the way they are.

My participants, of course, provided the key threads of my narrative, and formed the basis for my thinking about how and what we learn when we do a PhD. They were open and generous and have continued to show support in the years I have been putting this thesis together.

Finally, my partner Sandra has constantly listened, supported, challenged, argued, cooked, washed and ironed, and organised so much that has made my life simpler through all of the seven years. I have no words to describe her contribution to this thesis.

‘Michael’, one of my key informants, said:

A thesis has to tell you something you didn't know before you started reading it. It could be something you might have guessed or imagined, but you didn't know what the answer would be.

I hope this thesis does that for you, its reader.
"Your Boat Your Words" (Northland, N.Z., January, 2010)

Your boat, they will tell you, 
cannot leave the harbor 
without discipline.

But they will neglect to mention 
that discipline has a vanishing point, 
an invisible horizon where belief takes over.

They will not whisper to you the secret 
that they themselves have not fully understood: that 
belief is the only wind with breath enough

to take you past the deadly calms, the stopped motion 
toward that place you have imagined, 
the existence of which you cannot prove

except by going there.

--Pat Schneider

Posted by Melonie Fallick (@qui_oui on Twitter) on her photo blog Panoptikai, 26 July 2011. Photograph and poem used with permission.
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Notes on presentation of data

In keeping with my contention that PhD students occupy a liminal space in academia, any text that contains a student voice is presented with a pale grey background. Each student entry is introduced by an icon and a title that indicates its source as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of post</th>
<th>From my public PhD blog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[Or]</td>
<td>From my private blog (not open to readers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title of entry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of post</th>
<th>Participant blog: [Name of participant]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of entry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of post</th>
<th>Public blog: [Name of blogger]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of entry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of email</th>
<th>Personal email: Name of sender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Text that is marked with this icon contains transcription from a recorded interview with a key informant. These key informants were all academics at the University of Sydney who had some responsibility for the administration of doctoral students at the time of interview. They all had experience of being supervisors.

Two final points about the data:

- the blog entries are presented as they were written, except for editing to preserve anonymity. Spelling mistakes and other minor errors are intact. Interview data was coded directly from audio files (not transcribed).
- in the presentation of this data I have not included audible pauses (umms and ahs), and have sometimes removed material that would enable identification of the speaker.
Project participants as we began

Period of blogging: June 2006 to December 2007

Usual enrolment in an Australian PhD is six to eight full-time semesters. Many participants experienced a mixture of part-time and full-time enrolment over several years.

Grainne
A qualified professional who sometimes works part-time, and also casually as a research assistant in her faculty. She entered PhD straight from her Honours year. Her blogging begins in the second semester of her full-time enrolment. Her supervisor has just gone on six months’ study leave, and appears to be uncontactable.

Kylie
A qualified professional who has been working part-time on and off both inside and outside the University throughout her enrolment. She entered PhD straight from her Honours year. Her blogging begins at the beginning of her eighth full-time semester of enrolment, and she plans (perforce) to submit her thesis by the end of that semester. Her partner is also a PhD student.

Debra
An American married to American, Debra is a prolific creative worker. She has struggled with migration matters throughout her candidature, and is enrolled full-time due to those restrictions, although she also works long hours – she and her husband run their own business. She begins blogging in the fourth semester of her enrolment.

Esther
Esther is a health-care professional who worked for several years before undertaking a Masters degree and then a PhD. She works at various jobs, including travelling for a professional organisation, during the project. She is in the fourth semester of her enrolment when the project commences.

Jules
Jules joined the project in its last months, when she was in her fourth semester of full-time enrolment.

Marg
Marg is a health-care professional who joined the project early in her part-time enrolment.

Dawn
Dawn works full-time in teaching support at a university. She is much older than the other participants, and the project commences at the beginning of her third semester of part-time enrolment.
Introduction

I think the most exciting moment in my project came when I realised that the participants were reading each other’s blogs and leaving comments. This wasn’t unalloyed joy – apart from anxiety (what if they don’t get on? what if they hate each other? What if one starts trolling and causing strife?) – I had also felt irritation that we’d experienced some trouble logging in (my background on an eLearning helpdesk came in useful). But the excitement of seeing my participants create text that told their stories and shared their wisdom, their pain and their joy over many months has been both a satisfying and a humbling experience.

* * * * *

The journey of development that researchers and scholars take within the institutional framework of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Australia has, in the last thirty years, attracted the attention of both academic researchers and bureaucrats. Scholarship on the PhD in Australia has ranged from investigations of the idea of the doctorate using poststructuralist framings of identity; a substantial body of work (including an ARC-funded project) on the process of thesis examination; and output from an ARC-funded project that began with the demography of the PhD cohort and included two PhD projects. There have also been management-based discussions on the subjects of quality, benchmarking and the value of the PhD to the federal government that funds it. A few thoughtful philosophical publications question assumptions made about students. Many of these discussions, both published and unpublished, can be found in work presented at the bi-annual Quality in Postgraduate Research conferences (QPR) since 1994.

What is written at the end of an ethnographic study, say Vidich and Lyman, should be “an integrated synthesis of experience and theory” (2000, p. 62), and that’s been a goal for me as I’ve worked on this document. My perspective is, on one hand, very personal and micro-level. At the same time as being a PhD student I’ve been a university administrator who has an understanding of management, strategy and funding in higher education at my institution. I’ve become a researcher who’s read most of the history and theory about the Australian practices being enacted in my study, and has a view on these texts. I have Masters degrees in both English and Women’s Studies, which have provided skills and perspectives that also inform my judgement, and the roller-coaster process of writing a thesis isn’t new to me.

The mission of the postmodern ethnographer is to “disprove[e] all received texts and established discourse on behalf of an all-encompassing scepticism about knowledge; also replace[e] certainty with contingency” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000) p. 60. I read many texts in the process of writing this thesis: theoretical articles about doctoral identity, pedagogy, and curriculum; government policies; historical articles about doctoral study; university policies and committee reports, and supervisor training materials; publicly available blogs written by PhD students; and of course the blogs of the students who participated in my study. Many of these presented challenges to many of the others; I had to keep reminding myself that my task was to keep returning to the student view, that it
was the story of doctoral students I was telling. I became certain about one thing: no matter what students are told or may believe, nothing is certain about PhD study; virtually every aspect of it is uncertain and contingent on many factors – some unknowable or difficult to discern.

In an early article on the [lack of] conceptualisation of a pedagogy of PhD in Australia, Kamler and Threadgold point out that “the microcontext of relationships is never separate from the macropolitics and relations of power.” (1996, p. 51) Eight years later, writing for a special issue on PhD examination in the *International Journal of Educational Research*, Morley (2004) comments on “the complex micropolitical factors that … frequently disrupt rational processes” (p92). Lee and Boud, making a case for investigating the PhD as a social practice, point out that policy in this area of education is based on “a rather thin conceptualisation of what the doctorate is and what it does.” (2009, p. 10). They also call for more studies focused on the lived experience of PhD study, as do Peseta and Brew (2009). It is the aim of this thesis to reveal some of these micropolitical factors and the microcontexts of relationships, in the context of the macropolitics, relations of power, and apparently rational processes that operate in the lived experience of the PhD at the University of Sydney, and to set them in the context of the discourses that exist around the PhD in Australia: theoretical, political and managerial.

The original contribution to Australian research into the PhD of this thesis is that it presents the lived experience of candidates within the framework of their institution and government policy. Despite all the theorising, thinking and writing on the PhD in Australia, no study has thus far followed and tracked a group of candidates for a period of more than a year, perhaps because until recently there was no easy way for a group of candidates to interact and share their experiences as they happen, at a time that is convenient to them, and for those discussions to be easily captured. The development of software that supports the real-time online recording of events as they are reported, a process originally called web logging but colloquially known as blogging, has made a longitudinal study of this kind possible. My PhD project began by providing each one of a small group of PhD students with a blog, and asking them to keep it updated as regularly as they could, and also to read and comment on the blogs of others in the project. These blogs continued to run for eighteen months, when most of the students spontaneously ceased writing for a variety of reasons. This data provided real-time narratives of student development, which, along with interviews with key informants at the University at which they were enrolled and a study of that University’s documentation, informed my thinking about how students experience their PhD.

The structure I settled on was to present the bulk of this thesis as a detailed literature review of theory, policy, practice and experience, organised on a curriculum model that will be detailed in Chapter 1. This addresses one of my research questions, ‘What is said about the PhD in Australia?’ Real lived accounts from students, supervisors, and administrators are interleaved with this literature review to address my other research questions: ‘What and how do students learn while undertaking a PhD at the University of Sydney?’ and ‘To
what extent can PhD candidates be sustained in their development as researchers through the use of blogging?

Like Jim Cumming in his PhD thesis Representing the complexity, diversity and particularity of the doctoral enterprise in Australia (Cumming, 2007), I was aware of the dangers of presenting ‘thick description but thin explanation’ (Maton, 2006, p. 11) – as one of my supervisors said waringly at one point early in my draft writing: “No-one gets a PhD for presenting moving quotations”. I use the words of student bloggers to point up the lived experience of being on the fringes of academia, of serving one’s time to become a full member of this elite club, or, more commonly now, of enduring for a time an academic life one does not wish to live forever, that one is only inhabiting in order to receive the degree and return to a professional career. Along with the words of supervisors and administrators whom I interviewed, I use the (chiefly Australian) academic literature back to 1985, along with policies and other public documents of the University and the Government that largely funds the PhD enterprise, to provide the context for the student experience, with the contradictions, frustrations and impenetrable confusions that can be part of the process for many candidates.

The increase in research and literature on the PhD in Australia over the past decade may or may not be played out in management changes at any individual institution. The biannual national meetings of senior University staff concerned with the management of the PhD in Australia (forming the organisation called Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, or DDOGS) might increase the effect of zeitgeist and the sense of a nationally coherent institutional view of PhD matters. However, as research or literature is rarely cited in policy documents, it isn’t clear to me what part theoretical writing has played in effecting policy change, and interviews with staff with responsibility for PhD matters at various levels at my University didn’t really clarify this – except negatively, as many of them seemed to have little or no idea that these theoretical discussions are taking place. What is clear (and will be discussed in Chapter 3) is that changes in government policy (with accompanying changes in funding) have been the biggest levers for change in the management of Australian PhD candidatures since the late 1980s.

This thesis does not make a claim to providing answers to the problems that arise at the level of the individual student and their supervision. Unsurprisingly, the greatest amount of published and unpublished material on the Australian PhD has been on the supervisory relationship, supervision being the “primary pedagogical technology” of the Australian PhD (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000; Lee & Green, 2009, p. 2). Cumming (2007) points out that “…the deeper one probes the doctoral enterprise, the greater capacity there is to understand and appreciate its [the enterprise’s] irreducibility” (p. 67). The continuing strength of this relationship increases the difficulties for an institution that must manage its candidatures within its human and financial resources. There will always be a tension between a manageable universal model of candidature that an institution holds up as the ideal, and the reality of individual supervisor/student relationships that are, as a further complication, conducted within strong disciplinary contexts.
This thesis reports on a study that is, perforce, a small one – it is only a PhD. But, apart from Jim Cumming’s and Kevin Ryland’s PhD theses (Cumming, 2007; Ryland, 2007), published student experience has generally been reported only in the context of the supervisory relationship of the supervisor or the institution. There have been a small but important number of PhD theses (Grant, 2005; Knowles, 2007; Owler, 1998) that have investigated relations in the supervisory dyad, and these have added to the sound of the student voice in the literature.

This silence of students has been noticed and commented on for more than a decade, as will be discussed later in the thesis. While there is a natural wish for administrators to minimize or erase disruption, discontent and even the triumphing over what sometimes feel like overwhelming obstacles in the completion of a thesis, that does not explain the almost total erasure of the voice and presence of students, and also of awareness of difference and diversity in the student body in Australia, in both government and university policies and practices in relation to PhD, until very recently.

Two key concepts run through this thesis, reflected in its title: the liminal space that HDR students occupy in academia, and the accidental nature of the learning that occurs during candidature. The rest of this introduction will be occupied with explaining why these concepts appealed to me as ways to present the student experience of PhD in Australia.

**Why liminal space?**

A liminal space is usually understood as being a recognised, socially or psychologically significant and identifiable state, during which a person is moving between two other identifiable states. It is often used by anthropologists to describe rites of passage, most notably by Victor Turner, who expanded its use to Western societies – building on the earlier work of van Gennep in the study of symbolic ritual in indigenous cultures (Turner, 1969). In short, the person who inhabits a liminal space has only the cultural status deemed appropriate for them to have in that space; they have neither the status they had before they entered that space, nor have they yet attained the status they will have when they leave it. They are in a sense ‘between worlds’ and they must leave the liminal space when they cross the threshold of a new phase of their life (for PhD this means graduation or discontinuing enrolment). When you’re in a liminal space, you know that you don't know, but you don't know what you need to know. It’s a state which moves at its own pace, regardless of how much planning or work you do, because it is not a product of a rational plan (although having a rational plan may help you negotiate it). You will continue to inhabit this liminal space until you have worked out what it is you need to know in order to cross the final threshold. Only you will know what this will be, and no one can achieve your goal for you – although people may help, and there may be guides available, none will contain the complete answer.

But end it must: “a PhD candidature is a precarious achievement” (Mewburn, 2011, p. 10), and the chief characteristic of a liminal space is that it is not possible to stay in it indefinitely; by its nature it is temporary – although it may last for years it must inevitably end one way or another. Some other examples of
liminal spaces in our society might be pregnancy (moving from non-parent to the status of ‘mother’ or from ‘mother of one’ to ‘mother of two’), or convalescence after injury or serious illness (which may then involve a range of new statuses as, for example, ‘cancer survivor’ or ‘disabled person’).

Liminal spaces are contingent products of the culture in which they are situated; they will vary from time to time and place to place. An example of a liminal state which has changed its significance in our society is engagement – once denoting a state between single (virginal) and married, existing so that a couple might ‘get to know each other’ in preparation or their entry to the married state, but now carrying a different meaning due to the widespread acceptability of non-time-limited de facto relationships. The status of ‘engaged’ has not disappeared; it now means ‘intending to legally codify our already existing sexual and domestic relationship’, rather than ‘intending to enter a new socially-sanctioned sexual and domestic relationship’. Adolescence has long been recognised as an important liminal space in Western culture; in other cultures it may carry much lesser import.

Applying the concept of liminal space to the period of PhD candidature has enabled me to look at ways in which PhD students are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). The status, rights and responsibilities of a ‘graduate student’, ‘PhD candidate’, ‘HDR student’, or ‘PhD student’ may vary from one institution to another1, but in Australia it means the state between ‘not doctor’ and ‘doctor’ – ‘doctor’ being a permanent state which brings status and membership of an elite group of people even if it does not, in itself, guarantee employment, wealth or fame. To be in this liminal space in Australia means that you are assumed to be chiefly engaged in the task of writing a thesis, which reports the original research you have carried out.

The concept of liminality also gave me a way to discuss induction and orientation to candidature as a formal way of acknowledging entry to the liminal space, and also a way to think about its ending (whether by completion or by abandoning the degree) as the transition from the liminal space – a transition that many students seem to find difficult.

I do not mean, of course, to limit PhD students’ identity by assigning to them the characteristics of liminality: in addition to their candidature PhD students may be employed by their institution as research assistants or tutors, or as full-time staff members – academic or non-academic. And students may, of course, also be parents, siblings, adult children, carers, partners, employees of other organisations. However, given the nature of Australian PhD candidature, which persists for years without strong ritual signs of progress or visible outward markers such as examinations or changes of subjects over semesters, liminality

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1 I have not used the North American term ‘graduate student’, because in Australia institutions now offer a wide range of vocationally-directed post-graduate degrees by coursework. To distinguish these students from those undertaking research degrees, I have used both ‘HDR student’ (which means Higher Degree by Research student, and includes those doing Masters degrees by research) and, more specifically, ‘PhD student’.
provided a useful framing for thinking about the status of PhD candidates and for understanding my participants’ experiences.

In one sense the liminality of PhD students is potentially serious. One student who was undertaking a ‘funded’ PhD told me that when her supervisor ‘loaned’ her to a lab at another university some years ago and she had an accident there, she discovered she was not covered by existing policies or procedures concerning health and safety or the WorkCover insurance scheme, so was responsible for her own treatment. SUPRA, the postgraduate student representative organisation at Sydney, has found that students’ liminal status can present a structural problem when students approach them to report supervisor bullying:

The only bullying resolutions … cover staff and affiliates, not students. The University’s general resolution complaints processes … for ‘non academic grievances’ and ‘resolution of problems’ procedures for supervisory difficulties… are not robust enough to [ensure] that bullying complaints will be dealt with effectively and they will be protected. (Cardinali, 2010, p. 18).

In these cases the students’ liminal state puts them at risk of harm in situations where they have little or no institutional power.

Turner also postulated that a social grouping of persons or groups in a recognised liminal state – or indeed a whole society which is in a liminal period – could create a condition he called “communitas”, characterised as an “unstructured or rudimentarily structured … community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (1969, p. 96). I’m not sure whether supervisors, Deans of Graduate Studies, Heads of Department and other academics whom students may encounter during their enrolment could be described as ‘ritual elders’, but it is true that PhD students are inclined to assign an inordinate amount of power to their mentors and supervisors. One key informant reported that she was “absolutely sick of climbing down off the pedestal that students seem to want to put me on”. (Susan, experienced supervisor and former faculty administrator, Health)

People all over the world who are engaged on the work of a PhD do feel some kind of camaraderie or fellow-feeling that would fit Turner’s notion of ‘communitas’, despite the differences that might exist in both the kind of discipline they are working in, or in how the degree is structured, remunerated or examined in their country. International online forums such as PhinsheD.com (see Budd, Seevak, & Cantwell, 2010 for a discussion on student interactions there) provide ample evidence that this kind of connection can be formed. A forum called “PhD procrastination: A group for PhD students who should be writing their thesis/dissertation but would rather be knitting” that I moderated for four years at the craft website Ravelry² has shown me that interaction can provide support and practical advice in many situations – and that those situations may be remarkably similar in any country. Events such as the

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² Ravelry.com is an international website with free membership. It has more than three million members worldwide (March 2013); there are more than 700 in this particular forum.
retirement or unexpected departure, illness or even death of a supervisor, adviser or chair of their committee; ‘writer’s block’; boredom with the subject of the thesis or dissertation and fear of completion are examples of the international fellow-feeling that I have seen fruitfully discussed in that forum.

Similarly, the web-based strip PhD Comics (Cham, 1997-) (PhD here stands for Piled Higher and Deeper) has been a resource for PhD students to recognise themselves, laugh (often somewhat ruefully), understand something of their shared status and simply feel part of something more than their own project. Kelly (2009) offers an extended discussion of the supervision metaphors employed in this enduring comic strip – the first publication was in 1997 and it is still being published regularly. Its writer, Jorge Cham, supported himself by writing the widely syndicated strip while he completed his PhD in biomechanical engineering, but instead of moving into the world of research and industry he has chosen to become a professional graphic short story writer on the subject of the PhD experience – displaying perhaps the ultimate resistance to leaving the liminal space which had sustained him mentally, physically and financially for several years. Cham talked at the University of Sydney in September 2007 to a full lecture theatre.

Interactions between Australian PhD candidates were explored by Barnacle and Mewburn (2010) using Actor Network Theory. They explain what I am calling ‘communitas’ as “scholarly identity distributed and com[ing] to be performed through … informal sites of learning.” (p. 433) Mewburn (2011) took this analysis further, demonstrating that the cultures of complaint that are evident whenever PhD students congregate are “surprisingly effective ways for PhD students to negotiate and manage the precarious process of ‘becoming academic’ within the contemporary academy.” She calls PhD Comics “one practice for assembling a scholarly self”, and uses the ‘troubles talk’ framing from psychological and counselling literature to demonstrate how the conversations that occur on forums associated with the comics allow students to make sense of and rehearse their present and future roles in academic culture. Mewburn (now the Director of Research Training at the Australian National University) has also encouraged student self-problem-solving, has provided information to support students’ development of a clearer understanding of what a PhD means through her blog The Thesis Whisperer (Mewburn, 2010-) to which I have been an occasional contributor (M.-H. Ward, 2010b, 2012, 2013).

Within the blogging project that informs this thesis, communitas was demonstrated almost every day – as you might expect. In a sense the whole project was an extended living demonstration of how communitas can work for people in this particular liminal space. The following exchange, for example, was begun by Kylie (whose partner is also a PhD student). It provides a clear demonstration of how communitas is working as an emotional framework to underpin our experience.
The devastating lows...

There is a bit of an 'in joke' in our house, where we refer to 'the dizzying heights and the devastating lows' of PhD research. We invoke this phrase often when things are going badly or we are feeling a little glum about our research, to remind us that those feelings are all part of the journey, and are equalled out by the joyous moments of triumph you experience when things go right.

This week, however, has been a new low. A most devastating low. Getting ready to go on this holiday has brought on feelings of depression (I haven't done enough work), anxiety (I need to do more work, and fast!) and fear (I'll never be able to finish all this when I come back...there's just not enough time). Just add regret and guilt (I should never have planned this holiday), and stir.

In anticipation of your kind words, can I preempt them by letting you know that I am inconsolable. Where others have tried, you will also fail. But, I am going to see if the process of writing this out helps nonetheless.

Grmph.

Comment: Grainne

Oh, Kylie....and here I am, logging in because I'm about to write something very similar! I think part of it is the nature of the thing - so big, so amorphous. Try to be kind to yourself. I wish you luck. Take heart, don't give up. (Why are consoling words always cliches?)

Comment: Kylie

There is a certain logic at play when PhD students talk to each other about their experience I think. Here I was, feeling very unconsolable. But Grainne has said she is feeling the same. So the logic goes - Grainne feels the same way I do, but I KNOW Grainne can get through this, so therefore I must be able to get through this. Logically, feeling awful bears little relationship to performing awfully.

Still...I won't put away that box of tissues just yet.
Comment: Dawn

Not to try and console you - but you will try and really enjoy the holiday, won't you? Think about coming back refreshed, rejuvenated, ready to get back into it. Fantasy is good for the soul. :)

Comment: Grainne

I think it's also good, Kylie, to realise that no emotion is the final one. I remember someone asking me how I felt about doing a PhD, and I said, "Great today, ask tomorrow for a different response!" It often is like that. There are days when you think you'll never get it done, there are days when you feel brilliant. (And neither of those feelings is often really related to your output - I have had lazy weeks where I feel so confident, and productive weeks when I feel like a pretentious wanker who can't bloody well write!).

I know you can get through it. Maybe not today, but what you'll probably find is that after awhile of writer's block etc you'll realise that there were so many things that you actually were doing, thinking etc subconsciously. And soon you'll sit down and begin to write and it will make sense. And you won't quite believe what I'm saying until it happens.

Sit tight. It will.

Comment: Kylie

Thinking about what I was going to post made me actually identify the range of feelings that I was running through. We all have 'low points', but I think it is really helpful to single out whether you are feeling depressed or anxious, because they are really two different feelings stemming from different kinds of pressures.

So writing it down helped me because it forced me to name my demons (and in doing so yell, 'be gone!'). And also when I post I do sometimes try to get a bit creative or infuse a little humour into the stories I tell or the feelings I describe, so in that sense the blog post is like a Riddikulus charm of sorts (know your Harry Potter, people - boggarts represent our worst fears, and are defeated by thinking about them as being funny and laughing at them).

On the whole though, I'd have to say that this time the thesis crisis (no accident these words are so similar!) was tougher than the norms, and the blog only provided a brief reprieve.

On another occasion, Grainne shared her feelings about the positive aspects of doing her PhD.
Comment on blog: Grainne

Esther, that is so reassuring! I'm glad you can see how much I care about all this, because sometimes I fear it doesn't come out the right way...it's so easy to talk about the annoying times as opposed to those moments where you feel you've crossed some amorphous threshold, and you feel like a character in a book, shouting out: "This is the moment..." They are few and far between, I suspect, but that's part of the point.

Why accidental pedagogy?

“Accidental pedagogy” is a phrase that seems to have been first used by US educational theorists McGee, Carmean and Jafari in their book *Course Management Systems for Learning: Beyond Accidental Pedagogy* (McGee, Carmean, & Jafari, 2005). They took accidental pedagogy as their theme to explain how many academics use a Learning Management System (LMS), their thesis being that learning that happens in LMS sites often occurs purely by chance rather than as the result of any intention of academic staff.

The dearth of well-developed pedagogical theory on the PhD in Australia, as discussed by Kamler and Thomson (2008) among many others, does not of course mean that students’ experiences have not always been pedagogical – if we understand pedagogy to mean “how and what we learn” (Lusted, 1986, p. 2). Lusted insists that pedagogy is important because “as a concept it draws attention to the process by which knowledge is produced” (p. 2; emphasis in original). The vast majority of the pedagogical events and experiences that I’ve identified in my participants’ blogs – and those that Cumming (2007) extracted from his case studies – were not planned by the university, the AOU, the supervisor or the student: they ‘just happened’. An accident is something unexpected: you fall over, or fall into, or fall under; you trip, or trip over, or trip up. It can be minor and leave no long-lasting ill-effects, or it can result in a major life change. The first definition of accident in the dictionaries on my shelf is a negative concept, although all of them report more positive meanings as subsidiary. They might, perhaps, fall into the category that Bernstein calls ‘implicit’ – except that they, are, by their nature, outside the framing of any “official pedagogic discourse” (Bernstein, 1999, p. 271), being more random and quotidian and, well, accidental.

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3 Academic Organisational Unit, eg Department, School, Faculty or unit in which the student is enrolled. This concept will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

4 Collins: chance, misfortune, mishap; non-essential quality

Oxford English Dictionary: unexpected, undesirable event, causing injury or damage; chance or fortune (we met by accident)

Macquarie: undesirable unfortunate happening, casualty, mishap; unexpectedly, without design, by chance; non-essential circumstance, occasional characteristic (adj) happening by chance or accident or unexpectedly; non-essential, accidental, subsidiary.
So, in the context of this thesis, accidental pedagogy is the learning you might fall into, or fall over, fall down, trip over, or bump up against – with results (fortuitous or disastrous) that were not intended by the designer. In the case of PhD candidature the ‘designer’ can be taken to be the institution, the relevant AOU or the supervisor, depending on the context. I am not implying that because a pedagogy is accidental it is not fortuitous: it wouldn’t be possible to eliminate the accidental in PhD pedagogy because of course research itself is messy and unpredictable. However, I do think that students might find the process of completing a PhD less mystifying if their institutions were able to describe the process more coherently.

In the absence of a planned, conceptualised, intended pedagogical relationship (or, indeed, anything approaching a curriculum) at the heart of PhD candidature at any institution in Australia, accidental pedagogies may be the norm. In my interviews with academics at Sydney who are concerned with the progress and administration of the PhD, some were unable to clearly describe their personal pedagogical approach to supervision, let alone articulate a pedagogical position adopted in their AOU, discipline, or in the University more generally. Many (although by no means all) looked bemused and even discomforted when asked, “When you think of supervision, what metaphors come to your mind?” Even my secondary question “What words describe supervision for you?” did not always elicit a response. I will discuss these responses in more detail in Chapter 4.

It was amazing how often, when I described my blogging project to academic staff, they immediately (and perhaps slightly defensively) asked “Are you going to interview their supervisors too?” When I said I was not – in fact in most cases I deliberately did not find out who their supervisors were, as I knew many university staff through my employment, and did not wish to read the blogs with any prejudice – I was told, sometimes very clearly and even forcefully, that my project would be incomplete without the stories of the ‘matching’ supervisors. One person even said “Students will tell you anything.” The notion that the stories of (presumably adult) students might form a complete narrative of experience seemed very hard for some people to accept. I did consider not using the word ‘students’ to describe the people who are undertaking PhD studies, but nothing else (candidate) seemed exactly right, so I compromised with ‘HDR student’. I continue to believe that use of the word ‘student’ does set up an expectation of ‘acted on’ behaviour, and one of my participants spontaneously commented on this.

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Comment by Esther

21 September 2006

There's an element of not being taken seriously when you are a student, isn't there? 'Of course you're doing fine' (there there, pat on the head ... you haven't quite finished it yet and you're not a real academic until you do).

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5 Despite the growing use of the phrase ‘PhD program’ in Australia, I doubt that many institutions could produce the outline or detail of such a ‘program’ on request,
Institutions may wish to conceptualise the process of doing a PhD as a rational, managed set of steps (a ‘program’), and may even present it as such in their marketing literature, processes and procedures and in their discourses around supervision and examination; students and to some extent supervisors and examiners tell another tale. Theorists have expanded on some of these ‘gaps’ in conceptualisation. Gilbert (2009) explains official university statements about the purpose and content of a PhD as a “touchstone” (p. 58) – meaning statements that can act as a starting point for the planning of actual programs at a departmental level, as an attractant for prospective students, and as a quality statement against which actual programs can be measured and evaluated. However, Cumming comments on the “… sizable gap [that] exists between the PhD guidelines one finds on institutional websites and manuals, and the messiness that the conduct of research inevitably entails” (2007, p. 71). The pedagogy of PhD, says Grant (2005b) is “elusive”, “messy and unpredictable” (p. iii) – in short, what students learn is rarely what they expected to, or what could have been predicted: it is accidental, unexpected, unplanned and happily, in most cases, fortunate.

Finally…

This thesis doesn’t claim to be a definitive account of anything, least of all the process of doing a PhD. It is a reflexive, ethnographically-based account of the experience of some people who were enrolled in a PhD at the University of Sydney in 2006 and 2007. This account is contextualised in the deeply traditional and yet (as we shall see) strangely unstable setting of the University with its faculty and central structures, and also in the confusing and contradictory history of federal government funding for research training in Australia since the mid-1990s. The themes of pedagogy (how and what students learn) and the liminal space occupied by PhD students in academia - and to some extent outside of it - will be referred to and revisited throughout, along with example of the micropolitical factors that are an inevitable part of PhD candidature.

To finish these introductory remarks, and to set the scene for the following chapters, I turn to Malkki, who points out that “[The process that is] the critical theoretical practice of ethnography is typically long, often meandering, inescapably social and temporally situated.” (Malkki, 2007). With that in mind, I have set out to uncover some of the contradictions of PhD processes in Australia.
Chapter 1 – What do I mean when I say...

In this Chapter I will discuss some structural issues underpinning discussion about the PhD in Australia and the key ideas that will be expanded as the thesis develops. I will also explain the decisions I made about its structure.

Higher Education and the PhD in Australia

Like university sectors worldwide, there is hierarchical segmentation of Higher Education institutions in Australia, based on a complex mix of historical factors, research output and institutional income. It may be that the government reforms that began in the early 1990s have made this segmentation particularly strong in Australia (Marginson, 2005). The eight most research-intensive universities are called the Go8 (for the Group of Eight): the University of Sydney, the oldest university in Australia, falls squarely into this category.\(^6\) The research undertaken in these institutions is broad-based, valuing arts, humanities and social sciences as well as sciences, health, technology and business. The second major grouping is the Australian Technology Network: newer and sometimes having been transformed into universities from technical institutions following Government reforms to Higher Education in the late 1980s, they are now heavily engaged in the high-cost, high-return cutting-edge technology-based research that is valued by neo-liberal governments, including both the present (Labor) government and its (conservative) predecessor. Finally there are those that make up a new grouping: the hopefully-named Innovative Research Universities group, many of which were newly-created by Government in the 1960s. These last two groupings make up the so-called ‘second tier’ for research outputs; so-called ‘third tier’ universities are not generally closely aligned with each other. Even well-respected institutions like Macquarie or Deakin remain unaligned, although some are linked in teaching provision through a loose organisation that coordinates distance education called Open Universities Australia.

The notion of awarding a doctorate as the highest examined degree spread from Germany in the late 1800s to the United States, and the first doctorates were awarded in the United Kingdom in 1917. However, the PhD did not become established in Australian (and New Zealand) universities until after World War II. So it was not until the 1980s that the numbers of PhD supervisors who had themselves done a PhD in Australia became sufficient to trigger the development of an ‘Australian way’ of thinking about the PhD\(^7\). Certainly, this view is backed up by the publication record: the first publication on the PhD in Australia seems to have been Nightingale (1984a), who was concerned about how examination was being conducted, and also that “Rates of progress of research students in different degree programs [at one University] suggest that some students may well lack adequate information about the extent of their task as postgraduates.” (p. 137) This publication was followed by Connell (1985), who suggested that conceptualisations of the PhD by supervisors were

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\(^6\) The oldest five of these are called the ‘sandstone universities’, referring to the material used in their first nineteenth century buildings, which were based on the then-current model for universities in the UK.

\(^7\) This was suggested by Steve Dinham, in a conversation in 2005. (See Dinham & Scott, 1999, 2001)
inadequate. These concerns, as we shall see, are still being discussed very widely in the literature nearly 30 years later.

The articulated aim of PhD programs worldwide is for candidates to create an original piece of work – the concept of originality will be discussed in more detail below. There are two basic models for ‘doing a PhD’ internationally. The coursework+dissertation model is used in North America and in some universities in Asia – and has been used in some European countries, although this is changing due to the Bologna Accord, which is pushing universities towards a thesis-only model following a course-work masters. The thesis-only model is still used in the UK (although the Bologna model is gaining ground there) and some other Commonwealth countries (but not Canada, in which the US coursework+dissertation model is followed). The basic Australian model for the structure of a PhD is essentially the thesis model: a research project carried out and reported in its disciplinary context in a thesis document, with the work done over several years under supervision from one or two staff members who themselves have a PhD – a one-to-one or few-to-one tutorial model. This thesis forms the major (usually the only) work for assessment, and this assessment is done by a board of up to three examiners, at least one (and usually two or more) of whom are not employed by the institution at which the student is enrolled.

Most Australian Universities match students to one or more (usually at least two) supervisors; a few have a supervisory committee structure that is more like the North American committee advisory model. Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) felt that the traditional model of the scholar, ‘always-already’ autonomous and building their knowledge through reading and “the primary pedagogical technology – the supervisory relationship” (p. 136) – was no longer viable in Australia, given the then-rapid increase in PhD enrolments (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). They asked what alternative pedagogical models might emerge and become established at universities, but ten years later the answer is still not clear – a point that will be expanded throughout this thesis. Given this general lack of program-level planning and pedagogical theory in the understanding of PhD in Australia, the way that institutions orient students to and support them through their degree is, as Pearson (1999) predicted, still often largely managerial. Chapter 4 will present an overview of how the University conceptualises and manages the PhD process. How this managerial approach plays out in practice will be the subject of Chapter 5.

A major factor in the confusion around PhD work in Australia has been misapprehension about the size and shape of the PhD cohort. Government figures released in January 2012 reveal that 62% of the people who were undertaking research degrees in Australia in 2010 were over 30, and 40% of them were studying part-time. (Both these percentages are steadily rising over time.) Tellingly, 45% of them had come to their study from full-time work (so they are not young students who have experienced little outside the education system), and only 35% (a figure which is dropping over time) have come directly from previous study (DIISRTE, 2011). These figures are crucial to

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8 An interesting contrast is provided by Leyton-Brown (2008), who describes Canadian PhD studies as “overwhelmingly pursued on a full-time basis” (p. 117). He continues in terms that,
understanding how the PhD is understood in Australia, and implications of these demographics on policy and practice will be discussed in various places throughout this thesis.

Before I leave this brief overview of how the PhD is understood, I will mention several indications of confusion about what exactly one can be awarded a PhD for in Australia. Within the framing of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level 10 (AQF, 2013, p. 13), universities have the task of setting their own rules for what they expect from a PhD candidate. However I have often observed elision in understanding and discussion between three things: the research project, the thesis, and the ‘doing’ of the doctorate (which encompasses both but signifies much more). I would like to briefly consider two occasions on which I witnessed this elision in discussions.

First, there has been an increase in discussion in Higher Education circles in Australia on the subject of the ‘thesis by publication’ (see Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010b). Lee (2010) puts forward a clear and persuasive argument with strong pedagogical foundations for the inclusion of this kind of thesis in the range of thesis types that students might choose from and institutions support. However, it is clear that many people who are currently espousing it in their institutions do not have such a sophisticated notion of either pedagogical theory, or of the process of doing a PhD. In a roundtable discussion on the subject of ‘thesis by publication’ at the HERDSA’ conference in 2011, people from different institutions reported many different models of a ‘thesis by publication’: it might consist of three publishable papers, or five. It might require an introduction and conclusion to tie the papers together into a single piece of work, or an exegesis (discussion of how they came to be written), or not; it might require that the papers be accepted for publication, or be submitted to a journal, or simply be of publishable standard; it might or might not require that all the papers be written within the period of enrolment. Sometimes these rules varied between AOU in the same institution, even though the degree was to be awarded by the institution. Almost without exception, it was pointed out by an astute participant in the discussion, most of the discussion was focused on reporting the doing of the project being undertaken, not on the knowledge created in the thesis that was being written. A similar discussion at the QPR conference in April of 2012 centred on the problems raised by a thesis ‘by publication’ that contains works contributed to by other authors – permission must be sought from all of these authors, along with a statement confirming that the student’s contribution to the paper is at least 50%. In this discussion, one participant expressed surprise and great concern that students might be publishing on their own.

Also in 2011, I attended a two-day symposium, Doctoral writing in the visual and performing arts: Challenges and diversities, sponsored by an ARC-funded project Writing in the academy: The practice-based thesis as an evolving genre. There was much discussion about how disciplines such as dance, music, while acknowledging that the student is a “mature adult” (p. 121), discuss students very much as subject to process rather than as independent agents.

9 Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, a peak body for the scholarship of learning and teaching in Australian universities.
painting, sculpture or film-making might meet various University rules for the PhD. Some of these rules include strictures such as: 10% or 25% or up to 33% of the final submission could be in a medium other than text; or, there will be no submission of anything other than a thesis or exegesis – this latter word raised a lot of hackles, as some people felt that the artistic work should be judged at least partly on its own merit; and that the written explanation, description or justification for the project should not be privileged over the project itself. A senior administrator at the University had already mentioned these issues when I interviewed him.

*Michael, senior central administrator, Creative Arts*

My own take on that is that the creative arts are not the same as knowledge. People say “It's all knowledge - it's creative knowledge”. But an artwork is a fundamentally different thing from a piece of knowledge. You can see them as the same. But to me there's a useful distinction to be made between knowledge and artworks. You value an artwork for its aesthetic value - its beauty or its resistance to beauty or whatever. Whereas you value a treatise - a piece of scientific knowledge - because it tells you something about the world. The artwork does tell you something about the world, but to me it's the beauty that's the essential aspect. If someone produces a thesis in physics, someone can come along the next year and produce a thesis that supercedes that. So every scientific thesis can be disproved. But you can't disprove an artwork.

Many of the arguments I heard at that symposium seemed to be rooted in the ‘forced marriages’ that occurred between Colleges of Advanced Education and Universities in Australia in the late 1980s (more implications for the Australian PhD of these mergers will be raised in Chapter 3). Many staff in these ‘new’ disciplines felt (and clearly still feel, and they may be justified) that the Universities, on the whole, made no concessions to their value-systems, and simply expected them to conform to traditional standards. Again, my impression was that there was ongoing confusion between the project (which might be the creation of a painting, music composition, dance performance or film) and the knowledge created that must be captured explicitly in some way, and that many arguments were foundering on that lack of clarity. One point was continually made: that the practice-arts-based disciplines are ‘special’ because they ‘make things’, and the things that they make should be able to judged as part of the examination of a PhD. However, people in engineering and other applied science faculties also ‘make things’ as a PhD project, as do people in many other disciplines. Although, to pick up Michael’s argument above, while you can’t disprove a mechanical device, a cell culture or a drug, you can assess it as fit for its purpose, which you can’t do for an artwork. However, the Dean of the Sydney College of the Arts (part of the University of Sydney), in closing the conference, made the categorical statement that “The work of academia includes the production of scholarly texts”, and my interview with a senior policy manager at the University backed this up quite clearly.
Desmond, science, senior central administrator,

What we need to do is ensure that while those elements that make it characteristic of that discipline are not suppressed, the presentation that's brought forward for defence of the proposition that ‘I'm worth a PhD’ actually contains an assessable demonstration of the scholarship. So in essence plonking the sculpted bust on the desk and saying 'here it is guys' doesn't cut it. There's got to be some narrative at least that goes with it that establishes why this is seen to be an important development. What's the research, how is it located within its disciplinary space time and history; what's the innovative step here; how does this advance that particular discipline. ... You've got to know what you did, and articulate it in forms that peers can assess and talk about. [eg of chemistry PhD] They could just put the vial for the new chemical on the table and say 'here it is, take it away' but instead there's a traditional expectation that the steps that lead to that, an assessment of its value and importance, will all be part of a substantiated narrative. So if we specify that in very broad terms as the forms - in other words there's a reasoned argument put forward - and if we specify the form as an original contribution to knowledge - in other words it cannot be trivial - polishing the edge of a well-known area is unlikely to get a guernsey - then we've posited what the outcome of a successful PhD program is. And it's a pretty high ledge that we're asking our students to reach.

This Symposium on writing in the creative arts was organised by a group of academics who had a ALTC\textsuperscript{10} grant to investigate the Australian doctorate in creative disciplines (see Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2011) and was attended by several Deans of Australian creative arts faculties as well as many academics in the creative and performing arts. Taken with the earlier discussion at HERDSA, I was left with the impression that universities in Australia might need to conduct more discussion within and among themselves to increase their clarity of thinking about what it means to gain a doctorate. The recent Australian Quality Framework (AQF) documentation (AQF, 2013), which will be discussed later in this thesis, may be a trigger for this process.

**Academic Organisational Unit (AOU)**

As discussed above, when students enrol in a PhD in Australia, they expect to be working closely with at least one member of academic staff, usually called their ‘primary supervisor’. This relationship is commonly, indeed virtually universally, acknowledged in the literature as key to the success of their PhD.\textsuperscript{11} There will often be two or more academics involved in each student’s candidature as supervisors, and, in some institutions, there will be a supervisory...

\textsuperscript{10} Australian Learning and Teaching Council, at that time the major funder for research in learning and teaching in Australia. Since replaced by the OLT (Office of Learning and Teaching)

\textsuperscript{11} Interestingly, Lovitts (2001, 2005), writing on the US situation, identifies the strength of the academic culture of the AOU as the most important factor for PhD success.
committee, perhaps chaired by the primary supervisor. The academic unit in which this primary supervisor works is usually understood by the candidate to be ‘where they are doing’ their PhD, and in this thesis I will refer to this as their Academic Organisational Unit or AOU (see Cumming, 2007). This may be a level of the University’s organisation that relates directly to the central administration, or it may be a smaller, more local unit.

Cumming (2007) talks about the role of the AOU, whether designated as a Faculty, College, Department, School, or Research Centre, as playing “a significant role in supporting doctoral candidates” (p. 110). He quotes Gumport (1993), who describes the AOU as the “intellectual, social and administrative home” (p. 285) of a student and their program of study, but points out that the relationship between students and their AOU is not well researched – nor is the role of the AOU in candidature. Later in this thesis I will discuss what students in my study understand the role of their AOU to be, and reveal some of the discussions in which the University is presently attempting to understand (and manage) the role that AOUs play in candidature.

The AOU does not, necessarily, represent a simple disciplinary grouping. Pearson (1999a) considers the relationship of discipline to department to be problematic; certainly at Sydney the relationship between an AOU and a discipline may be extremely difficult to explain or rationalise. For example, the Department of Media and Cultural Studies (which is essentially two disciplines, each with their own history and literature), is at present12 in the School of Philosophical Enquiry and History, which is in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences – the largest in the University. There is another School in that Faculty called the School of Language and Culture, which does not have the word ‘culture’ in the name of any of its departments, and there is also an interdisciplinary Digital Cultures Program based in the Faculty’s School of Media, Arts and Literature. The Department of Anthropology, which might be understood as having something to do with the study of culture, is in a fourth School, that of Social and Political Sciences. In another example, on the Faculty of Science web pages there is listed both a School of Biological Sciences, and a School of Microbial Bioscience (the latter closely aligned with the Medical School which is in the completely different divisional grouping of Health). The Faculty of Science web pages also list as being within their bailiwick eleven ‘disciplines’, many of which are primarily taught in other faculties or divisional groupings, such as Engineering, Agriculture or the Medical School. (Some of these listings in the sciences result from the recent push to trans-, cross- and multi-disciplinary research and teaching.)

This confounds the view of Golde (2005), who happily conflates the concept of ‘department’ and ‘discipline’ in her discussion of PhD student attrition at a US university in the 1990s, claiming that a “department is the local manifestation of a discipline” (p. 671). Trowler (2012a), on the other hand, debating the notion of disciplinarity from a variety of perspectives, feels that “fluidity characterises disciplinarity across the world” (p.11), adding that, despite all the discussions

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12 At time of writing (mid-2012) a discussion has begun on a reorganisation of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The present structure has had a somewhat organic development history.
over decades on the notion of disciplinarity, academia finds it a remarkably
difficult notion to interrogate or broaden. He feels this is because of its
territorial nature (which he canvasses in some detail); disciplinary identity is
often rooted in local struggles over and between disciplinary epistemologies for
legitimacy and status – a struggle over essentialist definitions that might now, in
the light of new debates about the nature and purpose of knowledge, be seen as
pointless.

All of these discussions are, of course, of little or no interest to many individual
students, but the way that a student understands their role in their AOU, and that
of their AOU within both the institution in which they are enrolled and the
discipline in which their work is framed, can affect the progress and the
outcome of their degree process. It becomes particularly important when a
student is still considering enrolling for a research degree, particularly if
they are not familiar with the way their chosen university is structured. Sydney’s
Supervisor Connect website (discussed in Chapter 4) may help new students,
but, as we shall see later in this thesis, enrolment in their area of interest with a
well-matched supervisor can still be largely a hit-and-miss process.

Originality

One of the key ideas underpinning a PhD thesis internationally is that it must
make an original contribution to knowledge. For example, in the USA “…the
PhD is awarded for doing independent research and making an ‘original
contribution’ to knowledge.” (Lovitts, 2005, p. 137); in the UK “The one
specification common to all universities was that the candidate’s work must
provide an original contribution to knowledge to be worthy of the award of
PhD” (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000, p. 169); in South Africa “The candidate is
required to … make a significant and original academic contribution at the
frontiers of a discipline or field.” (Harrison, 2010, p. 11). Writing in the
Australian context, Peseta and Brew (2009) attempt to give some guidelines for
deciding on ‘originality’ in a PhD thesis, based on Cryer (2000) and Delamont,
Parry & Atkinson (1997), usefully breaking the concept down into originality of
research topic, research processes and research outcomes.

However, Tinkler and Jackson also point out that what is meant by ‘originality’
is not defined in most examination guidelines and is a concept that is broadly
debated in the academic community more generally; it is, they say “…a slippery
and all-embracing term and one that academics interpret in diverse ways.”
(2004, p. 117). Indeed they cite Cryer’s evidence that a thesis that is “highly
original” (Cryer, 1996, p. 197) may encounter difficulty in the examination
process. This would seem to be supported locally by Lovat, Monfries and
Morrison (2004), who found that examiners tended to be more comfortable
with the familiar, and correspondingly less generous than might be expected with
highly original work. Holbrook and Bourke (2004b) and Lovat, Holbrook, &
Bourke (2008), reporting on their major funded project into PhD examination in
Australia, found that even experienced examiners may find it difficult to
celebrate the ‘new knowledge’ they encounter in PhD theses.

Additionally, the nature of ‘original knowledge’ itself is not always well
understood, even within a discipline. While Tinkler and Jackson (2004) suggest
that an appropriate ‘level’ of knowledge in a PhD thesis might be that it would be publishable in a journal in the discipline, there is sometimes a tension between the goal (overt or covert) of ‘reproduction’ within the discipline (achieved through appropriate training within that discipline) and the development of a creative and critical thinker. Certainly, some of my key informants felt that the recent emphasis on ‘research training’ was resulting in less emphasis on ‘original work’.

Desmond, science, senior central administrator,

Across a diversity of disciplines such as this University encompasses... what is the definition of the PhD that speaks to all those different cultures? We've hung our flag for the moment on this idea of an original contribution to knowledge - that's the short form of the argument - and envisaged the scenarios that this might play out on these different cultures. I think in the experimental sciences that's pretty straightforward. In the humanities, again, there's going to be some sort of narrative that will demonstrate the scholarship, the research, and identify the contribution in forms that allow it to be assessed by peers.

I think what we've come to is an understanding that, in disciplines that are normally characterised by performance - and this ranges from jewellery design possibly through to engineering and architecture (notice that people who construct bridges don't do replicated experiments) what we need to do is ensure that while those elements that make it characteristic of that discipline are not suppressed, the presentation that's brought forward for defence of the proposition that 'I'm worth a PhD' actually contains an assessable demonstration of the scholarship.

This discussion about originality cannot be easily separated from my earlier points about what should be examinable in a PhD, and how the thesis relates to the project. The changing understanding of knowledge – what it is, how we acquire or develop it and how it is understood to be expressed – is across all disciplines in different forms and will be discussed further in Chapter 3. One of my key informants summed up the relationship of research to knowledge and the University’s role in this knowledge creation, very astutely.

Michael, senior central administrator, Creative Arts

PhD is how disciplines reproduce themselves; this is both negative and positive. They can't just be reproducing endless facsimilies of the supervisor, because the nature of the knowledge is constantly changing.

...The other aspect of the PhD: Universities need to be constantly aware of the positive and negative sides of their credentialing processes; make sure they're always serving the right processes. It's important that the PhD focuses on the fundamentals of expanding knowledge. The nature of academia is it often takes that knowledge and dissects it down into almost infinitesimally fine details, so that yes, you're creating a new bit of
knowledge, but it has no significance, or something like that and that's always, in a way, the problem with being an academic, because we live in the world of expanding knowledge; we've moved so far beyond the period where one person can even within a discipline hold all the knowledge within a discipline. We've become... it's the old dilemma between the specialist and the generalist.

But I think that's an issue that we also need to keep holding on to: PhDs should not only produce original [work] - I think I said significantly original - the significance needs to be there - that's a very important check so that academia doesn't descend into navel gazing too much - and I think that academics need to be responsible about this because they're always pilloried as ivory tower people who are obsessed with abstraction and those of us who work in academia often feel that's unjust. It's important that people investigate philosophical issues and people investigate pure maths - whether or not it's found to have a practical application - sometimes it's later found to have a practical application; sometimes it's not though.

In one publication from the extensive Newcastle project, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, which closely inquired into how PhD theses are examined in Australia, Lovat, Holbrook and Bourke conclude:

… the study has illustrated the need for further defining and refining of the notions of ‘originality’ and ‘creativity’ that underlie the doctoral regime. If it could be argued and demonstrated that the examination scripts in hand do not in fact represent a ‘technical’ and ‘negative’ genre but are true and authentic estimations of the levels of originality and creativity being displayed, then the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the doctoral regime is not working in fact to produce the new knowledge purported of it. In turn, this would lead to querying whether, in an era that has seen ‘doctorateness’ transformed from a relative rarity to a veritable industry, with funding-related pressure on universities to move candidates in and through to completion in minimum time, the PhD has in fact been tamed of its ‘wild side’, namely those more creative and original contributions that might extend the duration of candidacy and be seen as riskier propositions at examination time.
(2008, p. 75)

This quote is one to which I have devoted much thinking time. I think that it is important because it puts its finger on the disquiet that I have felt when reading about all the work that is being done to better ‘manage’ the process in Australian universities – particularly in the proceedings of the QPR conferences. Despite attempts at ‘rationalisation’ of the process of doing a PhD, students still ‘do their time’ in a liminal state; because the whole point of the PhD is that yours is unique, and you have to figure out for yourself the way you will do it.

Further, Cumming (2007) suggests that there is no clear ‘best’ way to ensure that PhD candidates are being inducted appropriately into disciplines – i.e. being
trained to work within a discipline while also producing work that is original within that discipline. He suggests that it is necessary to find a “middle path” through the “education-training nexus” (pp. 66-7). This debate was, in 2011, played out at the University of Sydney in no less than four committees, in an attempt to shape the future of the PhD.¹³ The last attempt to reform or regularise the practice of PhD at the University had been a report produced by a committee of Academic Board in early 2010 that contained 23 recommendations, none of which were ever fully actioned in faculties. This lack of clarity in thinking about the PhD was reflected in what my interviewees said, sometimes in quite radically different ways.

Polly, university-level administrator, Health Sciences 2 February 2009

There has been a major change in certainly my lifetime – my academic lifetime – from a much more self-directed endeavour, pursuing an area of natural curiosity, to a much more structured directed training program. And now most of my colleagues would be comfortable in viewing the PhD as a training program. And the latitude that one needs to go off and discover oneself by introspective study isn’t there any more. In some ways it’s the end of that old-fashioned view where very few people were doing PhDs and they did it to fulfil a desire for knowledge rather than to learn to become an academic or to learn to become a researcher. So I think there has been a paradigm change.

In her own discipline (which dominated the interview despite her University-wide responsibilities), the field of knowledge has exploded in recent years; formerly, she feels, it was possible to achieve a “sort of balancing act between being inclusive and rounded and knowing everything when you finish[ed] your PhD”. Now, in her view, a PhD has become a job-readiness certificate. In her words, “PhD is a means to an end, not an end.” Michael presented a more nuanced view:

Michael, senior central administrator, Creative Arts 29 January 2009

I think the nature of the PhD is, and certainly ought to be, dynamic because of the enormous rate of expansion of knowledge.

If the PhD, as a very important part of research training...isn't responsive to that, then it would quickly make itself irrelevant. That said, there will always be certain principles which would help you to hang on to through that change, almost as a way of navigating through that change.

I would hope that the PhD, always, was dedicated to the body of work produced by the student - and I want to distinguish between the nature

¹³ The committees were charged with reporting on supervision and supervisor training; the establishment of a four-year degree with coursework; pathways to PhD entry; and funding.
of that body of work and the function of that body of work within the research training process. So the body of work ought to make an extensive and original contribution to the body of work in that field. It should be of publishable quality and peer reviewed by three examiners... The function that that should play for the person undertaking the PhD is to enable them to ...become an autonomous researcher. I'm saying pretty obvious things, but it's not so much that they're obvious, but they are foundational things.

I think probably in the modern environment you have to look at whether that's enough, because we're a bit unclear if the PhD has much of a role outside of training academics. Some people think it does, and you'd think that in a knowledge economy it would, Industry is possibly not all that interested in credentialising; they feel that the creativity and capacity to do research doesn't need to be necessarily arrived at in that path and universities need to take notice of that. I think a person who does do a PhD does have to have a fundamental commitment to intellectual enquiry and curiosity and so forth.

Part of the confusion around terminologies relating to the PhD is reflected in the fact that there is no clear, broadly accepted way to refer to what it is that HDR students are doing. Although ‘research training’ is the term now used by the Australian government to describe the purpose and content of HDR programs (discussed in more detail below), the word ‘training’ and its semantic implications continue to be resisted by many theorists of PhD practice. For example, contributors to Boud and Lee’s book Changing Practices in Doctoral Education (2009) tend to prefer ‘research education’; this is commented on by their contributor Gilbert, who prefers ‘research training’, in his Endnote on page 54. Lee and Green (2009), in a discussion about supervision, imply that ‘training’ is often thought to be part of the larger educational process of undertaking a PhD, but don’t discuss the specific pedagogical differences between ‘education’ and ‘training’.

Sometimes, in discussion, it’s not even clear what is meant by the word ‘research’ (especially if it’s preceded with the adjective ‘scientific’, while meaning something more generally applicable across academia, as it sometimes is in government policy documents). Taken literally as ‘re-search’ – to search again – one has the impression of not taking what is known for granted, or looking more deeply into what is assumed as known. One phrase often used, which has its origins in the work of Thomas Aquinas’s discussion on ‘natural philosophy’, is “the orderly pursuit of knowledge” (Aquinas, 1994).

Turning to official sources, the Collection of Research data by the Australian government is governed by the following (HERDC, 2012, p.8):

Research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include
synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes.

This definition of research is consistent with a broad notion of research and experimental development (R&D) as comprising of creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.

This definition of research encompasses pure and strategic basic research, applied research and experimental development. Applied research is original investigation undertaken to acquire new knowledge but directed towards a specific, practical aim or objective (including a client-driven purpose).

Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2011), writing in the context of Actor Network Theory, say: “Researchers work with artefacts, whether symbolic or material, in order, ultimately, to bring new things into being: new ideas, ways of understanding, products, three-dimensional objects, etc.” (p. 465). However, as seen in the discussion above, people and even institutions are sometimes not clear whether simply making something new (particularly in the creative disciplines) is sufficient to qualify as research, or whether something more – theorising, situating within a tradition, reflecting on personal and social significance – is required in order for something to be classified as research. The arguments continue.

Education, sharing its root in the Latin word ducare, meaning to lead, with the word seduce, is often understood in higher education circles to mean, in its practice, opening minds and building knowledge by increasing understanding. Training, on the other hand, is understood to mean something you learn to do by following rules or protocols, often by rote learning and repetitive practice, and therefore inferior to higher-level conceptual skills which are understood to be more creative. However, skills inculcated through training are sometimes ones that we value highly in our society. Good medical practitioners can diagnose in a way that might seem almost magical and beyond the following of simple protocols of elimination, but their ‘inspired’ choices are rooted in many years of training in following protocols of pattern recognition. Musicians are rigorously trained through years of repetitive practice so that their creativity may soar through their music. One might discern a level of snobbery in the use of these words: ‘education’ leads to originality and creativity, while ‘training’ results in high skill development in a special area, but not necessarily in high levels of creativity and originality. But a strong skill base is important – even essential – for creativity and original work (Ingold, 2001). I will return to a consideration of how skills and skills training have been discussed in regard to the PhD in Australia in Chapters 4 and 5.

While the ends of research education and research training are not mutually exclusive, they are not identical either; nor have they been well teased out or conceptualised generally in higher education. Pearson (2005) points out that a successful untangling of the notions of research education and research training requires an understanding of “the intersection of pedagogy and research policy
and practice” (p. 120), while Peseta and Brew (2009) feel that, for supervisors, debating the words education and research is not as important as being aware of their own conceptions of (the relationships between) teaching and research.

This debate is about more than semantics. Cumming (2007) points out a “creative tension [that] exists in the literature—and in higher education policy—with regard to the role of research in doctoral education.” (p. 119) Gilbert (2009) reports on “a lack of consensus between academics themselves on whether the emphasis of the PhD should be on producing new knowledge or cohorts of skilled researchers.” (p. 55) Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat and Dally (2004a) highlight confusion during the examination process between the person of the student and the text of the thesis as the subject of examination.

For me, the question at the heart of this debate is to what extent the PhD teaches you how to do research and to what extent is it intended to produce original research. Most disciplines are too complex these days to allow everyone to master all methods or methodologies they encounter during the process of a PhD, and it may be true, as Holbrook, Lovat and Bourke (2011) suggest, that a university’s desire to keep students to completion deadlines is reducing the scope for truly original PhD work. In science and biomedical disciplines, for example, many methods and techniques are used by researchers even within the same team, and it is facile to suggest that it would be possible to learn to usefully apply more than a few of these—possibly only one or two—in a three-year PhD. This moves the meaning of the PhD from a top qualification, entire unto itself, to an entrée into research work through a post-doctoral appointment to learn new skills and techniques.

Discussions of increasing research output as the chief purpose of the PhD (a common theme of government publications on the subject) can elide the person who is producing it. Lee and Boud (2009) suggest that an increased focus on the practices of PhD would increase attention on the materiality of candidature (and thus the person of the candidate). In the absence of an oral component, in which the candidate is able to answer questions and discuss their ideas, examination of an Australian PhD comprises examination of the text of a thesis, but not of the person who wrote the thesis—see also Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, and Dally (2004a) for further discussion about confusion between a thesis and its writer detected in examiners’ reports, and Bourke and Holbrook (2011) for a discussion of the advantages of introducing an oral component to PhD examination.

The value of the new doctoral graduate is also shifting in another way: Lee and Boud (2009) report a shift in government and managerial literature from the thesis as the output of a PhD to the doctoral graduate being considered the output of the process, in their new role as ‘advanced knowledge worker’. This marks a shift from the new doctor being lauded as an individual who has achieved something for themselves, to their being a vital part of a national resource. In fact, the importance of PhD candidature to both institutions and the nation is underlined by a rather startling claim made by Pearson, Evans and Macauley: that PhD students carry out as much as 65% of the actual research in Australian Universities (2004). They cite this figure from the submission of the
Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDOGs) to a 1997 government committee in which it is claimed that

… most universities estimate that between 65 and 70% of their research is carried out by postgraduate research students. Second, around 25-30% of publications arising from university research has a postgraduate research student as one of the authors. (Siddle, 1997, p. n.p.)

The first figure seems to be a ‘quick and dirty’ kind of statement with no source cited in the original document. Government collections of academic publication (ERA, HERDC) don’t include publications by students, and the University of Sydney, like many universities, did not collect evidence of student publications until recently. It might be possible to use bibliometric databases of ISI publications, although I am not sure how easy it would be to identify students among authors. However much of the nuts-and-bolts research in Australia is done by PhD students, the federal government persists with its claim that it is training researchers, not underwriting actual research. This framing of the federal government funding of HDR students is labelled its ‘research training agenda’ (see, for example, (DIISR, 2011b, 2011c; DIISRTE, 2011). There will be a detailed discussion of government policy in Chapter 3.

From a managerialist perspective, it should be both desirable and possible to determine how the AQF list of skills are being developed in graduates within an institution – but in fact a discussion of the development of skills raises a lot more questions. For example, how widely do these skills vary according to discipline, or could some of them be agreed as a list of ‘core skills’? Or would a list of ‘core skills’ necessarily be so vague as to be meaningless? Which are ‘transferrable skills’, and which are ‘professional skills’, or skills specific to a discipline? These questions are considered in Chapter 4.

In summing up the arguments that I have canvassed above, Gilbert (2009, p. 55) makes the following claim: “These questions about the nature, scope and emphasis of the PhD are issues of curriculum.” It is on this claim that I have structured the body of this thesis.

The usefulness of the concept of curriculum to the PhD

As long ago as 1985, Connell referred to the PhD in Australia as raising questions about “curriculum, method, teacher/student interaction, and educational environment” (p. 38). Fifteen years later, Pearson pointed out “…there is no accepted term for a PhD or doctoral ‘programme’ which is more than the programme or course of study of an individual candidate, or an aggregation of all these individual candidatures within a department or an institution.” (1999, p. 275). Writing nearly 20 years later than Connell, Holbrooke and Bourke (2004a) noted that, despite the almost obsessive interest in and categorising of curriculum documentation in Higher Education more generally in Australia, the PhD was still almost a curriculum-free zone. You might say that any curriculum that can be discerned is as accidental – or incidental – in the PhD experience as the pedagogy discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

In this thesis I will use a structure of a yet-to-be-developed curriculum model to
talk about the PhD in Australia. Alison Lee refers to the idea of a PhD curriculum as a “rich, powerful, contested, difficult and sometimes slippery notion.” (Hopwood, Boud, Lee, Dahlgren, & Kiley, 2010, p. 83), and what I mean by ‘curriculum’ in this context, and why I have structured my thesis in this way, will be the subject of the remainder of this chapter.14

The idea of an expressed curriculum for organising education dates from the late 16th century (the word curriculum until then having been used to describe the track or course that chariots drove around from the Latin word meaning “course to be run”), when Ramus used the latest technology – the printing press – to distribute an organisational chart describing the organisation of teaching under conceptual headings (Doll, 2008). From the late 16th century (Doll, 2008; Gilbert, 2009) this came to be used as the word to describe “a uniform and predetermined set of courses all students in the university would follow (for the purpose of acquiring basic mastery in a subject or field)” (Doll, 2008, p. 205). It “referred to ‘notions of order, coherence and intellectual discipline’ of an entire program of studies” (Gilbert, 2009, p. 56, quoting Hamilton, 1987). In Protestant Europe and later in the United States, the notion of curriculum became associated with planning, order, uniformity, control, and measurable outcomes, and as this has remained the dominant use of curriculum into the 21st century (McWilliam & Singh, 2002).

In one of the very few contributions to the discussion of a curriculum for the PhD, McWilliam and Singh (2002), arguing for a doctoral curriculum, take a pragmatic view. They posit that a curriculum is commonly understood to be a container for packaging and presenting existing knowledge; thus to talk of a curriculum for research training is antithetical because research creates or discovers new knowledge. However, they point out, the nature of research itself is changing – it is increasingly bureaucratised and contained within established practices and government agendas. As the understandings of curriculum in Higher Education are also becoming subject to the same pressures, they posit, a perceived twain may in fact come together (see also Hopwood et al., 2010). Their idea is that what people learned in the process of doing a PhD should be related more transparently to the purposes to which that research might be put. This idea is also canvassed in both Leonard and Becker (2009) and Gilbert (2009).

McWilliam and Singh see this new concept of curriculum thus:

This curriculum - its rationale, its content, its pedagogy and its personnel - is constituted out of, and focused on, new modes of knowledge being produced in non-traditional ways by risk-conscious academic knowledge workers and non-academic others who are seen to both represent and understand the demands of knowledge work in commercial settings. As a forensic, performance-driven imperative, the enactment of this new curriculum opens up new spaces for higher degree research as a pedagogical endeavour while leaving little space for any residual monasticism that might still be lurking in sandstone corridors. (McWilliam and Singh, 2002, p. 15).

14 I have not discussed professional doctorates in this thesis; I have focused on the PhD.
In this view the PhD is being reduced to a means to an end – that end being something pragmatically determined, such as innovative industrial applications or medical breakthroughs that would eventually contribute to the public good.

But it was not until ten years into this century that there was more discussion of the issues that might inform the discussion of a curriculum for the PhD. As both Gilbert (2009) and Lee (2010) point out, not only are these questions still not being satisfactorily answered more than 25 years after Connell raised them, for much of academia they are still not being raised at all – in fact the raising of them is often met by incomprehension or anxiety (Lee 2010), or by a rush to policy development or placement of managerial structures (Lee & Boud, 2009) – we will see this effect throughout this thesis. More than 10 years ago, Pearson commented on “the lack of an agreed conceptual framework for thinking about the processes of doctoral education” (1999a, p. 274) – she classifies the conceptual framework around PhD and supervision in particular at the time she is writing as a set of practices based almost entirely on “strong normative expectations” (p. 274) framed by the previous experience of the supervisors and administrators involved (see also Brew & Peseta, 2004). A decade on, the dominant framing of the PhD in Australia is still rooted in local supervisory practice (Lee & Green, 2009).

Barnacle & Mewburn (2010) would also like to see a curriculum developed for the PhD in Australia – and by this they specifically exclude, as a form of curriculum, a list of ideally-gained skills such as are often listed in Australian institutions’ Graduate Attributes, generally presented without any kind of pedagogical framing (see Bosanquet, Winchester-Seeto, & Rowe, 2010).

Pearson (1999) documents what seems to have been the beginning of calls for generic attributes and skills training being included in the PhD at the end of the 1990s. It isn’t, at that point, being discussed in terms of a curriculum, but in this important article she begins a policy discussion that, as we have seen, is still continuing: what is the purpose of a PhD, what can be expected to be experienced when one undertakes one, and what its outcomes might reasonably be expected to be. This discussion is often derailed into a debate about coursework or skills training, but, as will be seen, this is only a small part of how I am thinking about the notion of curriculum.

When I talk about doctoral curriculum(s) in this thesis I mean any articulation or enactment – verbal, applied, theoretical or documented – of the nature and purpose of doing a PhD in its disciplinary and institutional context, and how that might play out in local practices regarding enrolment, support, progress, and examination. In other words, I am interested in how institutions, faculties and individual academics conceptualise what a PhD is (or might be), how they contextualise that idea in their local practice, and, crucially, how that practice is experienced by students. The difficulty that Australian academics and institutions seem to have experienced in articulating a doctoral curriculum is acknowledged by Gilbert (2004, 2009) and by Manathunga, who refers to the PhD as it is conducted in Australia as “operat[ing] with a nebulous, implicit curriculum” (Manathunga, Lunt, & Mellick, 2007, p. 20). However, as Gilbert points out, it is necessary to keep trying to make the nebulous more explicit, because “an educational enterprise which lacks clarity about its goals will
struggle to ensure they are achieved” (Gilbert 2009, p. 57). He also points out that “Viewing the doctorate as curriculum directs attention to the forms of knowledge in which it is grounded, and how these are articulated in the documentation of the degree.” (p. 52). We have seen briefly already how unclear these “forms of knowledge” may be, and they will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3, but Gilbert is here considering a curriculum that is broader than conventional curriculum definitions of classroom or coursework; he is writing more conceptually – in the way that, for example, McWilliam and Singh (2002) are when they make an argument for a doctoral curriculum for learning how to research, and in the way that the contributors to Hopwood et al (2010) are.

As Gilbert (2004) points out, discussions on the PhD in Australia have generally focused on pedagogy (how things happen) or management (how we make things happen better). Although there has been little discussion of a more holistic curriculum at this level of education in Australia, the few discussions that do exist contain excellent summaries of the theoretical approaches that have been taken, and a clear vision of what might be needed. For example, after a necessarily short literature review of the progress in this discussion to that date, Pearson (1999a) claims:

> What is needed is a curriculum model of the doctoral process which recognises that the production and reformulation of knowledge is integral to the student's learning process, and which integrates the various "teaching" components identified by Connell (1985). (p. 277)

She is writing, in 1999, in the context of the more than doubling in the numbers of HDR students in Australia over the ten years to that date (discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis), in which time there has been little concomitant advance in theorising about either the experience of those students or the context in which they are studying. The decade had seen PhD study move from being “a small and elite component” of the universities’ activities to a system of “massification” (p.270). Acknowledging the difficulties inherent in such a big increase in enrolments at any level of tertiary study, along with the emotional overlays that are adhering to the traditional supervisor/student relationship (for which see also Johnson et al., 2000), she argues for a “research-based conceptual framework of doctoral education to guide quality management, improvement, and innovation.” (p. 270) Her conclusion still stands as a beacon of common sense (although, sadly, it does not seem to have been a driver for change to date), and it is worth quoting in full:

> Without a framework which conceptualises doctoral education as more than an aggregation of individual supervisory relationships, there remains the danger of reducing it to a collection of tasks carried out by individuals, and to an overemphasis on rules and procedures to regulate their behaviour. Such regulation or quality control can lead to a bureaucratisation of doctoral education which might itself be considered

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15 At the time of writing the increase in PhD enrolments has slowed, but there is still a steady increase of approximately 1,000 enrolments every year across Australia. At the University of Sydney there are nearly 5000 HDR students – the total student body being about 50,000.
a threat to quality by de-professionalising the role of academics, and positioning students as dependent learners. (p. 283)

In the light of these discussions in the literature, I decided to use a curriculum-based model to structure this thesis. I am not claiming this model could be applied in any institution, although consideration of how knowledge operates throughout its various levels could be a useful exercise for an institution to undertake. Following Pearson and Gilbert, and thinking about how the word ‘curriculum’ could even be applied to the reality of doing a PhD at an Australian university, I first went back to classical curriculum theory, and contrasted some of the structures that are currently suggested as ways to conceptualise an education process with what the (very few) theorists in the field have said about the PhD in Australia. This enabled me to develop a thesis structure based on a curriculum framing. I don’t wish to suggest that such a curriculum exists; the PhD is not usually discussed in this way by academic managers, supervisors or students at Australian institutions – although some use the phrase ‘doctoral program’, it usually refers to a suggested program of coursework to be undertaken on enrolment.\footnote{There has been a great deal of change in the last year or two, and it may be that some universities are now envisaging PhD programs that are based in expressed curriculums that I am not aware of.} Using this structure to organise both the literature – theoretical and bureaucratic – and my data enabled me to compare and contrast what is theorised and what is said to be done institutionally with the actual experience of students.

Lee (in Hopwood et al., 2010; also Lee 2010) conceives of ‘curriculum’ (specifically in the context of HDR study) “in terms of a three-dimensional frame” (Hopwood et al., 2010, p. 88), encompassing first “a motivated selection from recent aspects of culture…and a vision of a future for that culture.” (p. 88). In this thesis, this dimension incorporates questions about the nature of knowledge, universities, and their future. Her second dimension is that in which the outcomes of learning are addressed, and “sets of learning outcomes …[are] expressed in relation to particular standards and sets of attributes” (p. 88) – the relationship between knowing, being and doing. This is the level at which most discussions about a curriculum for the PhD are held – discussions about increasing students’ skills by incorporating coursework and skills development. I have widened it to include discussions in the literature about the PhD. Lee’s third dimension is “the core activities of teaching, learning and assessment.” (p. 89). For the PhD in Australia, the core activities in this dimension are almost invariably theorised as pedagogies around supervision and, importantly, writing – as Aitchison and Lee (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Lee, 1998) point out, in the absence of coursework and a viva or oral defence, writing has developed as the key skill students must master for their thesis to pass examination. Many other pedagogical events and processes occur in an individual PhD, of course (Cumming (2007)), and all of these issues will be discussed in Chapter 5. This three-dimensional concept of curriculum is rich and sophisticated; it acknowledges the way that knowledge is produced throughout education.

Gilbert’s chapter in Boud and Lee’s 2009 book, entitled “The doctorate as curriculum: A perspective on goals and outcomes of doctoral education”,...
indicates concern about the gap between what Universities say about doctoral study in their documentation, and what they specify in the examiner guidelines. Taken more broadly, this is, in many ways, the most interesting thing I found to write about – the gap between what I am calling the ‘intended’ and ‘enacted’ curriculums – between what the University says its PhD is and how the PhD is practised in AOU’s – and, of course, experienced by students. In the small amount of literature that considers the concepts of curriculum in the PhD in Australia, this ‘experienced’ curriculum is barely mentioned, but it will appear here in the form of extracts from the student blog that formed part of my PhD project.

There are of course many more conceptions of ‘curriculum’ that could be considered. For example Prideaux’s diagram (2003) is based on constructive alignment, and I have reproduced it as Appendix 1. Based in a constructivist approach to learning, it may appear to be more appropriate for adaptation to the ways that people create knowledge in the process of doing a PhD in Australia than more classical classroom-based or undergraduate models such as Posner (1992) or Neumann, Parry & Becher (2002). However, Prideaux lacks Lee’s ‘higher order’ conceptualisations, discussed in Hopwood et al (2010) above. This kind of curriculum model might be used to justify an intended curriculum structure at the University – a map of his model against the way things are done at the University of Sydney in the first two columns demonstrates an intended curriculum structure, even though the projects undertaken and the disciplinary contexts differ vastly across the institution (see Table 1 below). However, as demonstrated in the third column of Table 1 (my comments), this curriculum model does not take into account the either the enacted or experienced curriculums. It does not consider what people learn, only how an environment is set up within which they might learn. These ‘fault lines’, rifts between intention and experience, caused by thin conceptualisations of PhD practice, will be demonstrated throughout this thesis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prideaux (2003)</th>
<th>Practices and policies at University of Sydney</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situation</strong></td>
<td>For PhD enrolment you usually need at least one graduate degree (including honours).</td>
<td>Needs analysis being conducted with enrolling students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intent</strong></td>
<td>The University's rules and policies are on the website, also relevant government policies (eg time limits) Faculty and/or disciplinary norms usually unspoken Supervisor training does not presently focus on this.</td>
<td>It is not clear that anything is clearly stated to candidates when they enrol. Most faculties have formal orientation sessions, but not compulsory and may not suit part-time students to attend. A formal needs analysis may help with this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly stated; aims; goals; outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Proposal, guided by supervisor and maybe some coursework or seminar series, also guided by Faculty and/or disciplinary norms</td>
<td>Faculties have a formal committee system for approving a thesis proposal, often after 12 month’s enrolment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate: Scope, sequence; related to aims and practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
<td>Actual doing; completely individual, guided by supervisor and maybe some coursework or seminar series as required</td>
<td>Most faculties offer students opportunities to attend research seminars and conferences, and may have a requirement for presentation during candidature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student oriented: variety of methods; opportunity for self-direction; learning in real settings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
<td>Formative assessment is comprised of supervisors’ comments on drafts etc, and feedback from presentations. Summative assessment is the examination of thesis – although this can also have formative aspects</td>
<td>Supervisory relationship individual and hard to regularise across disciplines, although some effort is made with annual progress reviews This examination process appears rational, but this may be partly illusionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear blueprint: formative; summative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisation</strong></td>
<td>Usually the first year is spent preparing proposal; other than that often very fluid – although second year often thought of as ‘data-gathering’ and third year usually referred to as ‘writing up’. However, enrolment is time-limited</td>
<td>This is very variable (appropriately so) across disciplines and individual student projects. May be more formalised for individuals by annual review of needs analysis recently implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explicit organisation: blocks; units; timetables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>PREQ surveys conducted bi-annually</td>
<td>Return rates of these in 2011 were 43%. Also, see Pearson’s comment (1990, p 270) on value of these, discussed in Section 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student feedback: questionnaires; focus groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Mapping of practices at the University of Sydney on to Prideaux’s model of curriculum design

Actual practices at the University will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
As Lee’s model moves through from the most conceptual, theoretical and practical to the local applications and practices, it served as a model for the structure of this thesis, shown in Table 2. This ‘three-layered’ approach allowed me to consider the personal, institutional and cultural contexts of PhD study in a new way. I was able to think about my discussion as moving constantly between and among individual student experience, practices and policies in AOU and institutions, disciplinary cultures, theoretical literature and the national priorities in such a way that each revealed in the others flaws, contradictions and alignments, sometimes in unexpected ways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lee’s dimensions</th>
<th>University practices and policies</th>
<th>Thesis chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level C</strong> – the most abstract – describes a program of learning, shaped by social, cultural and political factors – could be described as a motivated selection from culture that also contains a vision for the future of that culture</td>
<td><strong>Practices</strong>: history &amp; nature of the institution; disciplinary conventions, membership of DDOGs <strong>Policy</strong>: Government policy</td>
<td>Chapter 3 – The hidden curriculum: secrets, history, money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level B</strong> – the framings of sets of outcomes that attempt to integrate knowing/being/doing</td>
<td><strong>Practices</strong>: Academic Board committees; Supervisor training (intended to ensure institutional quality); dispute resolution processes; Ethics Committee; local doctoral or research training committees in AOU with delegated authority. Provision of skills training and equipment <strong>Policies</strong>: the University’s PhD Rule; minutes of Academic Board committees (Graduate Studies, PhD Awards) Instructions to examiners, policies on supervision &amp; administration from the Division of Graduate Studies.</td>
<td>Chapter 4 – The intended curriculum: What the PhD is said to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level A</strong> – activities, practices etc, usually local and discipline-based.</td>
<td><strong>Practices</strong>: PhD research projects; supervision; lab or studio work; faculty workshops and seminars; how students experience pedagogies <strong>Policies</strong>: Faculty-based; may be additional to those of the institution</td>
<td>Chapter 5 – The enacted curriculum: pedagogical practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Mapping of policies and practices around PhD at the University onto Lee’s levels of abstraction of curriculum

I have used this structure in a kind of ‘top-down’ way, beginning from what Gilbert (2009) refers to as ‘hidden’ (the cultural context in which the process operates, often not understood by participants in that process). He goes on to describe his level of ‘intended’ as the documentation of policy and practice provided by university or faculty. If I had tried to write about the intended curriculum at my institution in these terms this would have been a very short thesis: there is limited policy in this area, and practice at the University is too diverse and diffuse to allow useful analysis. So for my purposes I have also considered theory and published discussion about PhD practice under the
heading of ‘intended’. Gilbert’s level of ‘enacted’ (what is done to carry out the
stated aims of the intended) is where I consider the ways that policy is carried
out, mainly at the level of the AOU as that is how the University operates, and
how this affects the ways that PhD students learn during their candidature.

In the following chapters I will cover:

**Chapter 2** – What, why how: epistemology, methodology and method

**Chapter 3** – The hidden curriculum: secrets, history and money
National policies, disciplinary mores and institutional culture.
(Lee’s level C)

**Chapter 4** – The intended curriculum: what the PhD is said to be
Theoretical discussions about the pedagogy of PhD in Australia;
what documentation, policies and processes reveal about how the
University of Sydney conceives of the PhD, and how this plays out
in AOU (Lee’s level B)

**Chapter 5** – The enacted curriculum: pedagogical practices
Supervisory relationships, locally-organised workshops and
seminars, and other pedagogical mechanisms (Lee’s level A)

**Chapter 6** – Some conclusions: effective pedagogy in the liminal space
Reflections, research questions revisited, new understandings.

Running through all of these, providing a commentary on them if you like, I
will consider the reported experience of participants in my project.

A curriculum is, of course, a living thing. Like oxygen, Lee’s “social, cultural
and political factors” (Hopwood et al., 2010) are infused into and affect every
part of the PhD. However, they are hidden in the sense that they are difficult to
discern and are rarely understood or discussed with or by PhD students or
supervisors, or by administrators who make the policies that underpin PhD
practice. There is a perpetual system of exchange: all parts of the curriculum
effect change on the other parts over time. For example, university policies (for
eexample to increase government funding by encouraging cross-disciplinary
research) can slowly affect disciplinary mores; supervisors’ experiences can be
a force to change institutional culture in relation to supervisory training. The
experienced curriculum, like the hidden curriculum, is diffuse, pervasive and
difficult to disentangle; in one sense the liminal status of students and the lack
of their voices in the debates around PhD has made their experience another
‘hidden’ part of the curriculum, but this is not an idea I have scope to develop.

**Summary**

This chapter has canvassed a general lack of clarity about what one must do to
gain a PhD in Australia. This can be seen as an advantage for students; each
PhD is unique and the lack of clarity might serve individual students well if they
were blessed with subtle and sophisticated supervision and administration in
their degrees. But there is a need for clarity so that students to understand the
scope of what they are undertaking; future chapters will demonstrate how
confusion can and does affect individual candidatures. The curriculum model I have outlined will enable me to show how the seemingly rational discourses produced by government and institutions play out in the messiness and uncertainty that are actually experienced by students. Reporting the experiences of my participants and opinions of my key informants as a counterpoint throughout my account of the hidden, intended and enacted curriculums will enable me to focus on the detail of student experience without losing sight of the bigger picture that forms the framework of PhD study in Australia.

In the next Chapter I will lay out the methodological dilemmas and debates that I traversed in the course of my project, and the methods I used to generate and analyse data.
Chapter 2 – What, Why, How: epistemology, methodology and method

This thesis is very personal. When I ask myself ‘How do I know this?’ as I write, I answer that I know what the process of doing a PhD is like because I’ve done it; because I’ve done it in the company of other people who were prepared to share their experiences in our shared blogs and emails; because I have read the official University position on how it should be done, and also interviewed staff at my University who have different ideas about what the process is; and because I have read a lot of theory and reports of practice about doing it. I am aware that researchers are “caught up in their own social, historical and cultural histories” (Howell, 2013, p. 128), and I have tried to make my history visible and to make it work to support my arguments. In this thesis I attempt to connect the lived experience of doing a PhD to the larger picture of policy and theory. To do this I’ve used ethnographic methods, taking inspiration from Malkki’s (2007) claim that “…non-anthropologists, too, improvising with methods taken from ethnography, can create something new and important.” (p. 161). This has been my aim throughout.

I have written a reflexive account of my experience, broadened with the experience of other students and enriched by the views and experiences of people working at the University. These latter people were my key informants: academic staff members with (often extensive) supervision experience who were, at the time of interview, filling administrative roles with responsibility for the process of the PhD, either in their faculties or in the central structures of the University. I have also kept current with the documents provided by the University over seven years on the conduct of the PhD, as well as with government reports and other documents.

This account won’t come to any neat and tidy conclusions, because it’s about real lived situations, with all the messiness and uncertainty that entails. I have, at the end, indicated where some of my co-participants had arrived at when I finished this thesis, but of course their lives and their involvement with the PhD may continue to go on even though the PhDs they were undertaking when they participated in my project will not. Those who have had their degree conferred may be supervising other PhDs; their involvement with the PhD-as-process could thus be extended for decades to come. Some may still be working on their PhDs, while those who ended the process without completing a thesis may re-enrol in the future. I hope that my own involvement with PhD theory and practice will continue for years after my eventual graduation.

Ethnography

Ethnography is variously described as both a method and a methodology, and the two are often elided. The dangers of not clarifying how you are thinking about ethnography are summed up by Lillis (2008) as getting lost in the data, and thus not investigating the context of the study, which lack she refers to as “a truncated engagement with ‘context’” (p. 355). For me in this project, postmodern ethnographic theory (especially thinking about online ethnography) provided me with a way of both generating data and of thinking about that data,
but I do not claim to have written an ethnography: rather, perhaps, this is a multi-layered ethnographically-informed study.

My thinking about ethnography started with Denzin’s notions of ethnography as rooted in real experience and framed in political reality:

Viewing culture as a complex process of improvisation, it seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives. It celebrates autoethnography, mystories, myth, and folklore. This is a return to narrative as a political act, a minimal ethnography with political teeth. It asks how power is exercised in concrete human relationships. It understands that power means empowerment, the give and take of scarce material resources. It seeks performance texts that tell stories about how humans experience moral community. (1999, pp. 510-511)

I was further stimulated in my thinking by Malkki, with her claim that “Ethnography… as situated, long-term field research… is simultaneously a critical theoretical practice, a quotidian ethical practice and an improvisational practice” (2007, p. 164; emphasis in original). Each of these descriptive phrases caused me to think deeply about what I had done (Malkki’s book wasn’t published until after the blogs had run out of steam). They reinforced for me that the uncertainty about method that I’d felt while the blogs were being written, and then when I was reflecting on the meaning of what had happened, was quite normal – and it was, in fact, what it meant to ‘do ethnography’.

However, Malkki specifically excludes from her discussion of ethnographic practice two of the main reasons that I’d found ethnography attractive: the fact that it is also “a genre of writing and a practice of representation” (p. 164). There will be more discussion on how these facets of ethnographic practice emerged in my project later in this chapter.

The last source that I found useful to ponder was the list of questions that Markham (2009, p. 147ff) asks herself when she begins to write reflexively about her research. She intends the answers to these questions to help in the production of a ‘bridge’, between her “methods of inquiry and possible readers” (p. 148). These include “What is my perspective?” What methods have I used in collecting and analysing my data?” and “Why might my work be incomprehensible to a reader?”. As this thesis is the bridge I am building between my study and readers, I have aimed to keep these questions fresh in my mind as I work.

Anderson (2006) conducts an extended discussion of how various positionings need to be understood by the researcher: what he calls “first order” and “second order” constructs of the experience being considered in the ethnography (p. 381). The first order is the experience that the researcher has while carrying out their project, and second order is the added insight and awareness they are bringing to the project (and which is of course influencing the conduct of the other participants) through their understanding of the environment in which the community they are researching operates. For me an example might be that, although I can see why an angry blogging student might understand something about their relationship with a supervisor and can empathise with them, I can
also see why a supervisor may understand something different about that situation, or may have to act in a certain way – and I can also see where both positions fit into current academic discourse (theory) about PhD policy and practice. Markham points out that “Qualitative inquiry enables us to focus on the detailed local level, shifting from the forest to the trees in an iterative fashion.” (2009, p. 139) My viewpoint was constantly shifting from the undergrowth (student experience) to the trees (University policy and practice) to the forest (national policy) and back again – all informed by theorists on PhD practice in Australia. Anderson’s concept of “the self-narrative of analytic autoethnography” being used “to develop and refine generalized theoretical understandings of social processes” (2009, p. 385) seemed a useful aim for my narrative.

However, I need to be very clear: although I am in this story, I have not written an auto-ethnography. For example, this thesis is not, primarily, an attempt to display or perform my experience of doing a PhD (although it is, in one sense, a ‘performance’ as I perform my knowledge to a very small audience of examiners, I couldn’t call it a performance autoethnography); nor is it an attempt to heal myself through investigating my own pain or grief. I’m not using my story as the exemplar (as I read Ellis, 2004, a book I found informative, although didactic and unmoving); the touchstone (as I read Markham, 1998, a book I found fascinating and engaging); or the blue paper fuse (as I read Holman Jones, 2005, a chapter I found muddled, unfocused and pretentious, even as I appreciated its call to tie personal stories to political action). This text does not focus on my story, although I am in the study as a participant and am also outside it as the narrator/analyst of the story. I am consciously conducting the study, reading the history and the theory and the policy documents and all the texts that the other participants didn’t read. The ‘me’ who is blogging with the participants both is and is not the ‘me’ who is reading texts and conducting interviews, and thinking about the participants’ stories (including my own) in their light. And then there is the ‘me’ who is polishing these words: I have now placed myself at a meta-level from the participants and from my earlier experience of being in the project and of pulling the ideas together in iterative drafts, in order to finish this thesis about the situation we were in, our experiences together, and my experiences of representing them.

Understanding the complexity of these pulls, Anderson (2006) proposes that autoethnographic work be split into “‘evocative’ autoethnography” and “‘analytic’ autoethnography”. He claims that, since ethnography has taken what has become known as its ‘postmodern turn’ into autoethnography, there has emerged the problem of “ethnographic study in which the researcher is deeply self-identified as a member, while being troubled by the epistemological paradigm within which current autoethnography discourse is embedded.” (p. 374). I am not comfortable (although “troubled” may be too strong) with the genres used for much autoethnographic writing (i.e. poetry or fiction). It seems to me (as a literature scholar in a former life) that these forms are difficult to achieve well, especially when writing about one’s own experience – I’m unable to separate my inner literary critic from my theory reader. When didactic prose is written as fiction I find it unconvincing and irritating; I don’t enjoy it and I
find the theoretical strands difficult to take seriously. I believe that we learn from good fiction without being very aware the lesson is being conducted; didactic prose is thus, to me, the enemy of empathetic understanding. When autoethnography is written as poetry I really struggle to find any theory in it at all, as I am distracted by the words used (the choice of words and rhythm are what I understand to be the point and power of poetry). Powerful and moving the words may be, but I am not sure they are capable of carrying, explicating and applying theory when presented in the shorthand form that is poetry.

What Anderson refers to as ‘evocative’ autoethnography, as practised by Ellis and Bochner (Bochner & Ellis, 1999; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, 2006) and Holman Jones (2005) neither moves me to action nor informs my perspective with theory. The work of Laurel Richardson, on the other hand, considers research writing as a Critical Analytical Process (her shorthand being CAP, also referring to the Latin word for head, capit), in which “[t]he product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing.” (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005, p. 962). Perhaps I am more comfortable using my head rather than my heart; but I am certainly more comfortable and therefore better engaged when reading her work than the more ‘evocative’ forms of autoethnographic writing.

On the other hand, I do want the writing in this thesis to be evocative. I want the experiences reported by the project participants – the words that they have generously and bravely given to me – to mean something to readers, to interest them, perhaps to challenge them, even to move them. But I don’t want readers to feel manipulated, as I think is a danger in the more extreme ‘evocative’ tradition of ethnographic writing. Annette Markham engages, challenges, and even moves her readers without taking them to the point of resentment or irritation, as does Ruth Behar – Behar’s ability to weave her personal memories with political commentary and social theory has provided particularly inspirational for me. Perhaps Anderson’s framing of the aim of analytical social science being “to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves.” (p. 387) comes closest to what I would like to achieve. As Malkki points out, “The object of knowledge is never inert, lying somewhere out there in the landscape waiting to be ‘discovered’ – or ‘felt’” (2007, p. 173). I have been quite clear that I am making meaning from the data that has been generated in the blogs and interviews; that, as I see it, has been my task in writing this thesis. The meaning I have made is to relate all the sources to each other, showing the inconsistencies, similarities, congruences and disjointedness between various narratives of the PhD, organised, as discussed in the last chapter, into a theoretical framing relating to education theory, that of the curriculum.

**How I felt about what I did: issues of reflexivity**

Ashmore (1989) lists three often-cited ‘dangers of reflexivity’ as “the infinite regress of metadiscourse, the impossibility of being both a participant and an analyst at once, [and] the inevitable self-destructiveness of a self-referential

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17 See also on this point (although not specifically referring to autoethnography) Lee (1998) and Kamler & Thompson (2006)
approach”, which must be defused, partly by “adopting an attitude of serious nonseriousness toward the writing’s own paradoxical nature” (p. 27). It is certainly possible to be reflexive and analytic at the same time – I would find it almost impossible to be analytic without being reflexive – but, as discussed earlier, there are traps in being reflexive; they involve finding the balance between one’s own story and the context of the wider meaning that, as a researcher, one is trying to attribute to events. “[S]erious nonseriousness” is more difficult when engaged in a PhD project that can be overwhelming at times, but it does help to try to keep a broad perspective, especially when immersed in data, and to be alert for flashes of humour and incongruity.

Ashmore’s whole book is a reflexive treatise in reflexivity, and he provides an exhaustive etymology of ‘reflexivity’, including its meaning “‘to bend again’ or ‘to bend back’” (p. 30). He splits the concept into reflect (seeing, thinking, making moral judgments) and reflex (automatism – body reflexes such as the knee-jerk, and self-reference). Markham (2009) describes reflexivity as “less like looking in a mirror, and more like trying to look at yourself looking in the mirror” (p. 135).

Moving from looking at your reflection in the mirror to bending over (maybe backwards) trying to get a peek at yourself looking in the mirror, and then describing what you see – this is apparently how a researcher might practice reflexivity. In moving this to a more practical discussion distinguishing between reflective practice and reflexive practice, O’Connor (2007) explains thus:

When reflecting about action in a reflexive manner, individuals must actively seek to find the social meanings that are inherent in situated actions, and to focus on the broader issues which those actions may represent. (p. 256)

I found this comforting; having established that doing ethnography online meant that I could do my study without leaving my desk, I am relieved that I won’t have to undertake gymnastic contortions to write this thesis.

The participants in my project bravely agreed to put their confusion, their uncertainties, their frustrations and their achievements into my hands, and I would not be doing them a service if I didn’t both reflectively and reflexively attempt to interpret these within the framework of what I have come to create to explicate the politics and process of doing a PhD from my reading and other investigations. I feel morally bound, in Denzin’s words, to search “for those moments when humans resist these structures of oppression and representation, and attempt, in the process, to take control over their lives and the stories about them” (1999, p. 512).

Markham and Baym’s book Internet Inquiry (2009) provided me with several useful notions for thinking about the data the project has generated. I have attempted to base my work in this thesis on their five “cross-cutting conclusions” (pp. xviii-xix) about internet inquiry, which discuss research design as quotidian and contingent, practices as reflexive, context-sensitive, situated and requiring the “ongoing balance of dialectical tensions” (p. xix).
Data sources

All of my sources related in some way to the community I was studying – PhD candidates at the University of Sydney.

The blogging group was the core of the study, and provided insights into what and how students learn in the liminal status of PhD student, which was self-reported in a safe and time-extended setting in which trust built over time
I also kept a watching brief on the public blogs of other PhD students, mainly in Australia, and have occasionally quoted from these
I read and tracked changes in the documentation that the University provides to underpin its administration of PhD – most of it through the University’s website
I also conducted interviews with key informants to supplement my understanding of the University’s documentation: these were more-or-less experienced supervisors, most of whom had been or were working at the time of interview as faculty-level or central administrators in the area of PhD management
I kept a watching brief on the press (from local student through national to international) for articles about the PhD experience
I discovered and followed a small number of websites and blogs that aim to reflect, support and inform PhD student experience in Australia and internationally
I also kept a watching brief on the websites of relevant Australian government departments and read the reports produced
I read extensively in the published literature about PhD, focusing my reading on Australian work, including theoretical articles, the recent history of PhD and how changes of government policy (primarily funding-related) have affected universities and thus the way PhD is conducted.18

Student blogs

Soon after I enrolled late in 2005 I sought approval from the University Ethics committee for the project, and was granted this in December of 2005 (see Appendix 2 for the relevant documentation). I had originally thought of using an email list to conduct my study – I had a lot of experience with email lists for teaching, professional life and personal communication. However, having begun a personal blog at the end of 2003, I soon realised that providing each of the participants with a blog could allow them to ‘claim a space’ from which to relate their experiences. Forte and Hine (2000) explain how websites that incorporate public comment (such as blogs) are given meaning by the links between them – by the communities that grow around, among and between them. With the addition of pictures and embedded links and the ability to leave comments, frequently updated blogs give their owners the power to make strong statements about themselves, their feelings, beliefs and values. Blood (2000) records how regular blogging raised her awareness of her own thought process,

18 I stopped incorporating new material into the body of this thesis from the end of January 2013. Newer material may be mentioned in footnotes.
and Walker (2006) describes how she has developed her thinking between and through the reading of blogs. Later in this chapter I will give some example of how the blogs functioned to show what a successful method they proved to be.

Recruitment created more problems than I had expected. I began with a flyer (approved by the University Ethics Committee in December 2005 – see Appendix 3). I posted this on the SUPRA website, and also sent it to the staff member in each Faculty who was responsible for HDR students – some of whom sent startling responses. Two academics informed me that their students didn’t have time to waste on such a project (this being at least partly as a result of funding changes, discussed in Chapter 3, which had resulted in time limits being imposed on PhD candidature for the first time). One academic even sent me an angry email, questioning how I had got my project through the ethics committee. I noted in my private journal:

1 July 2006

From my private blog (not available to readers)

Gatekeeping!
Unbelievable how some aca[demic]s will only pass my recruitment post on to people whom they think will be interested, while others, without question, simply post it to a list they have of enrolled students.

Only one active participant for the project was recruited through this flyer – a few people made enquiries but very few followed up after I sent them the participant statement, and those who did never made a blog entry, made only one or two entries, or never created a blog or responded to further emails from me. It’s impossible to know whether this was because of some initial difficulties that were experienced logging into the system or some other factor.

I attended student events and mentioned my project to anyone who would listen, and this turned out to be the best method of recruitment. I met another student at a faculty event, and she not only joined the project but contacted some other students she knew to join, and they recruited others. Another participant was a friend of a friend, and a late joiner was someone I met at an NVIVO training course. Eventually seven people kept blogs for more than a month each, most of them regularly for well over a year.

After such a shaky start, the active participants made an effort to make their community meet their needs. We read and commented on each other’s entries regularly – almost daily at some points – for nearly 18 months, from June of 2006 until nearly the end of 2007, when several people were no longer enrolled and posting had trailed off. We talked about anything and everything – our own projects, our families, tensions between study and paid work, housework, decorating our study environments, travelling. Most of us took breaks from the blogs for a few weeks from time to time, then slid back in and rejoined the conversation.
Sadly, our interactions were not free of technical difficulties. The initial setting up of the blogs on a server in the Faculty of Education and Social Work required considerable email communication with technical staff – I was lucky enough to encounter a staff member who was interested in the software I had chosen: an education installation of Movable Type which I paid for myself. However, my emails reveal that it was some two weeks before the installation was done correctly and I was able to begin creating empty blogs for participants to use in May of 2006.

The server on which the blogs were installed suffered a disastrous crash in May of 2007 and it was several weeks before we were able to regain full access to our blogs. My emails from the time show that this was a very worrying period. We were unable to use our blogs at all during this time, and I had great difficulty getting responses from technical staff. The email list that had been set up for me to communicate with participants also disappeared in this crash, which further hampered my efforts to keep participants in the loop. It was that this point that blogging momentum slowed and never fully recovered.

In a final technical twist, the server that the blogs were installed on was replaced at some time in 2008 (partly as a result of the 2007 crash); however, as a part-time student I was somehow omitted from the list of people contacted to report material to be transferred. With the help of support staff I have recently been able to re-access the texts of the blogs (which I had of course archived for myself), but not the full versions, with their decoration and layout. For me, this has been a very disappointing end to the project; I had hoped to be able to include some of the photographs, illustrations and screen shots of the blogs in this thesis.

This was the price I had to pay for having the blogs installed on a faculty server over which I had no control. The handing over of responsibility for technical matters seemed to me to be an advantage at the time, as it enabled me to spend my precious PhD days working with the literature and the participants instead of sweating over technical issues; with hindsight I might have done things differently.

Some of the participants – but by no means all – had, like myself, a history as bloggers, and were familiar with the medium and how it could help them develop their ideas.

28 August 2006

Post in participant blog: Grainne

Blogging nostalgia

Blogging was very much in its infancy (so was the Net, for that matter), and my friends and I had our own HSC stress blog. It started off that one of our group had to move to the US with her parents at the end of Year 11 - we started off using a blog to talk to her as a group because phone calls were too
expensive and ICQ/MSN a problem in terms of time zones. Then four of us started using a blog as a sort of group diary - it was quite interesting, in retrospect. We were all going through things at the same time, a couple of us had parents who wouldn't bat an eyelid if we said we were doing 'schoolwork on the computer' (but they refused to let us call each other as that was obviously not studying!) - hence using the blog almost like ICQ minus the boxes that popped up to reveal our lack of studying, and my friend's sister who was at uni used to post a lot of really helpful comments - so did her friends - not just the 'you'll feel better soon' sort, but also the 'the trick with 3U Economics is...'. I bet there are many such blogs now. I was talking to one of my friends the other day and mentioned that I was keeping a blog again, and she reminded me of our blog, now lost in the mists of cyberspace...

10 October 2006

Comment from Kylie

I didn't have a blog during my HSC (1998), but had just got my own computer and when browsing for info on Hamlet came across internet FORUMS. I started reading through, and eventually started adding my 2 cents worth. As we all know now writing is an important tool for learning (and for many HSC students it is getting over the writing inertia that is the hardest thing about assignments and exams), so these forums were invaluable to me as a student. It was the first time that I thought 'hey, I really do know the answers to these questions'!

The participants’ appreciation of blogging during their PhDs, which encouraged both writing and reflection on process (discussed in detail by M.-H. Ward & West, 2008), was reinforced many times throughout the project.

24 July 2006

Post in participant blog: Kylie

Freire on writing

Just came across this passage in Freire's First Letter, in Teachers as Cultural Workers:

"If we think about the intimate relationship between reading, writing, and thinking and about our need to intensely experience this relationship, we might accept the suggestion that at least three times a week we should devote ourselves to the task of writing something. That writing could be notes about something read, a commentary about some event reported in the media, a letter to an unknown person - it doesn't matter what. It is also a good idea to date and keep these writings and, a few months later, to critically analyze them." (p. 25) (http://tamise.typepad.com/blog/)

...
Food for thought on the value of blogging, and also on the value of trying to write up parts of your research as early as possible, even if you end up chucking it all out the window in the end. "the intimate relationship between reading, writing, and thinking"...so true.

In addition Esther, commenting on an entry by Grainne, expressed her pleasure in using the blogs for personal support (a point that will be expanded in Chapter 5).

Comment by Esther

8 Sept 2006

Like Grainne, I've had a great time thinking and blogging about the practice/research debate and would also be interested to hear what others have to say!

This is a great forum. It joins me to others in the uni - something I haven't felt in quite a while. Technically down here at [faculty redacted] we are an affiliated (sp?) campus and quite removed from the central hub of main campus. This is the perfect virtual solution. I love it!

Describing culture involves tracing and reporting on relationships between people. It is inherently messy, unstable and hard to describe (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007; Malkki, 2007). Malkki claims that ethnographers need to be involved to describe culture usefully: to interpret the connections we observe and report our sense of them. I was fully involved in the project as blogger and commenter. It was sometimes almost a shock when one of the other participants reminded me that this was ‘my’ world – that I had created it specifically to ‘get data’ for my thesis, and it sometimes made me uncomfortably aware of my dual role.

However, although I do not consciously remember any tensions between my ‘blog self’ and my ‘researcher self’, I have uncovered some of my forgotten struggle with reflexivity – with the self-awareness I experienced during the period that the blogs were running – in the private blog that constituted my fieldnotes for this project.

From my private blog (not available to readers)

Problem of the informed informant

Interesting how interested my participants are in my our/my study. Of course they are - they are intelligent and critical human beings and want to know that I'm representing them and us properly. As I would too. But it certainly
prevents me seeing myself as any kind of 'expert' ethnographer visiting and reporting from an alien community. They will keep me honest.

February 28, 2007

what I hate about being in the project is...

…that I feel like the cheerleader. Because I kind of understand more about the process I get irritated with their assumptions (especially about writing) and the victim shit. While the others are giving tea and sympathy I'm telling them to sort it out.

I'm trying hard not to keep giving answers, just to react to what they write, but it's a tough one. It's a natural inclination for me, plus I'm older, plus I know something about the supervision process and the balance of power, and it's a real handicap in this project.

Although, re-reading my recent comments - the others all do it too, so that's not so bad...

But I'm quite consciously censoring what I write, and I don't like it!

Observing life in a community of people who may never meet face-to-face means that you have to face the dirty little secret that all ethnographers know but often don't discuss: participants may lie. In cyberspace, of course, they may lie about anything and everything, including their name, age, and gender.

To be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied there is to participate. To participate is to know enough about the rules for interaction and movement so that movement and interaction with and within this space is possible. Although this may not be so different than what we experience whenever we enter any strange context, it seems very blatant in cyberspace, perhaps because this process cannot be ignored, and because movement and interaction create embodied presence, not simply accompany it. (Markham, 1998, p. 23)

We were present, in a very real sense, when we communicated through our blogs. And, like me, the other participants were both aware and unaware at different times of the context of their writing.

“  ”

6 November 2006

Comment from Grainne

You know… , it's silly, but at some stage I forgot that I am meant to be writing things for someone else's PhD...good luck with the presentations and the writing.

7 November 2006
Comment from Esther

I have often thought about this… Are you getting some good data from us on this blog? Or has it turned into a ramble with very little to do with what you wanted to look at to start with?

7 November 2006

Comment from Grainne

And then you've got the question...is 'bad' data probably more authentic than 'good' data that is clearly written to be part of someone's PhD? You know, ..., if you'd let us know your research question, I'm sure I could produce some very relevant stuff - I worry that I rant a lot!!! Or would that defeat the purpose?

7 November 2006

Comment from Debra

What are your research questions, anyway? I'm asking everyone because I'd be interested to know. Perhaps they have already been mentioned and I have missed it...

All I could do was give them my research questions as they were at the time (they changed later), but stress that I really didn’t want them to consciously write to them – and to the best of my knowledge they soon forgot what the framing of the project was, and lapsed into less self-conscious writing fairly quickly. I accepted what participants said as representing their thoughts and feelings at the time they described them. Of course, they were constructing their prose for us all as readers, but it seems unlikely they were setting out to be deliberately deceptive in what they said.

To explore in another way the ‘truth’ and ‘usefulness’ to my thesis of the data, I needed to explore what ‘community’ meant in the context of the blogs – as Rutter and Smith (2005) write at the end of their ethnography conducted in a newsgroup, “What does withdrawal amount to when you have never really been fully ‘there’?” (p. 88). When members of a community live most of their lives outside the context that forms the basis of a study, the ‘immersion in the life of a community’ that ethnographers aim for raises issues about the meaning of time in an online ethnography. Hine (2000) talks about “temporal dislocation” (p. 65) to describe the feeling of moving ‘in’ and ‘out’ of online communities, which may move on where you're not there, but will also leave a permanent record of all changes that you can pick up when you return. Not only was I a visitor to the blogging community – the community that I had begun and we co-created – but even the participants visited the community only intermittently. Yet in a sense we were ‘there’ all the time: our words were there and could be responded to even when we were not online.

Ethnographers need bounded sites for their study; they define a bounded culture as their subject. I created my own bounded site – the blogs weren’t visible to the trawling bots of a search engine, although people could (and occasionally reported that they did) give others the address of their own blog. And the study
took place within the bounded culture of the University of Sydney, which occupies a physical place on earth but is also – as we shall see later in this thesis – an idea, an iconic institution, with many epistemological and ontological framings that may not be evident to its students or even its staff. The participants brought many different cultures to the 'place' that I created the shell for, and that they furnished and decorated: their cultural backgrounds, their disciplinary cultures, their lives – as graduate students, as family members, as working professionals. Together we created a new culture, one of PhD bloggers that was unique to our site. The spatial divides and dimensions of the experience of doing a PhD in this study were provided by the disciplines and epistemological divides within the University, not by the physical placement of members of the community in the geographical sense.

Internet ethnography is done ‘by the seat of your pants’; it’s the fieldwork you can do without leaving your desk (Markham 1999; Hine 2000). The communities that internet ethnographers study are, in one sense, completely contingent: they have existence in the minds of the people who make them up, and in the visible signs of creation of internet texts and links. But they are as true a representation of the people who make them up as the craft group, football club, church congregation or political party in which they are based, even if they will never meet – as Markham (2005) points out, “Many of us can probably name close colleagues and friends whom we would not recognise in person.” (p. 794). I have been involved in international internet-based communities in which we have created actual things for a member who had suffered a great loss in their life. I have contributed knitted squares to be made into blankets for a couple who had lost everything in a forest fire in the US, for a man who had a diagnosis of cancer, and for a man who had lost his partner of 30 years to AIDS after a long illness. I myself received a tangible gift put together by a group of internet friends (mostly in the US) after the death of my partner in 2002. Human responses to tragedy often find a form of making or giving to express their connection, whether that connection is physical or virtual.

The question of the distinction between people’s ‘real life’ and the discussions in which they participate in ‘virtual life’, and which informs what when, is one that has continuing currency. Baym’s seminal study of online discussion groups (1995) showed that "online groups are … woven into the fabric of offline life rather than set in opposition to it" (Hine 2000). In my project (as in Hine's ethnographic study of websites that grew up around the 1997 arrest, subsequent trial, conviction and deportation from the United States of British nanny Louise Woodward), offline experiences created the fabric of the online interactions. Additionally, online discussions in turn influenced offline experiences, which then created more material for the online community to discuss, and so on. Orgad (2005) carefully dissects the issue of the crossovers between offline and online communities in her study, which investigates the meaning of internet use by women with a chronic disease; she talks about “the inextricable links between the two” (p. 64).

Hine (2000) begins her book *Online Ethnography* with the question of whether the internet is a cultural artefact or constitutes a culture in itself. How this
question is answered by a researcher will determine both how a study is conducted and how its results are contextualised. How it is understood by subjects will determine how they respond to a researcher. Her answer, in short, is that it is both – to which view I entirely subscribe. Being both created by and used by humans as a tool, it is a cultural artefact. Joinson (2003) uses Vygotsky's (1978) word 'mediation' (explaining how tools allow for the extension of human capabilities) in his discussion of how word processing has affected the way we think about writing and editing. The online environment, similarly, has affected the way we think about written communication.19

I have discussed Hine’s second point – that the internet itself creates and sustains human culture – above. In this thesis, I am looking at the way that this digital culture supported communitas (as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis) among the participants in my study. An example of how the blogs facilitated the communitas that Turner considered a characteristic of communities inhabiting liminal space follows in the extended (although edited) passage. It takes the form of a discussion, mainly between two participants from different disciplines, of ideas at the heart of their theses. Participants demonstrate here how this project provided a place to write and think – both personally and academically – safely and without being judged. Within the space of the blogs they read, comment, offer practical assistance and thoughtful feedback, as a community undertaking different but related projects in their own PhD candidatures.

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19 Until recently, all internet communication has been written; now video linking and VOIP are allowing live video feeds and ‘phone calls’ to take place over the internet extremely cheaply, and facebook, twitter, you-tube and social media are changing irrevocably the ways that people communicate and ‘know’ each other. It is not within the scope of this thesis to consider how these will affect the way we view communication in the future.)
through the absence of people, even if they were people you never really knew in the first place. A lot of my attitudes towards men stem from my own constructed beliefs about my [close family member]. I keep on thinking and wondering about what creates us, as people and as professionals - is it the community we work in? Are the professional and the personal so entwined that they can't be separated? Do we have a need in constructing our own life narrative to people it with mentors? We'd all like to believe that there is a love of our life, but do we create our inspirations as well? How can we separate the self and the context it's formed in? What do you all think? I'd be particularly interested in your take on this, Esther, given your research on transitions - are they about the self in crisis? The divided self?

I've been reading a lot, and wondering: Is identity.....

• A form of argument? (MacLure, 1993)
• The type of person you are recognised to be in a given context? (Gee, 2000)
• The merging of person, culture and practice? (Lacasa et al, 2005)
• Our reflective views and identification with a group?
• Determined by communication and the roles we play in our interactions with the Other? (Mead, 1934)
• The way we negotiate our social roles?
• A reflexively organised endeavour (Giddens, 1991) where we create our own biographies in the postmodern world?

I have a feeling that the next couple of years are about me figuring this out for myself! There is something liberating about questions for which there is no real answer...

20 Sept 2006

Comment by Esther

Grainne, I am so impressed with your analysis of your work, yourself and the interactions that you have with people. And you think you haven't moved far!

... 

Thinking about it, I suppose my [participants] do present as a divided self. Private and personal selves have clearly articulated boundaries and it is almost that they grow into their professional skins, confident that their personal self is well developed - at least that they are comfortable about it. Personally, I wear my heart on my sleeve and what you see professionally is the personal Esther as well. And so it is interesting to note the differences and acknowledge that this probably has a huge impact on how [my participants] develop and interact with their patients. The division between personal and private is not articulated though. This perspective however is from having "gazed" at the data as it was presented to me - not direct quotes of thoughts from participants.

20 Sept 2006
Comment by Grainne

Thanks Esther, interesting food for thought as ever!

I don't know if you've ever read [reference given], but it is interesting. Will write more later, but it's very interesting about your participants and how they leave themselves out of the process. Do you think this could be because of the culture of performativity, whereby institutional regulations and increasing admin work and the need for accountability downplay the caring side of work? A lot of my participants have told me that they increasingly feel that they are being required to fit a professional mould, and they are so sidetracked by this that they often feel that the needs of their [employer] and to present themselves as being professional have caused them to abandon an ethic of service and act out a role rather than putting their sense of self into the job. A lot of them felt particularly upset by this. (Probably the difference between my research and yours is that I am looking at mid-career [...] as opposed to early-career professionals...)

22 Sept 2006

Comment by Esther

I think you have hit the nail on the head. I have named one of the other categories "Timely practice" where participants struggled to fit all of the tasks that they had to do into their working day. A couple of them recalled that they left their [workplace] up to two hours late because they couldn't get everything done in their allocated 8hrs. There is just so much to do that they focus on the skills rather than the nurturing. Some of the literature talks of quite an extended period of time before [my profession] can actually interact with their environment rather than being driven by it. I know from personal experience that when I started (and as I watch [my profession] in beginning practice) that I could only focus on the task at hand. "Sorry don't talk to me yet, I'm doing a blood pressure and can't concentrate on two things at once". In my [professional] practice now, I find that I do multiple things at the same time.

22 Sept 2006

Comment by Esther

Grainne, I'm also chasing down an article that I think might be useful for your work about [profession named] professional identity and the impact that that has on the individual within the system. Of course, now I can't find the damn thing and it must have been in the time when I was reorganising my Endnote library. I'll keep searching though.

23 Sept 2006

Comment by Grainne

Being able to use Endnote would be good...I haven't yet learnt, the thought of transferring all my references makes me feel queasy, but I know it must be done at some time.

I think the focus on skills as opposed to nurturing is becoming very common in teaching, particularly because of the culture of performativity, whereby there is an increased emphasis on performance standards and management and
economic rationalism as opposed to the ethic of service and the welfare-state ethos that has traditionally governed public [professions]. In such an environment, only the skills become valued as opposed to the nurturing, and they take so long to acquire and are privileged so much.

15 Oct 2006

Comment by Kylie

Grainne, I am constantly amazed by the extent to which we seem to have lived somewhat parallel lives.

My favourite teacher from high school (English, of course) did in fact die of cancer at the start of 2004. She was a strong lady, the kind of teacher that year 7's fear, and HSC students love :) I went and saw her in hospital a few days before she went, and I was very sad when it happened. She left a definite impression on my life, and I know that when I am lost in my teaching I try to shift my identity to emulate hers.

Absent [relatives] sure don't help at all either. My [relative] only lives 10 minutes away but he might as well have gone awol. These things sure do shape our identity, but they also shape our everyday lives and practices, in the sense that we are always battling to negotiate the line between personal and professional, and this is much harder when the personal aspect consumes your thinking and feeling space.

15 Oct 2006

Comment by Grainne

Thanks, Kylie. Yes, the absent [relative] thing is difficult - although he has a mental illness so it's actually much harder when he's around. Those sorts of things do become difficult mainly from the thinking space they take up and the problems they leave behind them (I won't go into the whole complicated saga). In some ways though, it's great not to have 'had it easy' - I look at some of my friends and they have so few coping skills because they've never had to develop them. I think having had some personal/family problems makes you much less judgmental and also means that you can relate to a wider variety of people. …All in all, who'd have it easy?

How information was exchanged and built into the knowledge base of the participants in my project has been captured in amazing detail in their writing. I have, of course, had to edit some of the text, but in the following excerpts I given a few examples of the emotional ‘truth’ of conversations as they appear to me. Returning to a key theme of this thesis, for example, I was able to identify many occasions when students identified ‘pedagogical events’ that might be called ‘accidental’. Grainne, who was teaching part-time, provides an example of an unexpected insight into her own PhD skill development.
Comment by Grainne on Dawn’s blog

Sounds strange, but I think I only really learnt how to write a few weeks ago! And that's from teaching a low-stream Year 9 class how to write - just having to divide things up that way and make them so explicit really did make me think about how I write and whether I'm being explicit enough...

Practical co-support was also common between participants.

Participant Blog: Dawn

Source of cheap books

One of my knitting friends has alerted me to this: [link for the Book Depository] great cheap source of books online. I have already ordered three books for my PhD from them (along with some knitting books!) It's in the UK but they don't charge for delivery, even to distant shores. They quote their price, and below it the price from Amazon for the same book (and of course Amazon charges for delivery).

Check it out!

Comment from Esther

Holy moley this is incredible! What a wonderful resource! Thank you so much both Dawn and Dawn's friend ... looks like my visa card bill won't be as bad as once thought!

Comment from Debra

Thanks for that! It's been bookmarked!

Another example of the way that the blogs worked is the expression of the ‘informed rah rah’ factor: the kind of support that is only possible among people who are sharing a long-term experience none of them have ever had before. In this passage several participants are discussing their background chapter and literature review in the context of their conceptual frameworks. They reveal much about how they think about their projects and their identities in this exchange, and we can see how the more experienced members of the group are able to reassure people who are more recently enrolled.
Going slowly....

Do you ever find that you have these amazing sudden bursts of enthusiasm that last for about....5 hours? I've just had one of those yesterday, but for the most part, everything seems so slow. I miss the structure of Honours in some ways - so manageable and you always knew where you'd be placed in each and every month! As opposed to now. I know that keeping up the motivation is going to be the hardest thing.

My research is on [professional] identities - how our beliefs, values and actions influence the way we [do professional work], and how the institutions/… culture in which we work impacts upon our professional self. I've spent the last few days wading through a lot of stuff on identity, and I'm finding it quite hard-going at times. I love the whole idea that we're all postmodern now and thus we've entered into an era where relativism and dualism can be tolerated - but EVERY bit of theoretical research that I've read seems to contradict each other! I'm at the stage where I'm finding it all very interesting, and become a convert to X's views until I read Y's article - and then change my opinions completely when I read Z's work.

The idea of doing a literature review is something I find a little frustrating. Not because I think I know it all (see last paragraph for how little I feel I know at times!), but it's always hard to know how much of your own thought you should be putting into it - as opposed to analysing a bunch of theorists' work. I really like the idea of being able to diverge from all that a bit and synthesise and evaluate stuff a bit more, and the summaries bit is quite frustrating for me because I always question whether I'm doing anything remotely new - surely a 2nd year undergraduate could do as much with a lot of time and a love of reading research?

Comment from Debra

… about all those references of what other people are saying - I kinda went through all that myself, I feel. I feel i can relate … But now it's like three years since I started my Lit Review - and most of my original thoughts have be thrown out the window - so don't worry yourself too much over it. It's nice just to see what other academics have to say, even if they are contradictive - but what you ultimately end up presenting in your final thesis will be determined by what YOU want to discuss as a result of YOUR data collection - eventually it does become YOUR say. You just use other people's arguments to debate or support YOUR project. I think you have to know other people's arguments first so you know where they fit with you. I guess what I'm trying to say is: it wasn't my favourite thing to do at first either, but reflecting back now - I'm glad I had those suitcases full of books checked out from the library! And another thing maybe i should mention is that I must have rewritten my Lit Review twenty times - and it's still changing...
Ahh...the literature review. In the spirit of using these blogs to spill all of our dark secrets, can I confess that I have not finished my literature review. Let me explain.

Firstly, I have separated out what I hear a lot of people referring to as a "literature review" into a chapter called "background" and a chapter called "lit review". I HAVE finished the "Lit Review" chapter - this is the chapter where I review the other research that has been done in my specific field and identify the 'holes' or 'gaps' in that research to justify my own study. I HAVEN'T finished my "Background" chapter though, which is the chapter where you explain the theory and the history of the field in general. I think I will blog in my blog about this soon.

So, yet another lesson from sister Kylie about what NOT to do in a PhD (i.e. not finish your BACKGROUND chapter - of all things - until your final year. But hopefully something to make others feel warm and fuzzy also about being less crap than me ;)

Debra, it's very reassuring to learn that you have rewritten your lit review so many times as I suspect I will do the same. Indeed, I suspect everyone would if they were being honest with themselves because surely your thoughts can change so many times between writings? And hopefully that's what a PhD is about, the growth in thoughts...Sister Kylie, I have a suspicion that the background chapter actually is best done close to last! (Not that I would know, but when I did honours I did write my lit review last - and this is because that way I'd know if was totally relevant to my findings as writing it first didn't feel right at the time!).

Oooh, yes - and then the terrible thing is that you then go and reference pieces of work that OTHER people think are seminal - which doesn't help, but you're so busy trying to cover all bases that you don't stop and think that actually Foucault and Bourdieu and Althusser (why do they all have French names?) are not totally relevant to your topic! You despise yourself for all this name-dropping, but it's so hard to avoid it as you know that even though you think it's silly, the mystical 'examiner out there' might pick you up on it!
I discussed the notion of ‘Troubles Talk’, (Mewburn 2011) in my introduction to this thesis; in this exchange Grainne moved from an anxious post to a much more positive view on her PhD experience due to wise words from Kylie, who was further through the process.

**Participant Blog: Grainne**

**Top 10 PhD Fears**

Not that I am a particularly fearful person, but I do find that sometimes doing a PhD has a lot of doubts and fears involved, just because the process is so unfamiliar and because I can't talk about it to my friends (well, I can, but I know that they think it's a bit boring!). Here are my top 5 fears (in no particular order):

- Never finishing!!! I know I have awhile to go before this would become a problem, but I have seen so many good students get stuck at a particular stage (I feel a bit stuck on the literature review part at the moment, and I haven't written any!) I dread the idea of not completing, or of taking ages to complete.

- Being unemployable due to intense competition for academic jobs (big fear: not so bad in that I am a qualified [professional] and would be happy to do that - but I guess no one does a PhD so that they can then go back and use their undergraduate degree)

- Becoming depressed, sad, lonely etc - I've never experienced depression, but a friend's partner developed terrible clinical depression at the start of his PhD from feelings of intense isolation

- Lack of money!!! (Enough said: this fear is perfectly reasonable!)

What about anyone else - do the fears ever change?

**Comment from Kylie**

Ha - in a word, NO. They never change, never go away - they only morph.

The fear of not finishing only gets stronger the further along you are, so get used to that one.

Being unemployable gets to be less of an issue as you realise that you can, in fact 'cut it' - but this fear morphs into a fear of choosing the wrong job, going down the wrong path. If doing a PhD was a bad choice, that's OK, because it'll be over in 3-4 years...choosing a post-PhD job means locking yourself into a choice that has no foreseeable end, so the pressure to make the RIGHT choice is big.

Becoming lonely or depressed is nothing to fear, because it's something that you can DO something about. Making some buddies 'on the ground' that you
can have lunch with at Uni etc is gold, but networks like these blogs help a lot as well. And friends that aren't doing/haven't done a PhD will just never understand, so having PhD specific friends is important, I think. Lack of money fears get worse the older you get. It sucks. And working takes the focus away from your research in a big way. On that front you just have to juggle the best you can I'm afraid...find a cheap local pizzeria!

19 July 2006

Comment from Grainne

Funny - we all do have so many fears, don't we? I'm surprised as well about how the lack of money one only seems to get worse - I mean, obviously, as a [profession] I don't especially care about money - but even just thinking about whether I'll ever be able to buy a home is scary!

Kylie, I also know what you mean about PhD specific friends - other people don't much understand. I've actually become really close to a girl I detested at high school simply because we are both now doing PhDs, albeit in very different areas...

It was surprising to me how often the discussion provided practical, timely support for the work of a participant. Like the discussion on writing a literature review already quoted, in a discussion on interview technique, participants developed their understanding of the practice of conducting interviews, and at the same time confronted some realities of academic work: the essential aloneness of research in many disciplines, the need for HDR students to take a stand on the importance of their work, and the inherent messiness of all research.

08 September 2006

Participant Blog: Grainne

A good interview...

Had my first really wonderful interview yesterday (research interview, that is, not job interview - the only good job interviews I've had were, sadly, for jobs I didn't really want that much!), exhilarating stuff! Now to transcribe it. A wonderful vibe surrounding the whole thing - the first few interviews weren't as good. I always wonder whether it's my skills as an interviewer or just the interaction of different individuals that makes some interviews seem a little flat. Yesterday's interviewee was such an energetic individual with views about everything - even though the public transport system let me down and hence I was incredibly late. It was refreshing to come into contact with someone who was such a passionate [professional]. I greatly look forward to hearing more from her, although her views were so quotable that I have a feeling they won't do my word-limit any favours...
Comment from Dawn

Good to read this, Grainne. There has to be some gold in the dross.

Comment from Esther

Congrats on the great interview Grainne. It's very satisfying and incredibly energising when it happens. I know that when doing my own interviews I got quite depressed that they just weren't going anywhere and had to be bolstered a bit by my supervisors and girlfriend that the work was indeed good and worthy. In true womanly fashion I assumed it was all my fault that the interviews weren't going well (truth be told it was just that they weren't progressing as I had expected them to), that I was stupid, incompetent and fell into a bit of a fug about why anyone would be even remotely interested in my work.

I think that a whole load of things play into the "success" of the interview and you have rightly identified some of them. Is it you? Is it your participant? Has the weather changed suddenly messing up papers that were in a tightly organised order? I came to the conclusion that they were what they were. I needed to come to the table as open as I could and tried very hard to let participants talk. Even if they had had a bad day, it was in the interest of my work to let them let it out. Some really interesting stuff came from one of my participants who had just moved into a … specialty that she hated, didn't see the point of and whose organisation she despised. As she entered the interview room like a little stormcloud I thought to myself "this is going to be terrible!". As it turned out, it was raw, uncontrolled emotion and very useful in how I came to appreciate the concept of transition for my [participants]. When I fed these emotions back to my other participants in subsequent emotions, they identified with it immediately but because the intensity of their experience was different, they didn't feel that it warranted a mention. When it was raised it for them, the interviews flew! They brought up stuff that I (and the literature) had not even vaguely considered!

Comment from Grainne

Interviews [must be] oddly like teaching in terms of the unpredictability of good moments - for teaching:

did the kids have assembly just before? Is it a mufti day? Is it raining? Will they all be caught up in the latest bit of gossip? Will they get oddly excited by what you're wearing for no apparent reason? Will they make idle chatter and refuse to work?

For interviews:

Does the [participant] have a [stressful professional meeting] and will thus spend half the time stressing about it? Are they driven demented by [repetitive professional tasks]? Is there tension in the staffroom? Are there arguments about the … budget? Is it a Friday and they're dying to get home? Did they
have a bad/good encounter … that day? Have they been to a meeting with bureaucrats and have inexplicably decided that all policies and all pieces of research are wanky and couldn't represent their lived experiences?

Of course, any or all of these variables could actually lead to more memorable teaching or interviewing! Your interview with the annoyed participant was probably fantastic - and yet she could have been mediocre on a different day. I'm doing reflexive research, so I can see myself writing up a lot about the temporality of the interview situation!

11 September 2006 ...

**Comment from Esther**

It's hard isn't it. I think there is a big difference too between being alone and being lonely. I understand how that can happen even in such an obviously bustling and busy faculty as [faculty name]. I think this is where the funny relationship that one has with one's supervisors comes into play. Like yourself, I'd love to be chatting all the time with people in the faculty about my work, their work, work that's been published and new and innovative stuff that is happening in the industry. The reality of it is of course, that everyone is in at different times, if they come in at all. So who is left to chat about your stuff to? Your supervisors. Wonderful people, fountains of knowledge and very inciteful with their comments. I sometimes feel though, that there is an element of me wanting to impress them and so not wanting to discuss the "works in progress". Perhaps it's a hang up from my undergraduate days where the academics were seen as the assessors and ultimately gave you a passing or failing grade. I think there is a little bit of that still hanging around given that the progress of your candidature - i.e. whether you keep on being a PhD student - kind of rests in their hands. They have to sign off that you have made sufficient progress with your work and recommend that you should continue. I know it's silly. I know that it's something that I've just got to get over. That these are now my colleagues who are honestly interested in my work, not because they have to be but because my work is interesting. But it still kicks around in my head. Hmmm. I must get over this.

Blogging is an outstanding way of overcoming this, if only you can get people who are interested enough to write on a regular basis. Time is so precious isn't it, and it's very easy to say "I'll get onto that tomorrow ... I've just got to get x, y and z done now, then I can write on the blog" (I know 'cause I do it myself). I have really come to enjoy starting my day with a blog. It seems to kick start me into action!

15 September 2006

**Comment from Esther**

Not sure whether it gets any better in second year. I know for me that I was further along the neurotic pathway in second year than having solved any major issues. I still worried about it incessantly (and still do), but perhaps you just get more comfortable with the dissonance inherent in your work. When you study anything at this level - so much detail and simultaneous generality - it is bound to be complex and anything but straightforward. Perhaps it's about
accepting the messyness of the project. Mine is all over the place despite some excellent, seemingly coherent and ordered diagrams!!!!

16 September 2006

**Comment from Grainne**

I guess the first-year-progress thing is pretty ambiguous. I often discuss this with my office mate, who feels she hasn't made enough progress. Yet to me, an outsider, I can see that, whilst she hasn't started writing, she's done so much conceptualising and generative data collecting and all sorts of things, whereas I tend to write in order to conceptualise things, rather than do the thinking and then the writing.

The messiness of the project is a hard thing to accept - but also quite liberating in its way, I think! I guess you end up becoming quite tolerant of inconsistencies.

In contrast, sometimes people just used the blogs for chatty silliness – although mutual support was still evident.

24 July 2006

**Participant Blog: Debra**

Hey you! I finally can read your blogs! how cool. It's been crazy getting me up and going on this. I want to go to Darwin some day. Sounds fun - glad to hear your conference went well and that you are finishing your chapter. I probably won't have time to touch on my PhD until after August - maybe after December - but come October, I hope to dive in deep. Right now I am doing a massive … project which i received a $1000 grant for - and I'm working on another … project in addition to that. So art is consuming me until further notice. Oh, won't my Supervisors be so proud? Anyway, nice reading about what you're up to. …

25 July 2006

**Comment from Debra**

hey i was just going to respond again - and then I'm reading the above and I'm realising i already responded - alright - cool - onto the next person - wait! How are you? BB06 is on in 17 minutes - do you realise you're the one that got my hooked on that in the first place? I never even heard of it until I met you - and then you said I would love it. Anyway, it's my exercise time - that's how I look at it. i do my pilates while I watch BB.

25 July 2006
Of all the methods I could have chosen to generate data for this research project, I think I was very lucky to have lighted on blogs. It is no accident that bloggers use their blogs to record their adventures in renovating, crafting and fashion, gardening, cooking, eating out, current affairs, child-rearing and chronic illness: all involve constant change, movement and development – which is, of course, a feature of PhD candidature. But candidature moves towards a fixed goal – a goal that is often seen as a means to an end (i.e. an entrée into academia or a new stage in professional life) rather than an end in itself. Walker describes blogs as having “…no whole; they are not objects. They are processes, actions, sites of exchange” (2006, p. 137), a description that closely mirrored the understanding of PhD candidature I have developed. Also blogging, like the process of gaining a PhD, is both an exercise in written communication and a social practice. The sense of ownership that bloggers generally feel in their blogs was demonstrated over and again as participants in this study enacted our own personal performances within the space I provided and we each decorated and filled.

Using student blogs was a method that enabled me to dig into the quotidian experience of being a PhD student in an authentic way – by which I mean that I was able to capture bits of the experience in a timely fashion over an extended period of time, although not in any way wishing to claim that I have been able to tell ‘the whole story’ of that experience. I have taken Denzin’s (1999, pp. 510-511) view of ethnography as rooted in narrative, trying to understand meaning-making in people’s daily lives, as political: querying power relationships and empowerment, and as telling stories about “How humans experience moral community”. In his words, I have taken “performance texts” (the participant blogs) and situated them in the context of higher education in Australia (with its constant theme of “scarce material resources”), current thinking about doctoral work and how “power is exercised” therein. I have situated my study in the ways that Australian academia, and the University of Sydney in particular, “construct(s) meaning” from doctoral study.

Key informants

I interviewed 11 people who worked at the University, in their offices, over a period of 7 months from November 2008. With the exception of the Director of Graduate Studies Simon French, whose contribution to my understanding is detailed in Chapter 3, all key informants were academic staff with a history of
supervision, in some cases ranging over 30 years. Table 3 provides a summary of the key informants’ positions in relation to the PhD at Sydney, with the pseudonyms I used in this thesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Disciplinary background</th>
<th>Present or former position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Senior central administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Former central administrator; theorist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Faculty Administrator; theorist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desmond</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Senior central administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polly</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Central administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>Applied Science</td>
<td>Faculty administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>Senior central administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mat</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Former central administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Applied Science</td>
<td>Faculty administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Former faculty administrator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Key Informants interviewed for this study

I am not providing dates for these interviews, because that could compromise their anonymity. These positions are usually rotating and, given that I have indicated their broad disciplinary area, it would not be difficult to identity informants if one knew the actual date on which I had interviewed them. The interviews were largely open-ended: I briefly described my project and why I wanted to hear their views and experiences, then let them explain to me their own conceptualisations of what a PhD is – generally, in the University, or in their discipline: what it means to work on one, and what it means to supervise and/or examine one. I was particularly interested in their views on supervision and examination; if these didn’t come up I would specifically ask a question designed to open up this area of the conversation.

How I approached the data

I did not attempt to code any data until the blogs had run down, although I was still conducting interviews. As my aim was to centre the student experience, I developed my raw categories in an emergent way: my reading of the Australian literature on PhD had put categories in my mind that would almost certainly prove useful: such things as supervision, skills development and examination. Then I spent weeks reading and rereading the texts of the blogs, listing themes as they seemed to me to emerge and present themselves as important, to come up with an initial list. Appendix 4 lists the categories – the nodes in NVIVO – that I initially developed while coding the data, along with a description of each and the number of people whose text was coded at the nodes, and the number of times I coded any data at that mode.

I continued to read and re-read the texts of both the blogs and University and government documentation. I listened over and over to the recordings of the
interviews, using iterative coding. I read or listened, coding and recoding as I went, using NVivo to ‘tag’ words and phrases and themes. This brought the narratives in both the blogs and the interviews to life, months or years after they first occurred. It also enabled me to find and create links between the different narratives and various policy documents. I could then think about all of them in terms of each other, and also of the themes that were emerging from them and from my other theoretical reading. The linkages that the program enabled me to make were rich and thought-provoking, and would never have occurred without the ‘space’ created by the program which brought them together.

Over time, my categories became grouped together. This second list of grouped nodes are presented as Figure 1. These groups were the basis of the thinking that I developed about the experience of the students in the project and the way that the University frames the degree.

As this thesis is framed by notions of pedagogy and the PhD curriculum, I’m centrally interested in what and how people learn while they’re engaged in PhD studies, so I looked at all the data through that lens, trying to keep my focus on what the students were experiencing. I have read and re-read, listened and re-listened, coding the texts created by the project to the keywords that I’ve established from my reading and thinking about curriculum and pedagogy. My method is deconstructive: I attempt to read all the texts in the context of each other. While I’m reading a University document I’m thinking about what it might mean for an enrolled student and how it is influenced by the present approach to government funding. While I’m re-reading a blog entry, say about a supervisor, I’m thinking about the comments from other bloggers, and about theoretical approaches to the pedagogy of supervision, and about both faculty conventions (epistemological and often unspoken) and University rules (written but sometimes opaque) around supervision. When I’m reading about the pedagogy of supervision I’m thinking about how supervisors have been and are being ‘trained’ at the University, and about how the government funds the PhD process, and in turn how the University funds faculties for their PhD students, and of course how students say they experience the pedagogy described. Reading texts against each other in this way leads to an analysis that can’t avoid being political – meaning it can’t avoid revealing the relations of power that it involves.
Figure 1: Secondary nodes and node organisation
The deconstruction I’ve done in this thesis, following Grant (2005b), recognises that language, even (or, perhaps, especially?) the carefully constructed language of government or university policy, is “slippery and indeterminate” (p.18); my interpretations are solely my own – although of course I hope they will be of interest and make sense to readers. Like Grant, I attempt to “open up and proliferate the meanings … rather than to narrow them down to a core truth” (p.19), and thus have resisted neat conclusions. And, again like Grant, I have attempted to investigate the power in a supervisory situation and reveal the competing ‘pulls’ at play, rather than simplifying the situation to supervisors having ‘power over’ students. This is how the small ‘p’, local political – the micropolitical factors that I discussed in the Introduction of this thesis – plays out in supervision.

Grant’s final point on deconstruction is the one I have found the most problematic: the necessity to try “at every step to problematise both my authority as textual commentator and that of the texts themselves.” (p. 19). She delineates two approaches to text: the ‘mastery’ approach, where the researcher presents unproblematised interpretations, and the ‘liberty’ approach, in which texts (participants) ‘speak for themselves’. Citing Hodge and McHoul (1992), she aims for “a self-conscious mode of textual commentary, that problematises itself even as it takes place … (although the pitfalls of mastery and liberty will continue to haunt such an approach).” (p. 19). Trying to tread the line between these two pitfalls has meant that while I have quoted sometimes rather long extracts from participants’ blogs and the resulting comments to avoid using only the ‘bits’ that support my insights, I have also added in reflections that occur to me as I write, and quoted from both my public and private blogs – where I recorded, from time to time, events and insights on contemporary events as a form of journalling. In this way, I hope, I am both re-presenting the reported lives of the participants and of my own in ‘running’ the project, and at the same time approaching a truly reflexive text.

One discussion on the blogs brought my dual roles as participant and researcher sharply into focus, and led me to think very hard about how I would re-present the words of the blogging participants.

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**Participant blog: Grainne**

19 September 2006

**Scary, scary conferences (take care not to smile at any part of this!)**

Which brings me back to remembering the first conference I ever went to. It was in Adelaide, and I didn't mind going alone but somehow I imagined that Adelaide would have a proper train system, which it didn't. Strike one in getting there. Then I entered, and who did I find but one of my former teachers, who I really wasn't at all fond of. It was nice to see a familiar face, in any case. Not so nice when I realised that she was presenting a paper on our
class, which she'd done some research on years and years back. And that I was
one of her case studies. She was keen for me to watch it, and she was on
before me. It was pretty awful - I disliked the way I'd been presented, I felt she
was relying on stereotypes etc etc.

As for the former teacher, she has since published a journal article about our
class - I wasn't misquoted or anything, but I still feel very uneasy over the way
I was presented. I've shown my participants my drafts of papers, interestingly
enough they often do want things to be extended upon so as to give a fairer
picture....

19 September 2006

Comment from Dawn

This made me feel quite anxious. I have been reading about the difficulties of
representing your 'subjects' ethically and don't want any of you to feel like this
about my eventual work. Maybe a good rule would be that I wouldn't be
embarrassed if any of you heard me present or read what I'd written about you.

20 September 2006

Comment from Grainne

It's funny, I know it sounds petulant of me, but it really did matter. I was
involved in a study with this teacher and it was a very different context - IQs
and social backgrounds - and she presented me as an underachiever and said
that it was related to my "dreadful home background and lack of
couragement from uneducated parents", which was a VERY unfair
assumption to make. And it was an assumption - I think I achieved fine, and if
I underachieved, it was from sheer adolescent bloody-mindedness in a couple
of subjects and nothing else!

I think the important thing when presenting your results is not to try and rely
on stereotypes - one of my friends, also in the study, was equally outraged by
hearing that she was an overachiever and achieved beyond her ability because
of her privileged background - again an assumption, and quite untrue given
that she had significant problems at home despite their wealth. Studies of
social class have the potential to really rile their participants!

After reading Grainne’s story of feeling misrepresented by her former teacher, I
did much reading and soul-searching on the subject of re-presenting
participants’ stories, eventually returning to Ruth Behar’s (1999) contribution in
the millennial issue of the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography. She refers to
the “intense and sustained reflection, even angst, that you find in ethnography
about telling a story that isn’t yours.” (p. 484). I realized that, of course, it was
absolutely normal to feel what I was feeling.

This is something quite profound and unique. Everyone steals stories,
absolutely everyone, except us. Or rather, we steal them too, but we feel
rotten about it. I have come to think that what ethnographers do best is
worry about why a story came into their hands in the first place. This
worry precedes ethnography; it is what gives our pursuit humility and earnestness and hope. Ethnography should go everywhere ethnographers want it to go but never with too much confidence. We must keep our heads a little bowed. Greatness eludes us. It is our loss of nerve that makes us ethnographers. That and our need, our irrepressible need, to go to real places to find the lost home of our imaginations. (Behar, 1999, p. 484)

However, there were other issues about the data that I needed to resolve. Researchers generally find the transcribing of interviews by ‘independent’ strangers to be unproblematic (although see Ross, 2010 for a discussion problematising this process). I did not transcribe my interviews (or have them transcribed) in full: I imported the recordings into NVIVO and listened to them many times, then slowly drew out and transcribed quotes that I wanted to code as relevant to my thesis – my interviews being relatively open-ended there were many passages which consisted of more general discussion which was not directly relevant to the work I wanted to present in this thesis.

The second issue was related to the use of software to encode and make connections between my various forms of data – policy documents, interviews audio files and of course the texts of the blogs. Although researchers are happy to read transcriptions on screen, there is a definite prejudice among some qualitative researchers against ‘coding’ – by which I mean using software to manage large amounts of data. Trowler (1997 n.p.) discusses this as two opposing points of view: the view that the many and rich ways that ethnographers (and others) have dealt with data will be subsumed into just a few ways of organising and reporting data (the “‘convergence’ model”), versus the view (that I share) that computer-aided coding has simply added another tool to the researcher’s array (“‘the repertoire-enhancement’ theorists”). At conferences, in workshops and at social events, other researchers have said to me that using specially designed software to code data means that you ‘lose control’ of the interpretive process, that the program makes decisions for you, that you are too far removed from the ‘voices’ of the participants. One of the project participants shared her struggle with using technology to re-present her participants’ voices.

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**Post in participant blog: Grainne**

13 Oct 2006

**Letting their voices speak or analysing what they say...**

Coding feels SO artificial!

I guess it's always going to be a dilemma. You can't do reflexive research, and be committed to those sorts of epistemological beliefs, and not have to deal

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20 Trowler was writing at a time when it was not possible to code images or audio or video material, and is thus limited to discussion of engagement with textual data. The arguments he canvases, however, are still heard.
with issues relating to one central dilemma: how do you reconcile a desire to represent and include the voices of the participants and the need to produce an analytical, issues-based piece of research which goes beyond the voices of individuals to link their concerns to broader social, economic and political discourses and educational imperatives?

I suspect that some of the problems that I have heard discussed are actually rooted in a lack of resolution of ‘mastery’ and ‘liberty’ approaches to data (Grant 2005, discussed above). In any case, none of these things have been true for me.

Summary

Given my position as one of the participants in my own PhD project, reflexivity was my only choice. Within the history of research into online communities, ethnographic method presented itself as the kind of study that I wanted to write. Having considered my positioning and the method of blogging as the main means of generating data – along with interviewing key people involved in administration of PhD at the University and searching out University and government documentation on the PhD – I spent some time reading and thinking through the epistemic issues I’d created for myself, which process I have recorded in this chapter of my thesis.

Before investigating the PhD in Australia in terms of a curriculum, I’d like to finish this discussion of ethnographic method and methodology by relating the notion of curriculum to Denzin’s statement: “Ethnography like art is always political.” (1999, p. 512) In terms of this thesis, there are many levels where the ‘political’ can be discerned, at both micro and macro levels. These political moments and situations are among the things that this thesis is designed to reveal and, as much as possible, to unpick and expose. At the level of the enacted curriculum, the relationship between supervisor and student, as heavily theorised as it is, remains a sacred cow, while the position of the student in their AOU, among their peers, and their institution more widely is poorly understood and under-theorised. At the level of the intended curriculum, universities provide an environment that includes supervisor training and support, policy and procedures and administrative support to carry out HDR processes, and physical provisions for students such as library services, computers and other equipment, office space, laboratories and studios. How this process aligns with the actual needs of students is generally poorly understood and not theorised. Finally, the most obviously ‘political’ of all things to do with PhD enrolment are the National Research Priorities (NRPs). As we shall see in Chapter 3, these priorities determine what monies the government will allot to research training, and how that funding will be distributed among both institutions and disciplinary groupings. Understanding how this has operated and how it continues to operate in Australia is a key part of understanding the shape of the PhD experience, and will be the subject of the next chapter of this thesis.
Chapter 3 – The hidden curriculum: secrets, history and money

“I don't know any other job where you work so hard to feel so dumb.”

Comment on participant blog: Kylie

6 August 2006

Participant blog: Grainne

Identities (or, lying back and thinking of England)

There's so many conflicting ideas and I feel like I'm just treading water at times, trying to cope with the massive and malevolent flow of information.

These two quotes, from the blogs of participants in my study, illustrate very clearly the liminal nature of PhD candidature: they know they don’t know, but they don’t know what they need to know. Despite efforts by the government and by institutions to present a rational picture of what a PhD ‘is’, this swirling mist of inaccurate context persists, shrouding the process of obtaining the qualification in an atmosphere of mystery. One of the worst things about being an HDR student is that much of what you might be helped by knowing is somehow hidden from your view; it is diffuse, riddled with myth, rumour and false assumptions.

As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the hidden curriculum – if you like, the very biggest picture of what PhD is in Australia – may not seem relevant to most students, or indeed to their supervisors or university administrators. In terms of the curriculum theory discussed in Chapter 1, this chapter will cover Lee’s Level C: the ideological framing that is implicit in all curricula but may not be understood or examined by participants. Gilbert (2009) describes the hidden curriculum as “knowledge, beliefs, values or practices which are implicit in the practice or culture of an institution or program and learned by its participants, but which are not explicitly derived from or openly designed to achieve the stated aims.” (p. 56) In this thesis this will include various ways that the nature of knowledge is understood, national government policies and funding arrangements, and the effects of disciplinary epistemologies and theories of PhD pedagogy. While these concerns may feel far from the experience of the individual student – or indeed the individual supervisor – like oxygen, the hidden curriculum can’t be escaped. Whether a student (or a supervisor) is aware of it or not, it still shapes candidatures (see McWilliam & Singh, 2002).
Discussing the process of examination of PhD theses in Australia, Holbrook and Bourke (2004a) describe the ‘layers in the … process that range from clearly articulated expectation to assumption and myth’ (p.160). My immediate thought on reading that was of recognition – when I read it in 2007 I was beginning to realise that these layers are not limited to the process of examination: they exist throughout the undertaking, management, funding and conceptualisation of PhD in this country.

**The PhD in Australia**

In his model of the doctoral enterprise, Cumming (2007) envisages ‘the academy’ in Australia as being very diffuse:

> Operating at local, national and international levels—in physical and virtual environments—the academy is represented in [my] model as a fluid and dynamic resource that is influencing participants engaged in the [doctoral] enterprise to varying degrees. (p. 122-123)

In this framing it is difficult, indeed, to see how one could make any kind of general statement about what part HDR students play in the academy, and how the academy might support or interfere with their efforts. This chapter places PhD candidature in the context of history, funding and culture – both disciplinary and institutional. To begin, I will offer a quick overview to illustrate both similarities and differences in institutional practice across the nation.

As described in Chapter 1, Australian Universities do not generally require a viva, or any kind of oral defence, to the examiners. These are usually mandatory in the UK model on which the Australian one was based (Johnston, 1997; A. Ward, 2008). As most New Zealand Universities – in which the PhD was developed at the same time as in Australia, also based on the UK model, and which are even more geographically isolated – do require a viva, the historical reason for the lack of viva or other oral examination in Australia is still not clear. Indeed Desmond, one of my key informants, discussed his viva – conducted at Australian National University in the early 1960s – as a practice which the University discontinued soon after. Another informant, Peter, discussed his recent participation as an examiner in viivas in New Zealand as a very useful way of enabling the candidate to claim and defend their knowledge. There is no doubt that the existence of a viva emphasises the person of the student in the examination process, which is, in Australia, presently focussed on the text of the thesis (Bourke & Holbrook, 2011; Holbrook et al., 2004a).

In at least some faculties at some Australian institutions (e.g. Queensland University of Technology, Australian National University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) there is, at time of writing, some use of a form of the US ‘public defence’ model – an event held some time before the submission of the thesis, so not, strictly speaking, an integral part of the examination process. And there is some use of the viva, especially in fine arts and performance disciplines, for example at RMIT and the University of Tasmania. A viva is also part of the process for submission at Sydney College of the Arts at the University of Sydney, but not in any other faculties or schools at the University.
The pedagogical significance of the use of these models will be discussed in Chapter 5.

**What is knowledge and what is it for?**

Although the PhD is supposed to result in the creation of new and original knowledge, as we have seen ‘originality’ is not a transparent concept. Nor is ‘knowledge’: Gilbert’s (2009) contribution to Lee and Boud’s book *Changing Doctoral Practices* lists six “major forms” of knowledge culled from several sources. They are worth reproducing here; he does not claim them to be exhaustive or independent of each other; nor that they could not be broken down further.

1. Abstract propositional or declarative knowledge – knowing about facts, theories, generalisations, concepts – often codified in formulae or codified in textual or diagrammatic form.
2. Abstract procedural knowledge involving conceptual skills and cognitive ability of analysis, explanation and problem solving.
3. Action knowledge involved in performance, interpersonal communication and psychomotor skills.
4. Tacit or habituated knowledge involved in expert practice and professional judgement.
5. Cultural understandings of the perspectives and experiences of others, including empathising and working with others through shared understandings.
6. Embedded knowledge residing in systematic routines, technologies and procedures, including tool and instrument use. (Gilbert, 2009, p.58)

The word ‘knowledge’ has also been co-opted in debates both inside and outside higher education through its use in the phrases ‘knowledge production’, ‘knowledge worker’ and ‘knowledge economy’. (What it means to produce original knowledge was canvassed earlier in this thesis.) Barnacle (2004) discusses students working in the professions before they enrol as HDR students, describing those students as being on the nexus of what is often called ‘mode 1’ and ‘mode 2’ knowledge. She posits these students as change agents, both in their profession and in the academy. Trowler (2012b) suggests that the increase in PhD projects in the previously ‘non-academic’ disciplines of art and design (discussed in Chapter 1) has changed the way that research is considered in these disciplines, by forcing students into a more formal, academic presentation of their work. Indeed, Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli & Richardson (2011) postulate a 3rd mode of knowledge that might encompass research in the creative arts, being “performative: a mode that adequately recognises the importance of the ‘sensual transport’ of the arts, and that asserts its equivalence through difference.” (p. 246) One of my key informants touched on the University’s role in knowledge creations:

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21See McWilliam, Taylor et al (2002) for an extended discussion of the relevance of these ‘modes’ to doctoral study.
Desmond, science, senior central administrator

The role of the University as a participant in the knowledge economy, by which I mean the act of knowledge generation, is an act of codification and simplification. So if you think of the way an idea develops - it starts out as a series of isolated experiences which people share. They gradually draw it together in some sort of convergent process, and it's simplified and it becomes public wisdom. It's a simple statement which is the result of a lot of work. Learning is the opposite: consider in a class of 20 bright student, all having the same learning experience, the odds are that you'll finish up with 20 idiosyncratic skill sets at the end of it.

Relating the production of knowledge directly to doctoral study, Boud & Lee (2009) talk about three sites of knowledge production for doctoral students: research, pedagogic and workplace. Although they are writing in relation to professional doctorates, this also relates to the many PhD students who are now completing a PhD in order to progress in their professional career. Cumming (2007) showed the knowledge created in the PhD candidatures as developed between and among different pedagogic situations throughout the course of the degree.

Discussion of the ‘value’ of ‘knowledge’ has shifted, in the last two decades, from being based in disciplinarity and defined by imperatives of the academy to being “governed by the economic needs of nation states and national systems” (Lee & Boud, 2009, p. 17). Technology, too, has transformed the ability to create, access, use and store knowledge – it is sometimes said to have ‘democratised’ knowledge and moved it from the grasp of the academy onto the streets, homes and offices of nations. Lee and Boud (2009) also mention that the solutions to complex problems (their example is environmental crises) now require knowledge to be held and shared between and among disciplines as the old disciplinary boundaries strain, weaken and begin to become permeable.

Singh, McWilliam and Taylor (2001) reported that “the contribution of HDR students to institutional research productivity” could “no longer simply be taken for granted” (p. 301), and Pearson (1999a) pointed out that the distinctions between pure and applied research are being dissolved, and inter- and trans-disciplinary research was growing at that time. Further, she claimed, …the balance of research carried out in universities, industry, government funded laboratories and other agencies in Australia is changing and is leading to universities becoming part of "a dense network of knowledge institutions that extends into industry, hospitals, government and the media." (ARC/NBEET, 1996) (p. 273)

McWilliam and Singh (2002) trace the beginning of the effect of the discourse of the ‘knowledge economy’ in Australia to the Kemp Policy Paper (1999) Knowledge and Innovation, which was almost entirely concerned with information and bio-technologies. They also talk about “the movement of HDR beyond academic apprenticeship” (p. 8), and the corresponding loss of the
academy’s position as the source of new knowledge. Industry and some other parts of the economy that now believe they are the ‘engine’ that keeps the economy moving are also claiming to be the creators and custodians of new knowledge. They may feel that the universities are bound to service their requirements by producing research-trained graduates. Additionally, McWilliam and Singh predicted ten years ago, if the mechanism that previously controlled the flow of new knowledge – the link between philosophy and science – were to break, managerialism would rise to take its place as the controlling force on what and how new knowledge is produced. The funding of the PhD in Australia, and its consequent management in institutions at the present time, would indicate they were not wrong.

In his introduction to his updated edition of the classic *Academic Tribes and Territories* (Becher & Trowler, 2001), Trowler (2012a) discusses the impossibility of continuing to categorise disciplines in the traditional ways, given the complexities created by “practices, forces and structures operating around the university.” (p. 29) He dismisses notions of the ‘ivory tower’ as ‘legend’ – a legend made even more unreal by modern pressures of governance, market forces and globalisation. I will return to how notions of disciplinarity might impinge on an individual candidature later in this chapter.

These changes in views of what knowledge is, and how it is understood as useful to humanity, have led to it now being spoken of as a national product or good. It is openly valued (and its creation through research is funded) for the ways it can support and meet the aims of the ‘national agenda’ for ‘innovation’ as defined by government.22 Researchers, in this schema, are valued for their output, regardless of the purity of their disciplinary approach. Biological scientists are using equipment developed for physics to investigate molecular structures of food; engineers are learning how medical research understands body function to improve prosthetic and other treatments, and even diagnosis; cognitive and neuroscience are working with education to understand more about how humans learn. This shift to the value of research depending on the ‘usefulness’ of its output (defined by national government priorities) has implications in Australia for how higher education institutions are funded to carry out the ‘research training’ of their HDR students, and, to some extent, how those students are valued.

**Funding of PhD in Australia**

In the late 1980s the landscape of funding for universities in Australia underwent a momentous shift. The Dawkins reforms changed the shape of higher education, creating

- larger and more business-like universities premised on conglomerate missions and economies of scale, mixed public/private funding, nonmarket undergraduate education, and a 50 per cent expansion of participation financed by students but supported by income contingent loans financing (Marginson, 2005).

22 See Lee & Boud, 2009, pp. 16-18; also Gilbert, 2009, pp. 54-55 for extended discussions of these issues.
These reforms introduced fees for undergraduates (along with HECS)\textsuperscript{23}, but also introduced the Research Training Scheme (RTS). The later Nelson reforms increased funding for HDR students, particularly to the research-intensive universities (Marginson, 2005), and also changed the basis of funding in such a way that time-limited HDR enrolment was now understood to be a crucial factor in how funding to a university on completion of HDR degrees would be calculated. More money being allotted, of course, means that government may well demand more say in how it is spent. Before I go on to discuss funding in detail, an explanation is necessary to give a context for the changes in citations in this chapter of the thesis. This will also provide a background to the varying contexts in which Australian (Commonwealth) governments of the last 25 years have placed PhD matters. Changes of government, and changes of responsibility within existing governments, have altered the department responsible for funding and policy around doctoral study. Table 4 shows seven changes in the name and breadth of responsibility of departments since the Dawkins reforms of 1987.\textsuperscript{24}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Training</td>
<td>DEET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
<td>DEETYA</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
<td>DETYA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Department of Education, Science and Training</td>
<td>DEST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (infrastructure &amp; reporting; funding until early 2010)</td>
<td>DEEWR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (policy; funding from early 2010)</td>
<td>DIISR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Department of Innovation, Industry, Science, Research and Tertiary Education</td>
<td>DIISRTE</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 4: Federal government departments responsible for PhD matters 1987-2012

From 2007 until the end of 2011, two departments were involved in tertiary education: DEEWR funded buildings and undergraduate study and produced annual figures for participation in all levels of higher education as well as funding the AQF (which maintains the Quality Framework within which degrees are planned), while DIISR provided the funding for research training (i.e. all HDR students) and thus had the responsibility for development of policy around PhD. However, at the end of 2011 a ministerial reshuffle saw DIISR’s remit expanded to include all tertiary education, and its name changed to DIIRSTE to reflect that.

\textsuperscript{23} Higher Education Contribution Scheme, a contribution to cost scheme that students repay when they reach an income threshold in their later working life. Prior to this no higher education fees had been payable by students.

\textsuperscript{24} Literally as I prepare this final draft in March of 2013, a cabinet reshuffle has resulted in a new ‘superministry’ with three ministers. It is now: The Department of Innovation, Industry, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIICSRITE)
DIISRTE (from March 2013 DIICSRTE) is presently the government department that collects and publishes figures on Higher Education, directs policy for research and also funds the Joint Research Engagement (JRE). JRE replaced the Institutional Grants Scheme in 2010 to fund both infrastructure for research students and the Research Training Scheme (RTS) – established by DEST in 2003 – which distributes bulk monies to universities to fund their HDR students according to their own priorities. As national priorities change, funding to Universities is adjusted in order to encourage higher or lower numbers of students in different disciplinary groupings. At present, for example, a PhD completion in Engineering brings in 2.35 times the funding that a PhD completion in History does, but this differential could be increased or decreased in any year. Universities with higher research profiles (measured by the grants they have attracted and, to a lesser extent, their publications record) receive funds for more HDR students.

Universities fund HDR student enrolments from their government grants to a greater or lesser extent (discussed in more detail below), but at most institutions the domestic HDR student (i.e. an Australian resident or New Zealand citizen) is not expected to pay fees to enrol, unlike undergraduates who are charged fees but can defer their payment under a loan scheme. Many of those enrolled full-time will also be on scholarships that a university provides from their bulk funding – Australian Postgraduate Awards (APA) or University Postgraduate Awards (UPA). A few will be paid to work on funded projects with industry bodies, which will be discussed below.

It has not been easy to untangle the complex web of transactions, based on arcane formulas, through which money is distributed among universities as a result of the relevant Act ("Higher Education Support Act," 2003), and I am grateful to Simon French, the Director of Graduate Studies at University of Sydney, for the time he spent explaining it to me – any misinterpretations are entirely my own.

Essentially, the bulk of the money the federal government provides to a University for research training is paid on a long lag system: payment on completion ensures that the money is not received until between 5 and 10 years have elapsed since the student first enrolled. A recent report on the full cost of research training reported that the “funding gap per HDR RTS EFTSL” as a percentage of reported research training costs per RTS EFTSL was 27% – therefore, on average, universities are providing 27% of the full costs of research training per HDR RTS EFTSL from sources other than the RTS” (DeloitteAccessEconomics, 2011) – but this varied between zero and 69% subsidy for individual universities.

On the median of reported shortfalls, the report concludes, RTS funding should be increased nationally by 34% (although if the average of shortfalls were considered, this could be increased to 51%).

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25 Details of the scheme are described on the DIISRTE webpage (DIISRTE, 2012a).

26 EFTSL = Equivalent Full-Time Student Load, so the abbreviations read “Higher Degree by Research Student Research Training Scheme Equivalent Full-Time Student Load”

27 However, the report also states that universities did not all calculate this figure in the same way, thus the spread may be exaggerated.
However, Deloitte were not happy with the self-reported data that they based their findings on, suggesting that a more rigorous study was needed.

The government decides every year how much money it will pay in total through Research Block Grants in its budget (in 2012 this was $1.63 billion (DIISRTE, 2012a)). This is divided among the Universities according to a formula in which 40% of the money is paid based on research grants received at each institution (inputs) and 10% based on publications by researchers (outputs) in the year being reported; the remaining half of the grant is directly related to HDR completions in the last year they were accounted for – which means up to 12 months may elapse before the date of payment. Further calculations are done based on disciplinary groupings (high-cost:low-cost – this funding mechanism can change as discussed above and is presently 2.35:1) and on the proportion of PhD completions to Masters by research (twice as much is paid for a PhD).

Additionally, as a safety net to enable Universities to plan their expenditure, any payment made cannot be less than 95% of what was paid to that institution in the previous year.

It is immediately obvious that the contributions of PhD students to the work on funded research and to research publications are important to the future back-funding of their degrees. Universities will ‘cut their coat to suit their cloth’ (an expression Simon used more than once in our discussion). Thus Universities with relatively low research income and few publications are able to provide their students with less; they will enrol fewer students, will be able to offer them fewer APA or UPA scholarships, will no doubt have less ability to service the needs (equipment, travel etc.) of ‘high-cost’ students such as those in engineering or medical science, and are likely to have a less well-stocked library and perhaps more limited inter-library loan arrangements. They will thus probably be able to do less research in the future.

It is virtually impossible for any institution to increase the number of HDR students they take on without digging deep into their financial reserves: the Go8 universities estimate that they spent $1.40 for every $1 the federal government eventually gives them for a research student (DeloitteAccessEconomics, 2011). For the least research-intensive universities, who may feel they can spend only what they are expecting to receive from the federal government, the only way to increase the amount of money they are able to spend on HDR students would be to get more research grants – most of which will require HDR students to do some of the research work ‘cheaply’ – i.e. not as employees with salaries and on-costs.

The cost of HDR degrees is generally poorly understood at any level in most institutions. Although they sometimes felt that they were short of money (most were full-time students on scholarships with part-time jobs), the participants in my study never discussed the cost of their degrees, with one exception: Debra, who was not a ‘domestic’ (i.e. not an Australian or New Zealand national) was

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28 When he took his position in late 2009, Simon reports being unable to find anyone in the University who was able to explain to him on what basis funding was allocated to the institution for its HDR students, or how money was distributed to faculties.
paying fees for her degree. In the following exchange she discusses her difficulties with money and bureaucracy.

Debra’s comment on a blog entry by Esther

The only "struggle" that I mentioned on my recent progress report was the lack of money available to support American full-time international students who have not previously graduated from an Australian institution. Outside the PRSS, there is absolutely no funding for a person like me. Money has indeed been my biggest hurdle - and with renewing our damn visas every year (thanks to USYD in how they ensured that I would have to renew every year rather than just give me the 4 years I said I would need in the first place - this has been another disaster I could elaborate on later) - between my husband and me that's another $800 a year just to be allowed in the country! Throw in tuition ($13600), union fees, health insurance - these things residents/citizens don't need to consider - I'm always broke! then there's rent, utilities and day to day bills - and people wonder why I don't have a mobile phone! Or why I never leave my house... I can't afford to!

However, further discussion on her blog, along with my enquiries, indicated that the International Office at the University may have erred in not indicating to the Department of Immigration the total length of time that her visa would be required in the first place. This omission was probably at the root of her problems. This is an example of how a local lack of understanding of (admittedly complex and arcane) government procedures had a very large effect on the life of an individual.

The funding system places students in an odd position: they are taken on so that more research can be done (and thus more money allotted to the institution); they are encouraged to publish (with their supervisors – student-only publications are not counted in this calculation), so that the institution can report more publications. But many will never suspect that this is how they are contributing to the financing of their own degrees. Most (and perhaps many supervisors in disciplines with low equipment costs) don’t think of an HDR degree as creating a cost to their institution – what they are provided with may seem very small and how it is funded unimportant.29 (What is actually provided to students will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.)

Government priorities for research and the training of future researchers can change quite quickly, but the current thrust of government policy has strengthened in one direction in recent years. The DIISRTE website (the URL

29 Recent (2010) changes at the University that require Faculties to be more transparent with their finances (the University Economic Model or UEM) are presently resulting in a concomitant transparency in funding arrangements from the centre and may make it clearer to faculties what students contribute to the faculty’s ‘bottom line’.
for which is ‘www.innovation.gov.au’) provides scant information about any ‘innovations’ that are not related to ‘science’, although the limits of ‘science’ are not defined. The statement on its front page in August 2011 (just before its remit was widening to include Tertiary Education) was:

The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research strives to encourage the sustainable growth of Australian industries by developing a national innovation system that drives knowledge creation, cutting edge science and research, international competitiveness and greater productivity. The Department is committed to developing policies and delivering programs, in partnership with stakeholders, to provide lasting economic benefits ensuring Australia's competitive future. (DIISR, 2011c)

The listing of its ‘partners’ covers organisations that conduct research into pure science, medical science, natural environment, industrial technology, business, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. A document available on the DIISRTE website, dated October 2011 and reporting on an enquiry into research funding, is (tellingly) entitled Maximising the Innovation Dividend (DIISR, 2011a). This concludes that, in general, public funding for research is adequate (although it also points out that there are presently no good ways to measure this!), but a key recommendation is that a new priority needs to be added to better fund research in Humanities, Arts and Social Science. There is no sign of this to date.

Demographics of PhD in Australia

The rapid and high-impact shifts in government arrangements for PhD administration and policy begun by Dawkins and Nelson have occurred over the same time as the number of PhD students in Australia increased beyond what anyone might have predicted in the mid-1980s. According to Pearson, in 1989 (the year that the Dawkins reforms of Higher Education in Australia began) there were 14,751 higher degree research students; by 1997 this had increased to 34,070, of whom 23,390 were doctoral candidates (Pearson, 1999, p. 269, citing DEETYA, 1998). This indicates a more than doubling in HDR students in just eight years. Marginson and Considine (2000), also citing DEETYA’s 1998 figures, put the increase in HDR students (including Masters by Research students) at 314% in that period, and they also point out that the proportion of HDR students had increased from 7.1% of total enrolments; by 1998 they constituted 13.1%, thus almost doubling their proportion of the total student body. By 2006, PhD enrolments were over 40,000, and by 2010 had reached 47,066. (DEEWR, 2010b) Figure 2, downloaded from the DIISRTE website, shows the continued steady increase in completions. Completions for 2011 are not available at time of writing, but DIISRTE statistics for 2011 indicate a 6.3% increase in PhD enrolments between 2010 and 2011; they have now topped 50,000.

30 Up-to-date enrolment statistics can be downloaded from the DIISRTE website. At time of writing (early 2013), the most recent full year available was 2011.
How funding affects process

With an increased awareness of the need for more ‘knowledge workers’, the White Paper introduced in 1999 by then Education Minister David Kemp (DETYA, 1999a) introduced the system of outcomes-based funding policies for research training (Neumann, 2003). Under these policies, for the first time, a time-limit was imposed on enrolment: students were expected to submit their thesis within three years of their date of enrolment. This is usually known as the TTC – Time To Completion – policy, and it led to the rapid spread of the phrase “the clock is ticking” in relation to PhD students. If the thesis was not submitted within three years (a six month extension could be applied for, along with up to two suspensions during the period for illness, etc.), a university, it was understood, would not receive the full funding for that student under the formula proposed for completion. Students often did not understand the source of this pressure, although they felt it keenly.

What also upsets me is the whole emphasis on completing within the minimum amount of time. I sometimes feel people just can't wait to shove me out, product produced, and move on. It's so hard when your PhD is very important to you but you sometimes feel that it and you don't matter so much to anyone else, and certainly don't factor into the broad scope of things in your faculty.

This pressure for on-time completions led to a steep increase in discussions of how supervisors could decrease the risk of students not completing ‘in time’ (see Ahern & Manathunga, 2004; also Manathunga, 2005b for typical
discussions in this vein). McWilliam, Singh and Taylor (2002) discuss how universities might act to minimise the risk of loss of funding by delayed HDR completions in this framing. They point out how the culture of risk management itself increases risk, by increasing understanding of how activities might increase risk. So, for example, a supervisor might feel that they need to be more au fait with the student’s record, as a managerial measure of the likelihood of non-completion, than with the student him/herself. The rise of what McWilliam Singh and Taylor (2002) call ‘audit culture’ – manifest, for example, in regular progress reporting – puts at risk the ability of a supervisor to manage an individualised program at PhD level because the ‘audit culture’ needs to ‘tidy up’ the experience for reporting purposes. The realities – good and bad – of progress reporting as it has been carried out in the last ten years will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The TTC policy was seen in academia generally as draconian, and in the last few years it has been modified by adding six months to the completion deadlines, increasing the stipend for APA scholarships, and the relaxation of the strict time limits (DEEWR, 2009). Simon French indicated that as far as he was able to determine, there was no financial penalty included in the funding mechanism for ‘late’ submission – and that none had ever been actually applied. However, this is not widely known, and completion time is still a strong factor in supervisor-student relations. Students and supervisors will usually now be asked to show cause why a candidature should be continued once the three-and-a-half-year deadline has passed – which may be as much the result of awareness of the cost of resources devoted to a PhD student as it is related to funding.

However difficult the TTC policy has made academic and student life, there is no doubting that its origins lay in long-term dissatisfaction with the quality of supervision in Australian universities (Neumann, 2003). McWilliam, Singh and Taylor (2002) cite a report of a meeting between government officials and senior executives at Australian universities to discuss how universities were now expected to manage themselves (presented to the OECD in 2001) as stating “…it is the lack of uniformity of practice within universities that is the key culprit in producing failure.”(p11, citing Gallagher 2000, emphasis mine). Neumann, whose study claims to reflect the state of the PhD in Australia around the turn of the 21st century, lists the studies that were undertaken into the PhD experience in Australia during the 1990s as Pearson & Ford 1997; Trigwell, Shannon & Maurizi 1997; Collins 1994; Parry & Hayden 1994 – all of which were investigations into managerial matters concerning the PhD, published by the government. She barely mentions the work that was done by participants at the QPR conferences since 1994, and does not cite any of the specifically pedagogical or post-structuralist ‘identity’ work that had also been published in the 1990s, for example Green & Lee (1995); Johnson, et al (2000); Kapitzke (1998); Lee (1998); Lee & Williams (1999); McWilliam and Taylor (1996). Neumann does, however, say that one of the purposes of her report was “to give doctoral students a ‘voice’ and to enhance the understanding of the complexity and diversity of their educational experiences” (p. xiii), and indeed the student voices in her report may be among the first to have been directly heard in an Australian publication.
These new government policies at the turn of the 21st century made sweeping assumptions about the kinds of people who were undertaking doctoral work, what they expected, why they were enrolling and what they were experiencing. These assumptions are summarised by Pearson as

…on-campus, full-time student experience, with socialisation arising formally and informally through interaction with the supervisor(s) and other academics in a university department, and which prepares the candidate for academic or other full-time research work… (1999a, p. 269)

Note the year – as early as 1999 Pearson is suggesting that “the development of a research-based conceptual framework of doctoral education to guide quality management, improvement, and innovation” (p. 270) would be a better basis on which to formulate and enact policy than managerialism based on flawed demographic assumptions about the student population. She points out that in the tension between institutional necessities and the demands of doctoral supervision, the lived experience of students has been neglected; no study had to that date attempted to speak from a student viewpoint or investigate what students thought, said, did or hoped for. From a policy perspective, the student is a liminal being, in the shadows, a subject for discussion rather than an agent in their own destiny – and there is no agreement as to what they might need, or how or what they might be expected to learn.

Pearson’s understanding of this gap in both policy and practice around doctoral work, and her wish to investigate it further, led to her gaining an ARC linkage project with Terry Evans and Pete Macauley from 2004-2006, entitled “Working Students: Reconceptualising the Doctoral Experience.” Three separate student associations were industry partners in this grant, and two PhD theses were completed as the result of APA(I) awards associated with it. (Cumming, 2007; Ryland, 2007). These theses broadened the investigation into the theoretical basis of doctoral development by including education theorists who have written on situated and social theories of learning, as well as acknowledging the broader aspirations of 21st century PhD students with references to career planning and workplace-based learning. This helped them to conceptualise people undertaking PhDs as ‘“workers’, ‘researchers’ and ‘producers’’, rather than students (i.e. similar to undergraduates)” (Cumming 2007, p.14)31

In the second decade of the 21st century, there is evidence the government has begun to understand more clearly the reality of the PhD cohort. As part of the discussions around HDR funding that took place in 2011 and resulted in the Deloitte report discussed above, the government released the figures from the 2010 cohort that were discussed in Chapter 1: students over 30 make up nearly 62% of the HDR cohort and part-time students form nearly 40% – and nearly half of PhD students were engaged in full-time work in the year before they enrolled (DIISRTE, 2011). Until this was published, all government reports and policies seemed to be focussed on the younger part of the PhD cohort, which is,

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31 I am indebted to this project for many insights and understandings, both the publications that have arisen from it and especially the PhD theses that it produced. Both Jim Cumming and Kevin Ryland have given me time and shown interest in my project.
in general, more likely to be enrolled in the non-professional disciplines of arts and sciences. The (belated) acknowledgement that the HDR cohort is composed of a mixture of young students with more mature people who have (possibly significant) workplace experience is welcome, and the policy, practice and pedagogical implications of this mixture will continue to be discussed throughout this thesis.

The first significant number of mature students to enrol in PhDs in Australia (contributing to the sudden increase in PhD enrolments to nearly 40,000 in 2005) came about partly as the result of another unrelated effect of the Dawkins reforms: Colleges of Adult Education (CAEs) having been taken into or becoming universities, there was now a need for former CAE staff to obtain a doctorate in their new roles as University staff (Ryland, 2007). And these were not conventional PhD students: they were mature educators who had taught for many years without the need for a doctorate, and may not have been deeply committed to the part-time doctoral study that had become a requirement of their reconstituted workplace. ‘Mature’ doctoral students, of course, have a range of motivations for their enrolment in what may be a gruelling commitment for up to eight years of their life. But most of them will be enrolling from a desire to find something out, possibly to contribute to their profession, or perhaps to change career. Few of them enrol only in order to maintain jobs they already have.

One of the effects of this “massification” of the PhD experience is the Universities’ need to move from seeing HDR students as a “small and elite” cohort (Pearson, 1999, p. 270). Even in 1996, nearly 65% of PhD students were over 30 yrs of age (Pearson 1999, p. 271, compiled from DEETYA, 1996). Although this figure is now reported by DIISRTE to be nearly 62% (see above), so has dropped slightly, DIISRTE reports it is rising, and it continues to represent a clear majority of PhD enrolments. However, it is possible that this is not known within universities more generally, even in the highest reaches of academia. The following was reported in The Australian in March 2011:

> I would opt for fewer research students, pay them better and insist that they be full time and get them through the system,” Professor Larkins said after the launch of his book, *Australian Higher Education: Research Policies and Performance 1987-2010* (MUP). (Trounson, 2011)

Prof Larkins had recently been DVC(Research) at the University of Melbourne and was then DVC(Internal). His views may seem out of date with the reality of many PhD students, who are supporting families while they study, but they are not uncommon in the world of scientific innovation that he is a part of (his discipline is Chemistry, with an emphasis on the production of fuels, the kind of discipline that is highly valued by DIISRTE). In my interview with Desmond, a senior central administrator (and science academic) at the University of Sydney, half of the time was taken up with a description of what he called ‘Pathways to the PhD’ – all of which were those he assumed would be followed by younger students (Honours and the transfer to PhD from a research Masters). He twice acknowledged older part-time students like myself with the phrase “…and of course, people like your good self” without ever specifying
whom he saw as constituting that group, or what ‘pathway’ he was envisaging that they might follow.

Another factor in the increasing diversity in both the student body and the nature of PhD work in the 1990s and early years of the 21st century was government schemes such as APA(I) and CRCs, which were trialled before being confirmed in their present form in 1999 (DETYA, 1999b). They are a practical outcome of the increasing commitment by government to support innovation in industry, discussed above. These schemes are aimed at increasing the production of ‘mode 2 knowledge’ — that is, knowledge that leads to a demonstrable outcome (McWilliam, Taylor, et al., 2002), or knowledge that is “valued for its potential to generate economic development and prosperity through innovation.” (Barnacle, 2004, p. 357) The effect of the schemes on the demographics of the student body was acknowledged by Siddle more than 15 years ago:

The increase in industry-related research has attracted students back from industry to university, often as part-time students. In this connection, it is interesting to note that of the 33,560 research higher degree students, over 11,000 are between the ages of 30 and 39. (Siddle, 1997, p. n.p.)

The industry-linked schemes have not only led to diversity within HDR student cohorts, but also to a more direct and acknowledged impact of research in both industry and the professions.

For older students, career preparation is clearly not the goal, but rather career change, or advancement, or just the desire to consolidate their grasp of their professional experiential learning. For some employers supporting such study can mean importing new knowledge and skills. (Pearson 1999, p.273)

Pearson acknowledges that industry linkages may bring problems to universities – there may, for examples, be two sets of regulatory bodies to be satisfied: the University and an industry-based one. There may be difficulties with management of the process of doing the PhD – the University will have certain reporting structures in places, such as annual reviews, which may not follow the same timeline as an industrial imperative such as a product launch. We might like to think that technology would have reduced the difficulties for a student of effectively having ‘two masters’ at a distance from each other, but it may still make life difficult for a student who does not have strong experience ‘managing up’ in a workplace. There is an extended discussion in Cumming (2007, p. 122ff) on how ‘doctoral practices’ interact with ‘doctoral arrangements’ (following Schatzki, 2002) to reveal the doctoral enterprise. His view is that

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32 APA(I): Australian Postgraduate Award with an Industry partner provides an individual scholarship in which some funding is provided by an industry partner, supplementing government funding, to undertake a mutually agreed research project
CRC: Co-operative Research Centres are part-funded by both government and industry to investigate specific research areas associated with the needs of industry. They typically provide some HDR places within research teams. By 2005, 2500 students had been or were working in this scheme. (Manathunga, Pitt, & Critchley, 2009)
industrial organisations and universities may not find it as easy to work together as the government would like to imagine.

Having surveyed academics involved in CRCs at an early stage in their development, G. Harman (2001) reports his concerns as threats to research autonomy, undesirable consequences associated with the commercialisation of knowledge, the low intellectual level of some contract work, reduced time of talented researchers available for teaching, and pressures on researchers to spend increased time on commercial activities. (p. 245)

Returning to the subject nearly ten years later (2010), G. Harman surveyed a larger number of academics and also their industry partners, and reported serious problems with the scheme on both sides. These complaints were focusing on the slowness of academic bureaucracies (from both parties) and on lack of government funding – especially in the early stages, which made it difficult to execute ‘proof of concept’ work. He concluded that there were two major problems: first that, despite the strong government rhetoric discussed earlier in this chapter, “Governments do not adequately understand the costs involved in bringing inventions to market and the risks involved for investors” (p. 77). The other major issue he described as “culture clashes” (p. 78): one respondent summed up the academics’ problems as “‘conflict between traditional academic values in the dissemination of knowledge and the new commercial activity involving trade secrets and intellectual property protection’” (p. 78). Barnacle (2004) predicted that there would prove to be a mismatch between these two cultures, and indeed this seems to have come to pass.

There is limited research on how students experience industry-funded schemes. Two other studies (K. Harman, 2002, 2004) concluded that full-time science-based CRC students surveyed at two research-intensive universities reported higher levels of satisfaction with their course than non-CRC-students. At least at the time they were surveyed, students appeared to be benefitting more from the CRCs than either the university staff or the industry partners. Surveying graduates of CRC programs, Manathunga, Critchley and Pitt (2009) found that they were no more likely to have found employment within industry than other PhD graduates in their discipline. They conclude “research training programmes in CRCs and in universities need further modification if their aim is to produce employment-ready graduates” (p. 101).

In my interviews with staff at the University, problems with industry-linked grants were not near the centre of the radar of the faculty administrators in applied science disciplines. However, one central administrator did discuss his concerns at some length, capturing the liminality of students in the schemes.

Michael, senior central administrator, Creative Arts

There are some areas in which they actually need the students to do the research that the faculty or the Uni has committed to do through an ARC or Industry grant. There is a tension there, especially with an Industry grant. It's a manageable tension; the Uni hires staff to investigate
(whatever), and it takes on PhD students to do that. It's got to realise it's not hiring the PhD students. They have a role within that process, but the University's role with those students is an educational role. That distinction is an important one. The person who has the pressure to fulfill the terms of the grant is the supervisor; they can't transfer that pressure to the student. If the student's work is not producing what they need they have to find some other way to getting their work done. Particularly in an area where – often in contract research the goal is something very specific, but free, open enquiry, blue-sky research is fundamental to the development of knowledge. Now, if a student comes in with a certain grant, and it goes in one direction, and at the end of a year it goes off in another direction, I think that's it's very important that the student is allowed to pursue that where it leads. If it doesn't suit the needs of the supervisor they've got to find another way to deal with those needs. They can't distort that blue-sky approach, which is legitimate from the student's perspective.

This trend of changes in the conception of PhD being more influenced by government, industry and professions than by academic imperatives was also reported by Leonard and Becker (2009) as occurring in the UK, and by Gilbert (2009), who traces the growth of these discussions in the US and the UK as well as in Australia. Manathunga, Lunt, and Mellick (2006) point out the influence on disciplinary-based research of CRCs and bodies such as National Science Foundation Engineering Research Centres in the US, while Green (2009) points out the tensions between Modes 1 and 2 knowledge being played out in doctoral curriculums internationally.

In February 2010, just as HDR funding was shifting to DIISR, DEEWR published a policy document, *Review of Australia’s Higher Education*, in which they opine that the number of PhD students needs to be further increased, in order to offset the contraction in the academic workforce expected from retiring baby boomers:

> In 2007 it was estimated that about 1,725 additional academics would be required each year between 2006 and 2016 to replace staff leaving the academic workforce or retiring. *About 4,000 domestic PhDs will be produced each year over that period, but only about 900 will seek to enter the academic labour market.* The biggest shortfalls will occur in fields with low rates of PhD students to academic staff and high rates of dispersal within the labour market, such as geology, mathematics and engineering (Group of Eight 2007). On the basis of the information available, the panel was not able to make a definitive recommendation on the number of additional Research Training Scheme places required to meet future demand for people with higher degrees by research. It concluded that further work needed to be undertaken in this area. (DEEWR, 2010a, pp. 84-85, emphasis mine)

Aside from the reference to the “production of domestic PhDs”, as if we were being factory farmed, no account seems to be taken of the number of PhD
graduates from the last ten years who have not taken academic positions, and who might conceivably be convinced to do so. Nor is there any mention of the number of PhD graduates from other countries who might consider employment in Australian universities, and who would not have been a drain on the national purse to prepare for academic work. Perhaps these are examples of the unknowns that prevented the committee coming to a conclusion.

In 2011, DIISR’s new responsibility for research training policy was cemented with the production of a glossy booklet, ambitiously entitled Research Skills for an Innovative Future: A research workforce strategy to cover the decade to 2020 and beyond (DIISR, 2011b), confirming the government’s wish to greatly increase the number of PhD places in Australian universities. It also announced a short-term review on its national research priorities (NRPs) called Focusing Australia’s publicly funded research, which reported at the end of July 2011. Briefly and unsurprisingly, as discussed above, the report (DeloitteAccessEconomics, 2011) confirms that Australian Universities feel that the funding they get for their HDR students generally falls far below what they actually spend on those students. Taken together, it might seem likely that there will be increased funding for research training in the near future.

This increase in reports and announcements about HDR and research training policies, which by mid-2012 was feeling overwhelming – almost one new report is being released every week as I write this – is part of a new push by the government. This was clear from all keynote speakers at the HERDSA conference in 2011: Higher Education is now viewed by government as an ‘industry’ which will be required to produce outputs to order (but, as already discussed, no-one is clear whether the ‘output’ of a PhD is the new researcher or their research). The terms of reference for the Deloitte report on publicly funded research referred to above include the statement that “NRPs [National Research Priorities] were introduced with the aim of focusing the Australian Government’s research effort in areas that can deliver significant economic, social and environmental benefits to Australia.” (DIISRTE, 2011) This seems to confirm that the direction the government’s considerable investment in research and research training is taking will reflect more tightly its expressed national priorities.

Set against the government’s apparently organised, rational approach to the PhD as research skills development for the good of the nation is the idea that academia (and the PhD, its ‘front door’) is a mysterious and romantic place (Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000). However, increased discussion about ‘new managerialism’, performance reviews for academics with publishing targets and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) may have dispelled some of the romance, and made academic life less attractive to students. Discussions on the project blogs about the nature of academic life revealed interesting anomalies between the work that participants were engaging in and their vision of what awaited them when they entered academia as fully-fledged doctors. It did make me wonder sometimes why they were persisting.
Participant blog: Kylie

One big thing that I have been left to think about all of this though is the number of people working in academia that must just be doing it out a compulsion to rise to the top of their field, to feel like they've 'made it', or to feel like they are a success (because the only way they know how to feel successful or worthwhile is through their work). Apparently the suicide rate among top-level academics is very high for this reason...they get to the top of their field and have nowhere else to go, nothing else to look forward to. They are so totally unable to see value in things in their life besides their work. I hope that never happens to me, or to any of us. I wonder if being part of this blogging project makes us more likely to engage in reflective practice, and so more able to steer clear of such dangerous mindsets.

Participant Blog: Grainne

visions of femininity in academia

I was talking to an older, retired female academic last week, who was feeling a little unfulfilled at the time she retired. She was talking about some of the people in her faculty (well, ex-faculty now), particularly the women who had become promoted. And I don't know if it was a 'sour grapes' thing or an interesting analysis of the situation - but she was saying that none of those women has research interests that were particularly theoretical, and none of them had especially good publication records. She felt that most of them had been promoted because it was politically expedient to have some women in positions of power, and the women who were promoted were almost always those who would acquiesce to male pressure. Those who were promoted tended to be intellectually mediocre but very good at PR and with good admin skills. And some of them had close personal relationships with the powers-that-be.

I'm still thinking about this. I have been to a couple of philosophically based conferences, and I couldn't help but note that they were very male-dominated. Why is it that more female academics aren't researching in theoretical areas of [discipline]? Is it true about females and promotion? What does it mean when females who do receive privileges of some sort are engaged in relationships with male faculty members? I'm not talking about any particular individuals or any particular faculty here, but on a political level, what does it signify? Is it simply another case of female oppression, is it a case of the misuse of power, or is it (as this woman was saying) politically smart of them? It makes me feel absolutely cold. I just didn't think that THAT much of this sort of stuff still went on in the 21st century. Was there ever a golden age for feminism? What does this continual battle between the sexes mean? Or is this woman merely
bitter? It's really hard for me, as someone who is proud to be a feminist, to ever want to admit that some women use their gender as an excuse for not succeeding because I really do believe that it's harder to succeed as a woman in academia. Or is it? Anyway, I'm still mulling over this stuff.

**PhD at Sydney**

Examples of the micropolitical abound in the story of how the PhD began at the University of Sydney. It’s always instructive to look at the foundations of the structures we take for granted, so in order to establish some idea of how the PhD came to be established at Sydney, I spent a morning in the University archives, and then wrote a blog post reflecting on what I had read. The facts have already been published in an internal publication (A. Ward, 2008) – briefly, the PhD was first approved as a two-year degree in 1947, the first PhDs were conferred in 1951 (one in Engineering and two in Science, which two faculties along with Veterinary Science and Agriculture continued to dominate enrolments for a decade; the first Arts PhD was not conferred until 1959) – but I was interested to read the documents cited for myself.

29 November 2009

**From my public PhD blog**

**Deans, faculties and a morning in the archives**

I spent part of my PhD day this fortnight in the University archives, reading correspondence and minutes of the old Professorial Board relating to Doctorates at Sydney. Julia, the archivist, found three files that were of interest, from 1947, 1955-7 and 1964. Along with a recent article [A. Ward (2008) cited above] and some information from a book called *Australia's First* I feel as if I have some interesting insights into how the PhD at Sydney got the shape that it has today. The one thing that I can't find any information on is why, although the form that was chosen was consciously and specifically on the 'Oxford/Cambridge model', no viva or any form of oral presentation or defence was included in Sydney's doctoral degree, nor indeed in any other Australian PhD at the time. And why the 'Oxford/Cambridge model'; considering this was just after WWII and there was strong anti-British sentiment in Australia at the time, why was the Harvard, Yale or Princeton model not even discussed?

However, I may have a clue to the mystery as to why the Arts Faculty would not even discuss the establishment of a PhD in 1947, and did not award its first one until 1959. There was already a series of doctoral degrees at Sydney that came to be called 'Higher Doctorates': Doctor of Letters, Doctor of Science, Doctor of Medicine, Doctor of Laws, Doctor of Divinity and so on. The Faculty of Arts seems to have been concerned that the special word 'Doctor' should be reserved for these degrees; they felt that the Masters would continue to be adequate for most teaching staff; indeed that the M.A. might be downgraded by insertion of a new doctorate. The science disciplines, on the
other hand, were possibly more pragmatic and saw that a steady stream of research assistants might be generated by instituting a ‘lower doctorate’.

By 1955 the PhD was well established, and a tiny handful had been awarded. The issues being discussed then by the Professorial Board concerned the standing of the higher doctorates, and formalising the difference between them and the PhD. With the exception of the M.D. they were intended to be applied for by established academics, of not less than 8 years standing and with a record of publication - not as easy to establish in isolated Australia then as it is now. The archives contain some interesting correspondence between the registrar and senior figures in the Faculty of Medicine, Ed Ford and Blackwell (now memorialised in the names of University buildings), concerning the requirements of the M.D., which were closer to the requirements of the ‘lower doctorate’, the PhD, than they were to the other Higher Doctorates.

In 1964 there were 304 full-time PhD students at Sydney, enough to create administrative work sufficient that a report on their presence was written, recommending that a Board of Graduate Studies be appointed to do this work. This would happen over the dead bodies of some Faculties, judging by the memos received by the Professorial Board, and instead a committee to oversee graduate awards was established. To this day an effective central body to monitor or administer doctoral studies is a contested notion - the position of Dean of Graduate Students (DOGS) was quietly abolished early in 2009, having operated for about ten years. Administration of doctoral matters was moved at the same time from the office of DVC Research to the office of the DVC Education.

One result of the Deans' wish to maintain control of PhD matters is … that … they have also had to shoulder the burden of providing all facilities for their students. A Graduate Studies Centre, such as was established at Melbourne in the 1990s, would have lifted some of that burden from them, but clearly the cost was seen as too high.

The question of the politics of the provision of facilities for PhD students at Sydney continues to be a contested issue that will be picked up again in the next chapter of this thesis.

**Disciplinary differences**

Having canvassed the difficulties in aligning disciplines with academic departments in Chapter 1 and looked briefly at the intersection of disciplinarity and knowledge creation earlier in this chapter, I would like to examine some of the differences that are still assumed to exist across and between disciplinary groupings within any institution. Most Australian writing on the PhD has concentrated on theorising about pedagogy in social sciences and humanities, although there has been some specific writing on laboratory-based PhDs in science (Cumming, 2009; Pearson, Cowan, & Liston, 2009). My own project has been a source of interest to staff in the science and technologically-focused disciplines whom I encounter in my paid employment. It provided me with some interesting insights into the narrowness of definitions of what a PhD ‘is’ within a discipline.
Reactions to my project

Researching the institution in which I work at supporting teaching across a range of disciplines (albeit limited to Becher and Trowler’s ‘hard’ categories, mostly applied), brings me into contact with lots of academic staff in the sciences and technologically focused disciplines. The most common reaction when I tell people that I am researching the process of doing a PhD at Sydney is laughter – caused by surprise, I think. It’s probably not surprising that comments are often sceptical - these range from “How can you be objective?” through “Are you sure that your sample will be big enough to be meaningful?” and “Of course, it's very different where we are” (sometimes meaning “you'd need to have a better idea than that to get a candidature up in my faculty”).

Most are respectful, and some are interested in my methods – ethnography has a certain credibility in the scientific world even if the degree of reflexivity that this project involves seems odd to them. More thoughtful responses have included “How interesting – that's a great idea”, “That's an area that I've often thought would be interesting”, and, most cheering for me, “There's a lot of work to be done on that”. I have even been asked to talk about the benefits of journaling to PhD students in a school in the engineering faculty. Some people have thought it is a very brave thing to do, to work in the institution that both employs you and in which you are enrolled. I'm not sure that I have felt any fear about this aspect of the project, but then I'm luckily not inclined to paranoia.

It’s safe to say that there are some clear major differences: a student in Becher and Trowler’s (2001) pure or applied ‘soft’ categories is more likely to have been able to chose their own topic and methodological approach, but to have problems with project definition, and a lack of peer interaction and faculty support; a student in their pure or applied ‘hard’ disciplines is more likely to have an experience of working on their PhD within a team working on a bigger project, but have problems centering round materials issues and joint projects, and with rigid enrolment patterns (Neumann, 2003; Neumann et al., 2002). However this is not a hard-and-fast distinction: there are funded projects in social sciences and humanities that involve specific, predefined work on the part of a PhD student, and one of my academic informants recounted her experience doing a PhD in pure science in which she was able to pursue an entirely original piece of research under a supervisor whose interest in her topic was fairly general.

Some of these broader distinctions are to do with equipment provision and funding issues: a humanities or social science researcher will probably need to be provided with only a computer, some software and methods training and access to a good library; a science or engineering student may also need access to a laboratory with specialised equipment and expensive consumable inputs – a difficulty specifically mentioned by two academic informants in professional
applied science disciplines – which may be in a place far distant from their university (for an example see Cumming (1997), pp. 47ff for the story of Lisa, a PhD student in Astronomy who travelled to many countries to gather data during her candidature). One informant in a technical discipline revealed his concern for students who have to work at the campus of another university in order to use the equipment they need to undertake their projects.

Many technical PhD projects are undertaken as part of a team trying to solve a much bigger problem than could be tackled in a single PhD. Some will require the student to undertake training in specialist laboratory techniques – some may even be entirely composed of the development of such a technique that will be of use in a much bigger project. Or, a student’s PhD may consist of a pilot survey to prepare the ground for a team’s grant application to investigate a major health problem in the community. There is probably only one word that can describe the variety of projects that students may undertake in order to do a PhD in Australia, and that is ‘immense’. Some of these projects may be conducted with specific funding from government funding bodies or industry, and the special difficulties for students enrolled in these PhDs are discussed below. But with such a huge variety of projects, how is it possible to say anything useful about the experience of doing a PhD?

In his PhD thesis, Cumming (2007) has a long and interesting discussion about taxonomies of knowledge, and their application in micro-level studies (pp. 98ff). He reproduces the figures for percentage enrolments in the Government’s categories of Broad Fields of Study (BFOS) in 2005 using two different (but largely agreeing) measures: the 2005 DEST figures and the figures from a 2005 national survey of PhD students. However, he asserts, neither these figures nor Becher and Trowler’s taxonomy reveal very much that is useful about the student experience. His view is that more granular categories are needed, which he proposes as

- field: the broad subject area
- academic organisational unit (AOU): department or centre in which they are enrolled
- topic: the focus of the research (which may involve more than one disciplinary grouping)
- other: constructions or sources of knowledge not related to their discipline or perhaps even to academic work.

His consideration of case studies using these categories as a lens results in a rich and tapestry-like construction of the experience of being a PhD student. Perhaps most importantly, by freeing himself from the bounds of disciplinary taxonomy, he has been able, in his category of ‘other’, to examine the pedagogical experiences and mechanisms of each student in a distinct way that provides deep insight into what might be learned in the process of undertaking a PhD. Rather than comparing this discipline with that discipline, and judging their characteristics from some received taxonomic structure, he reveals how broadly conceived the doctoral enterprise can be when it plays out locally – what Lee and Boud (2009) call “the materiality of the activities and experiences that … make up doctoral work across the spectrum.” (p. 13)
Unfortunately, disciplinary silos mitigate against this breadth in practice, and in one sense this is unavoidable and even desirable. Doctoral studies are the mechanism by which disciplines reproduce themselves, and it is right that disciplines should decide for themselves how to conceptually frame their students’ experiences. In practice this is done at the level of the enacted curriculum in the AOU – at faculty or departmental level, a point underlined by Pearson’s comment that their department or faculty is the “significant site and organisational context” of a student’s PhD learning (1999, p. 281). Manathunga, Lunt and Mellick (2006) argue that an “interdisciplinary doctoral pedagogy” is not only possible but necessary to solve complex social and scientific problems in the future; however, the mechanism by which institutions and disciplines might be persuaded to introduce this kind of curriculum and pedagogical practice is not clear. Even using the word ‘curriculum’ in this context doesn’t feel right: what I would rather call ‘plans’ that have been applied to PhD learning to date have been piecemeal, often managerial and usually too vague to be seen by students as related to their needs. What is being discussed and how it is being introduced into PhD practice will be discussed in more detail in the next two chapters of this thesis.

Summary

We have seen in this chapter that the process of completing a PhD in Australian universities, based as it is in relationships between humans and in the creation of new knowledge as conceptualised in Lee’s Level C, continues to resist attempts to manage and regularise it; how this plays out at the University of Sydney will be examined more closely in the next chapter. Here we have examined agendas that may not be immediately obvious to students or even to supervisors, some of which are competing and some of which are complementary. These agendas can be said to form a kind of hidden curriculum (Lee’s level C) for most of the people involved. The federal government, the body that funds most PhD study in Australia, wants ‘outcomes’ (i.e. the research done by PhD graduates as well as their certified ability to undertake more research, and their selves as researchers to be employed). The specific directions of these desired outcomes will shift over time, depending on National Research Priorities that are contingent upon national and international events. Governments, beginning in the last decade of the 20th century, have seen ‘research training’ as an important way to safeguard Australia’s place as a technologically advanced nation in the future, by preparing both a new generation of academics and a new generation of trained researchers for industry – occasionally one will even see the phrase ‘research industry’ in government documents, referring to organisations such as universities, large industrial companies that carry out research and development, biotech companies, and government-supported bodies of many kinds (e.g. land care and wildlife protection, indigenous cultural support). Although information about these priorities is evident on government websites, their effect on the funding given to universities through the RTS is not well understood by universities, and is generally completely invisible to staff and students.

The universities, which distribute the funds provided by the federal government to students, each want to raise their research profile, which is maintained by
research grants and published research – in part so that they will receive a larger slice of the funding ‘pie’ – and PhD students are important contributors to this profile. Supervisors, likewise, will be more inclined to take on students who can boost their own research profile – this is an important part of promotion applications and building a curriculum vitae. Universities also have an expressed aim of providing a suitable environment for students to develop as researchers, of ‘managing the process’, which means, for example, putting processes in place to protect students from abuse or bullying on the part of supervisors and ensuring their development proceeds at an appropriate pace, which fits with the students’ natural desire to succeed at their studies. This is one of the reasons that managerial discourses have generally dominated academic discussion about HDR students – progress reports, student satisfaction surveys and faculty-based reports on facility provision are visible, can produce concrete measures and can thus be reported on. Supervisors share this aim of wanting students to succeed, although perhaps in a more personal way, and may also feel very passionately about preparing people to continue and expand the work being done in their disciplines. They may resist managerial attempts to ‘manage the process’, claiming it to be an invasion of academic freedom or an unnecessary intrusion into supervision – which may be an under-theorised relationship, but it is one that is experienced very personally by both supervisors and students, and is thus resistant to official ‘management’.

In the middle of these agendas is the shadowy figure of the HDR student. Whether they have a passion for their subject or have drifted into PhD candidature, their most important driver is likely to be to complete their research project, ‘write it up’, submit it and graduate. However, leaving the liminal space may not prove so easy, and, whether they graduate or not they will, of course, do much more than they expect. They will, accidentally, learn many things about themselves, and, whether they complete their degree or not, will leave their university much changed.

The next chapter of this thesis is concerned with matters that are closer to what students experience: what Australian theorists have had to say about the reality of the PhD experience, and what universities apparently intend that experience to be.
Chapter 4 – The intended curriculum: what the PhD is said to be

Comment by Grainne on a post by Esther

I think what upsets me most is the rhetoric about encouraging postgrad students to be part of the faculty community. I don't think they live up to this promise - when are we included in research networks? Why are we hired as research assistants and do a lot of the cerebral stuff for someone's work and then don't get our name on publications that we feel we've partly written? Why can't we have a ream of paper to use for our work? Why can't I use equipment that I booked previously because some professor-dude wants it at the last minute? There are a lot of small things, but together they do add up…

Comment in response by Esther

I know Grainne. I hear every claim that you have made there. It's frustrating. I realise that I'm not particularly hard done by, but when the talk floating around the faculty is that they want to support postgrad students in every possible way and then rescind on vague promises made I get ticked off. I'd much rather know that something isn't available than be promised it and then have it taken away.

In this chapter the subject for discussion is the intended curriculum: what is said about PhD process and practice by theorists and by the University, and what students might expect to happen from what they are told. In these quotes from participant blogs, PhD students talk about what they feel is expected of them, matched with the reality of what is provided by their AOU. Lack of clarity about practical issues is unsettling for students, and it may sometimes play into and magnify other disappointments, such as a perceived lack of support from their AOU for them as developing researchers. I will explore the gaps and contradictions between theory and reported practice in the Australian PhD literature, what institutions and AOU consider suitable and adequate provision for students, and how students experience their candidature. The liminal status of students is very clearly shown in these gaps; except in the work on the supervisory dyad discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the voice of the student is barely heard in the literature about PhD management. I have ordered the issues I’ve chosen to discuss in the approximate order that students encounter them: student inductions and orientations to the process of the degree, University and AOU process, supervision, skills training, examination, and completion.

This chapter covers Lee’s Level B of a curriculum as discussed in Chapter 1, the level that attempts to “address the inter-relationships between knowing, being
and doing” (Hopwood et al., 2010, p. 88) ‘Doing’ is much easier for University bureaucracies to manage than ‘knowing’ or ‘being’, so institutional attempts to create or provide what might be called a ‘curriculum’ usually result in a list of skills workshops and competency-based courses. The ‘problem’ that a ‘curriculum’ is supposed to solve within PhD candidature is ill-defined; it is commonly understood to be something to do with a lack of skills, but what these are and why students would need them is often not well conceptualised.

As an example, the quote that follows demonstrates a high level academic administrator’s conception of the changes in the way PhD is being thought about in Australia. He seems to be saying that the University needs to improve the employability of its PhD graduates (outside academia). How this might be done is vaguely described; perhaps he is talking about the kinds of skills training proposals that were later discussed at the University, and will be covered later in this chapter.

Desmond, science, senior central administrator

Different students will listen to the problem through different filters...Each student will use their knowledge in different ways to solve different problems. So if you think about what we're trying to achieve with PhD students in terms of intellectual development, then these should be folk who are real drivers of innovation in society, who will look at these intractable problems in totally different ways and with different professional skill in the way they do it and they're the ones likely to find solutions come up with ideas etc.

At the moment we use PhD grads mostly to train the next generation but why can't we get PhD students deployed more widely and more acceptably in society. I think we need an education program. You can imagine we take a fresh PhD graduate and put them into Acme shoe development - they will be a loose cannon straight out of the box. They won't know anything about business, and they'll be asking questions, they'll know nothing about the culture. What's visible is that they don't fit; what's invisible is that they're assimilating knowledge at the rate that will put the rest of the company to shame. The trick is how to develop the interface so that they can contribute usefully.

This focus on how PhD graduates might be employed after graduation is a continuing theme in this chapter, as my discussion about the ‘purpose’ of a PhD shifts from the national interest (discussed in the last chapter) toward the outcome for an individual student – seen, in this chapter, through the lens of theory and institutional provision. Included in this discussion about the local level of the intended curriculum will be induction and orientation into doctoral studies, theories and conceptualisations of supervision, along with information that is available for students. Unlike the hidden curriculum, much of the intended curriculum is evident to students in some way, although perhaps not always in the way that a university intends it to be; it influences what is presented to them as the way they should proceed in University-wide and
locally faculty-based orientation sessions, seminars and workshops, in explicit documentation and in discussions with their supervisor about what doing a PhD will mean for them.

My exploration of the literature on the intended curriculum will include conceptualisations of the PhD that have prevailed in Australia, and particularly how it is conceptualised at the University of Sydney. Although there have been rich and complex conceptualisations of the PhD by theorists, the national discussion has been, in general, managerial. Barnacle and Mewburn (2010) point out that universities tend to the ‘instrumental’ in their conceptualising of PhD candidature, eschewing “the ontological and epistemological implications, or … how significant the research context is in influencing what counts as knowledge, and the ways that being a researcher can be performed” (p. 443). Certainly, at the level of the University, my interviews with key informants demonstrated conceptualisations that often show no awareness of either theory or national debates. As a consequence these conceptualisations are often rather thin, and tend not to have a broad conceptual framing – being, rather, based in disciplinary epistemologies or managerial imperatives.

Theoretical literature on PhD in Australia

As we saw in Chapter 1, Nightingale (Nightingale, 1984a, 1984b) and Connell (1985) were among the first Australians to write conceptually as academics on the PhD. Moses (1984) also reported on student and supervisor dissatisfaction (gauged by surveys conducted at the University of Queensland.) There was a small but increasing amount of academic writing in the 1990s on pedagogy, supervision and management of the PhD process (Brennan, 1995; Evans, 1995; Grant & Graham, 1999; Green & Lee, 1995; Johnston, 1995; Leder, 1995; Lee, 1998; Lee & Green, 1998; Lee & Williams, 1999; Owler, 1999; Parry, 1997, 1998; Shannon, 1995; Vilkinas, 1998). The proceedings of the Quality in Postgraduate Research conferences contain many more abstracts and papers, although most focus on practical matters rather than engaging with the conceptual. My analysis of these papers shows that very few of them are based in pedagogical theory, and almost none contain either direct or indirect reference to the lived experience of students (M.-H. Ward, 2010a).

One of the most important publications on PhD in Australia in the 1990s was Lee & Williams’ (1999) “Forged in Fire”: Narratives of trauma in PhD supervision pedagogy”. Using the method of ‘memory work’, they asked academics to recall their own experience of doing a PhD. Nothing like this had ever been reported in Australia before, and the journal invited responses for its following issue. Pearson’s (1999b) response points out that lack of student agency and institutional and personal silence surrounding the differing levels of perceived power in PhD practice is the root of many of the problems that Lee and Williams raise. Barraket and Brown (1999) speculate where else such an analysis could go. Having assessed ‘Forged by Fire’ as “valuable”, they point out that development of a “practice of postgraduate pedagogy” would entail “a commitment by university managers, Federal government, individual supervisors and students to actively reform research scholarship and training” (p. 177, my emphasis). There is little sign that this commitment was made in the following decade. However, as we have seen, there are definite signs that policy
about research and research training is now, in the second decade of the 21st century, being taken extremely seriously by government – although how this may play out pedagogically at local institutions is still unclear.

The “pedagogical technologies” (Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000) of private study and the supervisory dyad were, until the early 2000s, the main ways that pedagogy was discussed within the literature on PhD in Australia. At the time they were writing, Johnson et al describe the operation of a PhD: “More private than any other scene of teaching and learning, supervision—and more generally, the pedagogic practices of the PhD—in the humanities and social science at least, have remained largely unscrutinised and unquestioned” (p. 136). Although they limit their disciplinary claim, I have seen no evidence that PhD processes in other disciplines are (or have been) more open – there is less written about PhD process in what are known as the STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine) in Australia.

In the decade and more that has passed since they wrote those words, PhD practice in Australian universities has changed in one very clear way. Changes in government funding discussed in Chapter 3 have driven universities to institute more or less useful processes to add structure (mainly by including skills and competency-style courses for students), to chart progress, to document provision of such basics as desks and computers, and to train (or retrain) supervisors. But the primary pedagogical relationship that most PhD students will experience, for better or for worse, continues to be with their supervisor. This is reflected in the fact that so much of the literature focuses on ‘pedagogies of supervision’. However, like skills-based courses discussed later in this chapter (very few of which, as far as I know, presently approach the integrated form of a ‘program’)34, most approaches to supervision support and pedagogy are piecemeal and depend on the ideas of a particular staff member working in a particular position, often in a single faculty. The reason for this can usually be traced to the strength of the tradition of the supervisory relationship: staff (and even students) are reported to resent what they might see as ‘managerial intrusion’ into this relationship (see Halse, 2011; Manathunga, 2005a). Even regular progress reporting is resisted and dismissed as ‘box ticking’, rather than being seen as an opportunity for students to rehearse and disseminate the new knowledge they are creating (Mewburn, Tokareva, Cuthbert, Sinclair, & Barnacle, forthcoming).

One of the richest sources of data about how academics in a broad range of disciplines in Australia discuss issues around HDR student matters is found in the proceedings of the Quality in Postgraduate Research Conferences held biennially since 1994, discussed briefly earlier in this thesis. At the conferences that were held during the period of rapid changes in government funding (1998–2002), concern was continually expressed about how the work of preparing

33 The provision of centrally-approved documentation to aid administrative staff in their work carrying out PhD-related processes may seem like an essential managerial tool, but the first one of these for the University of Sydney, in which this work is done in 16 faculties, did not appear until the end of 2009.

34 One exception might be the federally-funded program for PhD students in Mathematics to be run through the ATN universities discussed below.
HDR students would continue. The implications of wave after wave of government discussion papers and subsequent funding changes were dissected and discussed by attendees, who have included Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, public servants and Federal Ministers, along with experienced supervisors in many disciplines and researchers such as Margot Pearson, Alison Lee, David Boud, Margaret Kiley and Gerry Mullins, Robin Barnacle, Pete MacAuley and Inger Mewburn, who have broad and deep experience in the theory, practice and politics of this area of higher education.

Accordingly, an analysis of the abstracts of QPR conference papers provides a rich picture of the grassroots interest in postgraduate education and research training in Australia since the early 1990s. It demonstrates how the tides of discussion have flowed from the changes in government funding, through institutional initiatives, down to the level of AOUs, supervisors and individual students. Papers have ranged widely: theoretical, policy-driven, informational and practical. However, the theme of institutional policy supporting both supervision and the student experience has continued to be strong – nearly half the papers offered at each conference since 2002 have institutional support as their main or sub theme (M.-H. Ward, 2010a).

Despite the availability of data from student experience questionnaires (SREQ, PREQ) and other research tools that exist for investigating the situated experience of HDR students (such as surveys and focus groups), few papers offered at QPR conferences have been based on this kind of data or deal with the quality of the student experience, either directly or indirectly. (Notable exceptions would be those presented by Symons (Symons, 2012a, 2012b) on how the results of the PREQ are managed at the University of Sydney.) As Pearson (1999) predicted, … the development of instruments such as the Postgraduate Student Course Experience Questionnaire (Guthrie & Trembath, 1998) may leave those involved unsure as to how to interpret and how to act on the findings. (p.270)

And, while the papers offered at these conferences have concentrated on how institutional policies for support can or should be formulated, there is little evidence from the conference proceedings that pedagogical theories of supervisory work or student development have formed the basis of institutional policy. The support that has been devised by institutions has largely been reported at QPR as meeting the expressed needs of supervisors, or managerial goals, such as the development of policies around generic skills and employability discussed later in this chapter. (This is not to say that pedagogical theory has not been an important theme in conference presentations; however, it has most often been discussed in terms of writing or the supervisory relationship, and has not often been related to the reported experience of students, nor to the development of institutional policy.)

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35 I presented a poster to the 2010 conference that analysed the themes of past conferences.
36 At the University of Sydney, this data is now being taken more seriously; once each faculty’s data is collated, it is returned to the faculty to comment on the levels of student satisfaction.
Pearson first pointed out (1999a) the lack of reporting of the lived experience of students (and later achieved the grant that enabled both Cumming and Ryland to investigate PhD student experience in their theses). It is exciting to me that researchers at the University of Newcastle are presently undertaking a major study that allows students to be heard: there has been little work so far in Australia that directly reports students’ voices, as Cumming notes: “If the voice of candidates has been registered at all, it is invariably subdued” (2007, p. 13). The voices of students have not often been heard at QPR, either reported in presentations or as presenters. In most years the numbers of reports on student experiences ranged from 1 in 5 to less than 1 in 7. The number of students presenting at the conferences was miniscule – in single figures every year. Again, the liminal figure of the student lurks: discussed, speculated about and planned for, but rarely directly consulted.

To be fair to the conference organizers, I am happy to report that the call for papers for the 2012 conference specifically invited students to attend and to report their experiences of enrolment in an HDR degree. As far as I can tell by perusing the program, there were around 10 students presenting on their experience at the 2012 conference (about 1 in 8 of conference presenters).

In order to discuss the intended curriculum at the level of the institution, I will now look at several separate but related things: how universities orient students to their HDR status, what universities say the requirements for gaining a PhD are, and (you might assume flowing from that) what students need to be provided with in order to undertake a doctorate – and how that is determined.

**Induction rituals: entering the liminal space**

*Susan, experienced supervisor, Health*

One of the most difficult things I find – for part-time students, especially, when they start, is ‘making it real’ – it’s easy for them to just drift along for months and not really begin to engage with the big ideas.

At many Australian universities, without a framing of coursework or a common starting date for PhD students such as may be experienced in the US, let alone anywhere for them to report and very possibly no fixed desk where they will be working, entering the liminal space of PhD candidature can be a rather surreal experience, particularly for part-time students. One day you are not a PhD student; the next day you are, but it hasn’t made a great deal of difference to your life. You may have a meeting with your supervisor scheduled for some time in that first week – or maybe that month. What you ‘should’ do until then may not be clear. Or, you may have been meeting informally with your supervisor for weeks, or even months prior to your formal enrolment (this is not uncommon for older students who have been out of academia for some time), and if your supervisor does not signal a change of pace, or have a clear discussion about goals or deadlines, it may be hard to grasp that you are now ‘official’. While your institution, your AOU or your lab will probably hold some kind of orientation workshop or series of meetings, these may not be held
on your first day, week or even month. Your supervisor may have suggested some reading, but it doesn’t feel quite real.

The Office of Graduate Studies at the University of Sydney used to run an evening event early every semester to welcome all postgraduate students (coursework and HDR) to the University; this has been discontinued. No attempt is made (or, indeed, was ever made) to present an integrated series of meetings for doctoral students, such as is run at other universities such as ANU, RMIT or the University of Auckland (NZ), covering, for example, the history and practice of PhD, how it is constituted in Australia and at the University, and the rights and responsibilities of students and staff.

Students who are full-time, who are on funded projects, or those for whom their AOU has been able to provide a desk or other working space from the beginning of candidature may not feel like this, but I think that decades of dependence on the supervisor-student relationship may have left AOUs lazy with this work. On the other hand, one thing that I have picked up from talking to academics is that some take their role as supervisor very personally, seeing themselves as responsible for creating the next generation of academics in their discipline, and, as mentioned above, many feel conflicted or even resentful at the AOU’s or the University’s ‘interference’ in this process. Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) described how this lack of theorising in the supervisory relationship can play out in candidature, and Pearson (1999) puts it succinctly:

> The difficulty for the future with such a dominant model of research-student induction biased towards the induction into "received institutional and scholarly approaches" is, as argued by Brennan (1995), that it is a barrier to implementing or even offering systemic alternatives rather than individualised efforts. (p. 275)

I’ve attended quite a few ‘orientation sessions’ in my own AOU over the years (and even presented at them a couple of times), and I’ve looked at programs in a variety of faculties, so I feel quite confident in stating that orientation workshops in AOUs at the University of Sydney are usually heavily focused on the supervisory relationship – how it should work, how a student might ‘manage’ it, what to do if it isn’t going well. (I will discuss how supervisors are oriented to their participation in this relationship later in this chapter.)

Students in science-based disciplines are likely to have more of a formal introduction to their work, which is more likely to be carried out as part of a team, or as a small part of a bigger project. There may be Occupational Health and Safety implications of their work, for example, to which they will need to be introduced formally, or species-specific training in animal handling. However, teamwork in science isn’t universal (Cumming, 2007), and may bring its own dangers, as the AOU may delegate to the individual research lab its responsibilities for orienting the student to the rights and responsibilities of candidature, and lab management may not see its role as orienting the student to anything more than their project. Although my experience (and those of my participants) is with arts, humanities and social sciences, I believe from my interviews and the literature that there are not huge differences between
disciplines in conceptions of supervision, and thus with supervisory practices, across disciplines (see Grant, 2005; Cumming 2007; Cumming, 2009).

**Institutional practices**

There are two documents that would be the nearest thing to a national level B (in Lee’s schema) or intended curriculum in Australia. As previously explained, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF 2013, pp.63-66) lists the knowledge, skills, and the application of those expected from an Australian doctoral graduate. It is supplemented by a Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) document that outlines institutional responsibilities for degree administration and management as follows (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2011, p. 14):

1.8 When the course of study is a Masters Degree (Research) or a Doctoral Degree, the higher education provider ensures that:

- academics who are the primary supervisors of students are actively carrying out research and publishing in the relevant discipline area;
- students are able to form part of a scholarly intellectual community for their discipline and participate in the life of this community; and,
- available benchmarks are used as a guide to appropriate provision of policies, supervision, services, resources and support for students.

But, of course, local practice in institutions varies widely (Gilbert 2009). Broadening the application of the 2011 AQF guidelines. DIISRTE published a document on their website in mid-2012 from a meeting of the Australian and regional Deans and Directors of Graduate Students. This document is a new best-practice guideline for the PhD in the Asia-Pacific region, developed at a workshop held earlier in 2012 and largely funded by DIISRTE (ACDDOGS, 2012). This document contains a summary of four best principles for PhD practice, containing details that take the student point of view into account:

1. Critical dimensions of the doctoral experience
2. Generic/transferable skills
3. Principles for quality supervisor development
4. Quality research training in the context of the globalisation of research

However, it is not possible to gauge yet what the reach and effect of this document might be in Australian institutions.

The next quote from a senior and powerful University staff member reveals much about how little was understood at the time of the interview (2009) by senior staff at the University about the actual size and shape of the PhD cohort, and its probable shape in the future. The emphasis is mine – and it is there to make the point (as discussed in Chapter 3) that in 2010, as DIISR figures released in 2011 make clear, 62% of the national PhD cohort were over the age of 30 and 45% were working full-time before they commenced their PhD study, and these proportions are rising every year. So those who undertake what he

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37 These Guidelines were updated in January 2013; the latter is the version I have referenced in this document.
refers to as ‘the normal pathway’ (and this view was confirmed in several other places in the interview) is in fact a bare majority of PhD students nationally.

Desmond, science, senior central administrator

Using [the term] 'research training' gives you licence to explore a slightly wider landscape than the PhD. …if you started Bachelors, how can you finish up at the top of the tree, and the PhD is to all intents and purposes our flagship degree in that respect. …

So what we're looking at is not only what must be the ideal experience within a PhD, but for people who at the stage of the career when they are doing Bachelor's have no particular wish or interest to pursue research, but who later discover that it's something they would like to do, how do they get back into it. The normal pathway... is a good honours degree, and we've rejigged a revision of the honours policy - what the honours experience should be - so that it fulfils the requirements of research preparation. So there should be a significant research experience in every faculty's honours program.

Most Australian Universities have a central management structure for their PhD process; the University of Sydney, in keeping with its strong disciplinary culture (Marginson & Considine, 2000), has a hybrid model that encompasses a mixture of disseminated and central management of both its PhD students and the PhD process. This has recently been confirmed as the way the University will continue to manage its PhD students. There is now no central academic office of Dean of Graduate Studies at Sydney (it was formerly in the Research portfolio); there is instead a very small administrative and policy unit (equivalent to about two full-time staff members), the Graduate Studies Office, in the Office of the DVC (Education). And this Office does not exist solely for the administration of HDR degrees: it is also concerned with the burgeoning number of postgraduate coursework degrees offered by the University.

In theory, at least, moving administration of HDR degrees to the Education portfolio might mean that the emphasis shifts from consideration of the student as ‘apprenticed’ to a researcher ‘master’ to a broader consideration of how and what the student might learn in the process of doing a PhD (Manathunga & Goozee, 2007). In other words, it acknowledges the pedagogical dimension to PhD experience. However, support of the actual experience of candidates at Sydney is almost entirely with AOU's, and to a small extent with the Learning Centre, who offer courses in writing; the Library, who offer discipline-based support in information searching and management; and the student representative body, SUPRA, who publish an excellent Thesis Guide (SUPRA, 2007). Supervisor training, discussed later in this chapter, is the responsibility of the Institute of Teaching and Learning, also in the Office of the DVC (Education).

38 An example of how this works at ANU is covered by Pearson (1999a) pp. 281ff.
39 In 2011 there were 4331 students enrolled in HDR degrees at the University.
In the light of Neumann’s comment in her Australia-wide study that “[t]he readability and accessibility of university policy statements and handbooks for doctoral students is highly variable” (2003, p. xv), I began a search early in 2009, in the persona of a naïve student interested in enrolling in a PhD at Sydney in a cross-disciplinary area, with only a vague general idea of what I was interested in pursuing: many students – a majority in the professional faculties – come to PhD after many years away from academia or having studied at other universities, and may not be familiar with the way that faculties are organised at this institution.

The University of Sydney has acknowledged this difficulty in the development of the ‘Research Supervisor Connect’ section of its website; when I first used this early in 2009 it reflected only a tiny percentage of staff supervisory interests and skills. I also found it hard to obtain general information from the University’s web pages about doing a PhD at Sydney. At that time there seemed to be considerable confusion between degrees undertaken by research and coursework.

19 January 2009

From my public PhD blog

The mythical PhD handbook

This morning I conducted an interesting exercise. Pretending that I was looking to enrol in a PhD at the University of Sydney I searched the site for general information about PhD degrees, to almost no avail.

The easy page to find is the one with lots of puffery about how faaabulous Sydney is for PhD students. Its links are weird - e.g. if you click the one labelled postgraduate applicants you get taken to a site for coursework in the faculty of nursing. There are links to a couple of professional master's degrees but very little else. But this is the page that you will be taken to whenever you click the link for 'student handbook' on any postgrad research site.

Slightly more difficult to find (requiring a search) are the academic board and other regulations for the awarding of the PhD.

Searching for just 'PhD' will take you to lots of obscure places - the Electron Microscopy Unit, for instance - before you find the Academic Board site. "Doctoral" sends you first to the Institute of Transport and Logistical Studies - I'm sure a popular place to do a PhD - before Academic Board for some more useful stuff.

If you go to the faculty sites you can find their postgrad student handbooks - but a cross-disciplinary student might not know which faculty they want to enrol in. I certainly didn't - I could have been in Education or Arts (cultural studies). And the one in Education isn't easy to find either.

Nowhere can I find a handbook that brings all this information together for prospective candidates. There's some publications from the Learning Centre, but they are nearly ten years old. The SUPRA (student union) handbooks are
the best resource, but there's nothing on what the university wants students to know about its process and policies.

I did quite easily find a link to the ITL's supervisor training program. However, their link to the apparently mythical 'handbook' downloads the Faculty of Health Sciences student handbook and, like all the other links, takes you back to the page of puffery with no handbook linked from it.

Of course, the University website, ponderous as it may be, is not static; it is continually being updated. I redid the searches in 2010, and found the situation to be much the same. However, when I redid the searches on Research Supervisor Connect in March of 2011, that site at least was greatly improved, and most of the phrases I thought of searching for as a subject for PhD research did direct me to a school or department, where I was invited to fill out a form for further information. However, the search on ‘Higher Education’ did not take me to the Faculty of Education, only to the Centre for Research on Computer Supported Learning and Cognition research unit (CoCo) within it. ‘Education policy’, on the other hand, returned 25 faculties or schools, as diverse as the College of the Arts and Korean Studies, but little in the Education Faculty itself.

Sadly, the more general information about enrolment and regulations that I had been unable to find on my earlier searches was, by March of 2011, no more easily found. When I redid the searches for “PhD”, “PhD enrolment”, “Doctoral” and “Research training”, they still led first to faculty websites, although the Research Supervisor Connect website discussed above now appeared quite high on the list in most searches. Only two of the searches I undertook at this time (“graduate studies” and “graduate study”) brought me to the useful and informative pages of the Graduate Studies Office discussed above. (I added these to the search because I knew the name of the office, which didn’t exist when I did my earlier searches. Even “Graduate enrolment” failed to find the information I might have needed.)

There is no doubt that 21st-century students are using the internet to make their initial enquiries about HDR study. The Research Student Connect website may now be functioning much better – although I hear anecdotally that some faculties still experience difficulty convincing staff to register their interests there. Additionally, many, if not most, students need to find administrative and organisational information from time to time during their candidature. The information they need is now available on the Graduate Studies Office website, but most students, and indeed many supervisors, would still not be able to find it easily unless they use the phrase ‘graduate studies’.
I may have been naïve in expecting the University website to be of much help to me, as the cartoonist xkcd pointed out in July of 2010, represented here as Figure 3.

Figure 3: Schematic of a University Website (xkcd, 2010)

What should be provided for PhD students?

HDR students at the University of Sydney are surveyed every two years regarding their satisfaction with their enrolment, using the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) (Symons, 2012a). This survey instrument covers a broad range of aspects of HDR life, including library services, supervision and research culture. The 2011 version is available from the University website (Office of Graduate Studies 2012a). Symons (2012b) indicates that the University is genuinely interested in responses, which are collated in the Office of Graduate Studies, with faculties being sent summaries of their students’ replies and asked to respond, thus fitting the new University principle of ‘mutual accountability’. As this happened for the first time in 2011 and it will require several cycles to see if student satisfaction improves, it isn’t possible to say whether this process will encourage AOU’s to look more closely at their students’ experience of HDR enrolment.

In 2011, the Council for Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) produced a survey of the policies of Australian universities’ minimum provision for HDR students (CAPA, 2011). The information was gained by searching University websites:

Students are entitled to know what their entitlements are. Institutions who have not taken reasonable measures to make their minimum resources policy known to their students are considered for the purposes of this study as not having one in place at all, or with guidelines under development. (CAPA, 2011, p. 13)

40 HDR students are also surveyed nationally by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia in the year after they graduate, using the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire on which the local SREQ is based.
As Boud and Lee (2005) point out, provision of material resources, while seductively easy for universities to aim for and student organizations to report on, does not guarantee a satisfactory experience for students. No attempt was made to discover whether universities actually have any minimum provisions in place; they were being judged on whether they announce them in a central place on their website. A institution like the University of Sydney, in which provision of many of the measures used is delegated to AOUs, is going to score badly in such a ranking system – and, indeed, the University scored in the lowest category on all measures. However, this is an incomplete measure: anecdotally I know of one University that, despite scoring well in the CAPA survey, does not have a great number of journal subscriptions (not surveyed), nor is it is able to provide its HDR students with free inter-library loans (not surveyed either) – these are presently virtually unlimited at Sydney, where the University also has a huge range of journal subscriptions.

In 2012 the University, possibly stung into action by the CAPA report, established a policy of minimum level of support for an HDR student (Armstrong, 2011). This document outlines in detail what a student should be provided with, including adequate supervision, opportunities to engage with the research culture of the discipline, and a physical working space of minimum standard. However, the well-documented University-wide space shortage and the sharp increase in the number of HDR enrolments over the past decade, along with the low priority that has historically been awarded to PhD student needs at both institutional and faculty level, means that this should be seen as an aspirational document rather than a reflection of current reality. As discussed in Chapter 3, the long lag in funding returns can make investment in PhD infrastructure difficult to achieve, even at such a wealthy institution as the University of Sydney.

On the other hand, AOUs (particularly those within STEM faculties) are well aware that if they wish to get research work done, they need to provide facilities and equipment. Part-time students (in STEM there are very few in the sciences and technology disciplines, although more in the Medical School) are particularly poorly catered for across the University. In my own Faculty of Education and Social Work it was only in 2010 that some (hot-desk) space was set aside for part-time students who needed it, and that full-time students were allotted desk space (usually shared for the first year), a locker and a personal computer or laptop.

The largely distributed model at the University may make the experience more than usually variable. Students in a huge faculty such as Arts or Sciences (over 850 HDR students each) may mix only with students in their small sub-disciplinary or interest group, whereas students in small faculties with a wide range of research areas, like Veterinary Science, can know all the PhD students in the faculty quite well. A student enrolled part-time in the Medical School (about 800 PhD students) and working full-time in a hospital may almost never meet another PhD student throughout their candidature. And, due to the lack of central structures to support PhD, there is almost no opportunity for PhD students from different faculties to meet and learn from each other, unless they become active in the student representative organisation, SUPRA. Although
several changes to the PhD have been mooted over the last few years, it is still not clear how these might be carried out in such a diverse environment. Many, such as a requirement for compulsory coursework and funding for an extra six months scholarship ‘top-up’, have never been actioned.

**AOU processes**

The responsibility for carrying out University policy at Sydney is devolved to the AOU. Very few have an articulated policy regarding how they intend PhD students to progress, or how they provide opportunities for students to engage with each other or with other faculty staff.

The primacy of the supervisory relationship in Australia has often been seen to lead to a lack of acknowledgement of the social situatedness of learning in PhD process (Leonard & Becker, 2009). In a US PhD, in which coursework is a built-in part of the program, this may not be seen as such an issue. North American students begin their PhD in a social environment (classes), and as part of a defined cohort. In Australia it has been (and I have no doubt it still is) possible for a student to enrol and progress to thesis submission without ever discussing their ideas with anyone except their supervisor (Johnson et al., 2000). The provision of opportunities for social learning for HDR students is presently being widely debated at Sydney, mainly in the context of provision of PhD coursework. At the time of writing, incidentally, there doesn’t seem to be any official coursework (as opposed to voluntary workshops) being offered at the University at PhD level, as is mandated by the AQF; rather PhD students are sitting in on Masters level coursework.

As an alternate approach, my AOU (which has around 250 HDR students) now strongly encourages all PhD students to attend three workshop series, held in the evening to accommodate the large cohort of part-time students: Developing a Research Proposal in the first year; Writing a Thesis in the second year; Writing for Publication in the third year. Although these are voluntary and not assessed, the first full year of provision was highly successful, with steady attendance and students reporting how much they are enjoying meeting others in their cohort. This seems to me to be an excellent model for ‘HDR skills development’, which will be discussed below. A small number of AOUs are considering support and even coursework for HDR students using online forums, but this has not proved a popular choice so far.

There was nothing like this available when I enrolled in August 2005. In November I blogged my confusion:

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3 November 2005

Faculty of Ed

I am astounded at the lack of interest shown in me by the Faculty. I don’t expect them fall all over me, but I did think that they might welcome me and make some attempt to make me feel part of a community. Interesting that it’s
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Education! I feel really weird, driving through there in the morning and thinking that I should be a tiny part of what's going on, but not feeling that I am. They are getting funding for me, and what am I getting? [Supervisor]. True. Maybe that's the problem... maybe the fact that she's in the Quad and not a part of what's going on means that I'm not either.

I will certainly be talking about that at this progress interview, whenever that is scheduled.

But that first progress review didn’t go as planned either…

Also didn’t blog about my annual progress interview which was really weird. I just got this feeling that the committee chair (a past Dean of the Faculty) didn't have any confidence in me and kept saying things like "But you should have had your research proposal approved before you put your ethics application in!" and, when pointed to the research proposal that I had submitted and had been approved, said "There's no literature review in this proposal!" – when there was a long lit review but I hadn’t used that heading. It was quite surreal.

The following two reviews didn’t go well either. In one I was patronised by a staff member who assumed that the upcoming conference presentation I mentioned was the first one I had ever given – without enquiring, he gave me some tips for ‘the first time you present at a conference’ (I have presented at several throughout my two masters degrees and my 10-year career in academic support); at the second I was encouraged to attend a course in academic writing – a subject I used to teach myself. At neither review was my progress nor my project discussed in any depth. It wasn’t until I started attending the graduate presentations at CoCo that I began to feel part of something outside my actual project, and by the time I had been enrolled for over four years I was able to write…

Annual Review

Its that time of the year again… . This was the most business-like annual review I’ve had so far. Very professional and the academics had actually read my file, which made a first I think. It was exactly what it should have been -

41 ‘The Quad’ at Sydney is shorthand for the central management structure of the University, which is located in the oldest buildings, collectively known as ‘The Quadrangle’.
concerned interest and advice where it was asked for - and I really appreciated that. This year, since I've been attending the methodological colloquia and being on the DDS committee, 42 I am feeling much more like a part of the faculty than I ever have before.

In these reports I display my faith in the ‘annual review’ as an important part of my candidature. Somewhat more experienced now, I feel rather more cynical about this ritual. Who reads these reports? I have no idea. My last report (2012) is to be returned to the (Academic) Manager of Doctoral Studies in the faculty, having been signed by my supervisor and myself and the members of the committee who interviewed me. Does she read them all? Or are they simply filed? I am not alone in this: a project conducted at RMIT (Mewburn et al., forthcoming), reports that, due to confusion about both the purpose and the audience for such a report, “both students and supervisors worked to create a specific version of the 'PhD researcher' for consumption by the absent authority figure,” and also that “without exception, candidates reported reluctance to comment on supervisor performance in writing.”

This RMIT project arose when it was realised that students had been enrolled for (sometimes considerably) longer than their allotted time-span, but had never been the subject of a negative or even critical progress report. Mewburn and Sinclair (2012) conclude “… that no ready or transparent nexus may be assumed between progress reporting, the effective monitoring and enabling of candidates’ progress in their research programs (including addressing problems being faced by candidates) and progress itself.” They report one of the reasons for the failure of progress reporting to represent reality is that “…[s]ome students internalised the power relations inherent in candidature…[quoting a student]. ‘[Y]ou don't want to ruin a reputation. Who am I? A novice: a novice apprentice researcher’.”(n.p.) The flaw in over-reliance on the present forms of progress reporting within candidatures is that universities are attempting to regulate, oversee and interrogate supervision, a process that is still, in essence, understood by all concerned to be based on a personal relationship between two people.

Belonging to an AOU, of course, brings responsibilities as well as conferring rights. My AOU established a Division of Doctoral Studies (DDS) in 2009. This Division (now an Office) comprises two part-time academic staff, several other staff who oversee progress reviews, and an administrator, and is responsible for all policy and practice affecting doctoral studies in the faculty (around 250 enrolments, many part-time). However, when some students were angered by their inadequate student workspaces, they didn’t contact the staff of the DDS; they raised a student petition (signed by 12 students) and sent it to the Dean. When a meeting was called to discuss the issue, only four students attended – one was me, attending in my role as student representative on the DDS committee; two of the others had not signed the petition and were there for

42 My time as a member of this faculty management committee, the Division (now Office) of Doctoral Studies, has been invaluable in the writing of this thesis. Staff on that committee have been generous, supportive of my project and interested in my insights.
general interest; the third was the petition organiser who didn’t seem interested in listening to any other view but her own. The gap between the intention of the faculty to meet student needs and how that was experienced by students seemed to be very broad in this case, but it also seemed to me that the students most concerned about the issue were not interested in acting to bridge it. It was interesting for me to observe a situation in which students attempted (albeit rather clumsily) to claim agency and the Faculty apparently responded in a helpful way, but the students did not then exercise their agency to follow their initial complaint through to a solution. There will be more discussion in the next chapter about the relationship of students to their AOU.

The liminal nature of candidacy is clearly shown by how common it is for HDR students not to understand that their enrolment makes them part of something more than the people they are in regular contact with (Cardinali, 2010), and to be quite perplexed as to whom they should turn if they encounter a problem – they clearly do not see the progress report structure as a safe place to bring these concerns. Published results from the SREQ and PREQ show that, although overall satisfaction with the experience of doing a PhD at the University continues to increase, the measure that continues to lag is that of ‘climate’: most AOUs at the University could do much more to foster a sense of provision of systematic support and a community of learning within their PhD cohort (Office of Graduate Studies, 2012a, 2012b). On the other hand, most students report a fairly high level of satisfaction with their supervision arrangements.

**Supervision**

I was reluctant in this thesis to delve too deeply into a discussion of theories of supervision – I am writing about the student experience of doing a PhD and the theories are invariably written from the supervisor’s viewpoint and rarely include data from students. However, as we’ve seen, thinking, writing and advising about supervision dominates the Australian PhD literature; it’s impossible to discuss issues of pedagogy and curriculum without thinking about how supervision is conceptualised. I will discuss the literature that covers the dominant paradigms of supervisory skills, but focus the discussion as much as possible on the local (University of Sydney) situation and, in the spirit of this chapter’s dominant theme of the intended curriculum, on institutional responsibility for supervisor training. (The student experience of being supervised will be covered in Chapter 5.)

The subject of supervision (from the point of view of the supervisor) is the most popular subject in all writing about the PhD in Australia, beginning with Moses (1984) and Connell (1985). As we saw above it is the second most popular theme at the QPR conferences after institutional support. However, there is

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43 This view is also supported by personal communication from Simon French, Director of Graduate Studies.

44 Notable exceptions to the silence of students in the supervision literature is Grant (2005), who looks at the experience of being supervised as well as at the experience of supervising, and McAlpine and Lucas (2011), who look at the experiences of eight PhD students through the lens of agency and identity trajectory, although they did not focus specifically on the experience of being supervised.
considerable tension in the literature between conceptions of supervision as intimate and mysterious, and those of supervision as a manageable productive relationship. The bulk of the discussion (much of it at QPR) has been on improving the ‘management’ of candidature; work that discusses identity, power relations in supervision or workable alternatives to ‘traditional’ supervision models is a smaller genre. In a seminal article, Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) discuss the power relations between supervisor and students as an ‘invisible pedagogy’ (citing Bernstein, 1977), in which the student has the illusion of control, but in reality it is “The supervisor’s task…to arrange the context, to attend to the student’s needs and differences, and to observe and monitor.” (p. 142). As Grant points out “…supervision is not only concerned with the production of a good thesis, but also with the transformation of the student into an independent researcher” (2005 p. 49). Manathunga and Goozee (2007) also challenge the idea of the ‘already autonomous’ scholar in their discussion of conceptualisations of supervision that may be useful to the relationship.

The use of the word ‘relationship’ implies something very personal and even intimate. One of my key informants, George, a faculty-level administrator in an applied science discipline, said “I like to think of the supervisory relationship as a temporary intellectual marriage”. This is an interesting metaphor; in our society it would be generally considered that a marriage should be between equals. It may also have a bearing on how upset students feel when supervisory arrangements are changed without their consent (discussed in Chapter 5), and it is worth thinking about in situations where students are assigned to supervisors – perhaps these are a kind of ‘forced marriage’, in some psychological way. In Turner’s terms (1969), this relationship is between a liminal space inhabitant and a ritual elder, two people whose status is by no means equal.

Indeed, Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) point out that the word “‘Supervision’ carries powerful overtones of ‘overseeing’ (of ‘looking over’ and ‘looking after’)” (p. 142). The supervisor(s) in this model (which is the generally accepted one in Australia across disciplines) stand in for both the University and the discipline. Supervisors undertake formal reporting on the progress of the research to the Ethics Committee (in some institutions), and on the progress of the student through their degree to the University, usually through the AOU as discussed above. Additionally, supervisors may be seen as mentoring the student into relationships with other academics in the field through suggesting and supporting conference attendances and publication and, importantly, through the selection of examiners. The relationship is not between peers; there is a ‘panoptical’ quality about it – despite the often cited truism that it is the student who is the ‘expert’ in the subject matter of their project and the resultant thesis, supervision of the process of transformation to ‘independent scholar’ or ‘autonomous researcher’ is still understood to be necessary.

While acknowledging the difficulties inherent in theorising, Grant takes a positive view of the relationship:

…there is a proliferation of discourses (systems of meaning) that produce supervision as a cultural practice. While there are limits to the ways we can ‘sensibly’ think, speak and enact supervision, these limits
shift and slide as a function of the rich discursive context. Such slipperiness is a mixed blessing for the lived experience of supervision: it is potentially problematic insofar as differently positioned supervisors and students may talk past each other, but also fruitful insofar as there are more possibilities for diverse and pleasurable supervisor and student subjectivities and supervision exchanges. (2005, p. 32)

It is this ‘process’ aspect of supervision, with the “slipperiness” of the power relations, which makes it such a difficult subject to discuss. The supervisor(s) bear responsibility, in the management sense, for keeping the student ‘on track’. At the University of Sydney, the Supervisor is the Principal Investigator of the project, and thus responsible to the Animal or Human Ethics Committee for the conduct of the project (although I am aware this is not a universal practice – at some universities the student takes this responsibility). As we have already seen, supervisors are assumed to be able to provide the student with what they need to complete their project. Although supervisors generally understand themselves to be responsible for the production of the thesis, it is not clear what responsibility they are understood to bear for the production of the scholar.

‘Rational’ attempts to investigate, describe and theorise supervision process continue. Anne Lee (UK) (2008) suggested a framework for supervision with five ‘fields’ of interaction: Functional, Enculturation, Critical thinking, Emancipation and Relationship development. Halse and Malfroy (2010) ask “…what do doctoral supervisors do and how might their work be theorized?” (p. 79; emphasis in original). Their answer is thoughtful: they suggest conceptualising the work of supervision as having five “facets”: “…the learning alliance, habits of mind, scholarly expertise, technê and contextual expertise.” (p. 83ff)

The increasing diversity in age and life situation of PhD students has brought a new challenge to supervision. Whereas the academics reported in Johnston, Lee and Green (2000) were basing their views in their experience of a clearly differentiated coupling of inexperienced (young) student and experienced (older) supervisor, some students may be older than their supervisor, and may have as much or more life and professional experience. Ryland (2007) discusses issues in the supervision of part-time professionals, concluding that, while the responsibilities of the supervisor in the relationship are the same, they need to use different markers and techniques to carry out those responsibilities. For example, citing Evans (2000), he points out that time management skills may already be better developed in the older student (who is more likely to be fitting their PhD around their family and work obligations) – for a supervisor or university-based ‘skills training’ to focus on time-management skills may be counter-productive and even patronising. Rather, supervisors might usefully work within the situation that the older student is in, such as success in their career to date and their desire to improve their standing in their profession (or enter a new one).
Some work has been done on the idea of PhD as a threshold concept.\footnote{Threshold concepts in education “represent a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1). They are widely discussed in first-year university teaching in a variety of disciplines.} Meyer and Land state that “Difficulty in understanding threshold concepts may leave the learner in a state of liminality (Latin limen—‘threshold’), a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 10). This is not quite like my earlier description of a liminal space in which people are trapped in quite a systemic way; it is more diffuse and could relate to almost anyone tackling new knowledge in almost any area. Additionally, it is probably not possible to identify universally ‘what is needed to know’ that would move a PhD student over the threshold of ‘knowing’ what ‘doctorateness’ might mean for them, and there is no attempt to do this in the literature (Kiley, 2009; Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Wisker, Kiley, & Aiston, 2006). Rather, the notion of threshold concepts is presented chiefly as a useful tool for supervisors encountering students who are ‘stuck’ in various places in their candidature — and it may very well work in those situations. But in my view this idea has limited usefulness for understanding the PhD student experience more broadly.

In the context of examination, the supervisor may be seen by the examiner as shepherding the thesis and guiding the student to appropriate standards of submission, and being held “implicitly or explicitly…negligent if the work is below par” (Johnston, 1997, p. 344). Lovat, Monfries and Morrison (2004) document how examiners’ reports reveal their power relationship to the supervisor, seeing him/her as gatekeeper, deciding when the thesis is ready for submission and blaming him/her if the student seems to have submitted prematurely. Hill, Sankaran and Swepson (2006) point out that the experience of being an examiner can be one of the factors that improve a person’s supervision.

Workload issues for academics who are supervising PhD students are by no means clear-cut. Up to the last five years there was no workload allowance at the University of Sydney for staff supervising in some AOUs; supervision was simply considered part of their teaching and research work. Workload formulas have now been produced (although they may vary between AOUs at this institution) so that staff with several PhD students can choose to reduce undergraduate teaching. Although students may have a limited knowledge of the other responsibilities a staff member has, they get very frustrated if their work is held up by apparent inactivity or lack of response from their supervisors, as this post from Debra illustrates. Setting up of clear expectations, and re-iterating them at intervals, is often recommended as a strategy, and be what a supervisor has aimed to do, but this may be heard by the student as being fobbed off with claims to ‘busyness’. This disconnect can be compounded when supervisors do not give timely feedback.
Participant blog: Debra

I see the Sups next Tuesday - will up date you on that, I am sure... I'm not really looking forward to it - having to hear about how busy they are, how they couldn't find the time to read my work, how I need to reduce the amount I write, how I need to make more frequent meetings with them - all the usual bullshit...

What I want to tell them is to schedule some time in their damn calendars, sit down, and read my chapters because I need their feedback to move forward. I even wrote a letter stating I could read all my chapters in one day, with a critical eye - so if they just scheduled a Sunday or something to dedicate to me (after all I do pay thousands and thousands of dollars for them to do this), then it could be over with. Anyway, we'll see how it goes... I am, of course, projecting... but basing these projections on past experience. I mean, really, I gave my Data Chapter to my Sups before summer vacation even started, and they still haven't said a word about it.

Useless, just useless...

While universities may aim for “predictable outcomes and timely completions“ (Grant, 2005b, p. 10), Lee and Green (2009) claim that “attempts to bring a contemporary rationality into the intensifying public discourse about supervision“ are doomed because the supervisory relationship itself is a creature of “metaphor, allegory and allusion.” (p. 616) Some supervisors clearly do understand the liminal nature of candidacy (even if they don’t use the word liminal to describe it), and express their awareness of it very clearly.

Peter: Social Science, senior faculty administrator

Pedagogical basis: it's like, having an idea of where students need to get to. And what I've found that every student - and you have all sorts of students - until someone's done it they don't know what the destination is. Sometimes I think that one of the problems that really really good students have is that their supervisors assume that they can do it. Whereas they've never been there before. And I've had that case - where I've had really capable students... but they've never been there before, you know, so they don't know where that endpoint is as well. So that's a trap, thinking someone's really, really capable, they don't need the mentoring as well.

Some people are new to this culture, so they have much less idea, but until anyone's been there they don't know where it is that they're going. So I'd suggest having a sense of where the student's got to go and what's going to happen at the end and preparing your students as best you can for that... for want of a better word I'll say for that moment...in
Lee and Green (2009) describe their metaphor systems as representing “available systems of description which offer clusters of conceptual possibility” (p. 616). Although the interviews I conducted with academics at the University were almost entirely unstructured, I did specifically ask every academic staff member what metaphor came into their mind when they thought about supervision. I was attempting to get some insight into how academics see themselves as supervisors – how they conceptualise that part of their academic work. I was inspired to do this by Grant’s PhD thesis on supervision, which contains the following list of metaphors she has identified as being in use:

… master/apprentice (Connell, 1985), guide/traveller (Clegg & Gall, 1998), parent/child (Clegg & Gall, 1998), mentor/mentee (Leder, 1995), older sister/younger sister (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000, 2001), resource/resource user (Clegg & Gall, 1998), a family drama (Johnson et al., 2000), even a loving partnership (Heinrich, 1991). Most recently Lee and Green (2004) have added a more theoretical perspective, suggesting there are two “arch metaphors” (p.6) for supervision, Authorship and Apprenticeship, and drawing from their substantial empirical data (approximately 100 interviews with supervisors) three metaphor systems: cultural-discursive apprenticeship, co-production and project management. (2005, p.26)

I particularly like Lee and Green’s three ‘metaphor systems’ in the last sentence: it seems to me that virtually all discussions I have had about supervision fall into one or other of these arrangements.

In an early contribution to this debate, Yeatman (1995), points out the difficulty for universities in walking the line between “rational accountability” and “bureaucratising the supervision relationship” (p.10). She suggests, rather presciently – although she does not see some of the advantages for student work that will be discussed later (M.-H. Ward & West, 2008) – that getting students to keep digital logs of their work might fulfil several needs, including on-going and open scrutiny of student work, a written record of work, and an acceptable form of “contractualism” (p.11). Her own metaphor, presented at the beginning of her article and which she does not challenge, is that of the ‘master/apprentice’, and this is still one of the most common ways that people think about supervision (see Manathunga & Goozee, 2007 for a detailed discussion of this model).

Manathunga (2007) deconstructs another common metaphor for supervision: that of ‘mentoring’. She points out the “governmentality” (p. 207) of mentoring, and suggests that, used as a metaphor for supervision, it can “mask the significant role played by power in supervision pedagogy.” (p. 207). It may be that people who endeavour to mentor their students are consciously trying to move beyond a master/apprentice model to more of a co-production model, seeing that as a more equal power relationship with their students, but the
relationship, with its burden of the supervisor’s previous history of being supervised and its contingent place in a university’s management structures, is much more complex than the way it is usually conceptualised in this framing.

In a more participatory, practice-based spirit, Boud and Lee (2005) offer the metaphor of peer learning as one that might provide a productive framing for the supervisory relationship, and Lee and Green (2009) aim to bring together the “conceptual space of pedagogy and the productivity of metaphor” (p. 616). Halse (2011) suggests that more thinking be directed toward what supervisors learn through their supervision work. These ideas would seem to provide a more ‘modern’ pedagogical framing for the supervisory relationship than other models, incorporating elements of connectivism and collaborative learning, and perhaps appropriate to how students might be expected to develop their own scholarly identities in our networked world. In practice, however, the inherent power differentials may make this kind of practice difficult – students may find it challenging, at least initially, to understand and exercise their agency even if supervisors aim to try and encourage them. These were not concepts that arose often in my interviews with supervisors when I specifically asked what metaphors they thought of in terms of their own supervisory practices. I simply report these responses here, in the light of the discussion on the last few pages.

**Polly, health sciences, University-level administrator**

No single word comes to mind - it’s a very complex issue. It underpins the success or failure of candidacy, and sets up people for how they’re going to behave. Some people have tremendous role models for supervisors and go on to be tremendous supervisors; some people have shocking role models and go on to become tremendous supervisors. They’re not correlated in a one-to-one manner. Like all personal relationships they need to be managed carefully; when it goes wrong it goes very badly wrong.

**Peter, social science, senior faculty administrator**

I guess that underlying it is the mentoring model of learning. I recently read an article comparing the US system with the British system, and saying that in a way, and I’d never thought of it like this, that the way we do supervision is like the Oxford model of learning to be a student, you know, with a tutor, so to speak. In a sense that’s where it’s come from, and I’d never thought of it like that, whereas the US model is actually quite different.

**Wendy, social sciences, theorist**

I think the idea of a guide. Not as in guiding. Here’s someone going along a dark, perhaps winding, perhaps stony path and in the dark and you’re kind of there. So at times you need to kind of help them along. I’ve got this image of how you might help someone who might stumble on the path - hold their elbow or their arm or something - and at times you’d step back into the darkness and they would just be going on, on their merry way. At times the going would be quite slow and at times it might
be bright and they can kind of race along. At times you're really not in
focus for the student at all.

Mat, science, experienced supervisor and former University-level administrator

I think of PhD students as 'colleagues in the discipline'.

Desmond, science, senior University-level administrator

… there are many facets to the role of good supervisor, and I think the
art that I have to learn as we frame our policy is how does one lead
people to an expectation of the richness of this environment without
prescribing it to death. But... having a solid sense of reasonable
expectation.

One of the issues that this thesis does not cover is the issue of cross-cultural
supervision. The special issues that arise in applying such a poorly-
conceptualised notion as PhD supervision in Australia to a sensitive relationship
between a supervisor and student who do not share a common cultural
background and/or first language is a thesis in itself. Indeed this is the topic of
the PhD thesis of Sara Cotterall, whose PhD was awarded by Macquarie
University as I was completing this chapter. A special issue of the journal
Innovations in Education and Teaching International in 2011, edited by Grant
and Manathunga, opened the discussion of this side of supervision, but it is
beyond the scope of this thesis.

As well as the difficulties with discussing the supervisory relationship
rationally, it is difficult to discuss supervision across disciplines: the models
discussed in Johnson et al (2000) for the humanities and social sciences,
including benign neglect, mentor, panoptical overviewer and parent, and
those listed by Grant (2005) above, have proved resistant to change and are still
extant in universities in the 21st century. However, the ‘traditional’ models of
supervision in science-based disciplines, in which there are more structured
working relationships, are equally resistant to change. The newer models of
APA(I) and CRCs, which are often seen as ‘tying’ students to research in which
a preferred outcome is evident, have inherent in them the pure and applied
science models of supervision, often based on the strict hierarchies of a lab
environments and thus more related to employment structures than pedagogical
relationships.

Michael, Fine Arts, Senior Central Administrator

I think the supervisor also ought to bear in mind that if they're advertising
for a PhD student to do a certain project they ought to emphasise the
research training part of that role. They need to allow the student to
develop the scope of the project, develop the research questions, develop the methodology with assistance. Because to me, if they don't do that they aren't going to train an autonomous researcher, they're going to just train someone who can do it. And every now and then in discussions round the University I've been alarmed when people talk about PhD students as though they were research assistant or employees, and they're not. The relationship between supervisor and student is not an employee relationship. It's very easy for supervisors on large grants to see it in in those terms, and they're got to be very careful.

The following extract from my personal blog highlights the liminal space occupied by the PhD student working on a large funded project, as I unexpectedly observed for myself one morning.

28 February 2011

From my public PhD blog

Ouch!

This morning I saw this as I walked to my office through the Engineering Faculty. Nearby some young people explained to me that it was a robot sensor that could be sent into areas that were unsafe for humans and would report on what was there, using a variety of sensors. Several branding markers on the robot indicated that this was a well-supported funded project.

I asked if they were PhD students. They laughed, and said that no, they were researchers (postdocs, I wonder?), but that they had 'an army of PhD students' working on the project. One of them added "Cheap labour", to general merriment.

This attitude to PhD students, that they are only fit for the mundane work of a complex team project, is related to an expression reported by one of my key informants to be once common in science: ‘handle-cranking’ PhDs’. It may be that the push from the science and applied science faculties to establish PhD as a degree in the late 1940s was as much related to the need to ‘turn out’ more research (in response to increased demand for scientific research by the government (Forsyth, 2012)) as it was to ensure that universities in Australia kept up with those in the US (A. Ward, 2008). However, as Cumming (2007; 2009) has shown, the pedagogies that emerge – how students actually learn – within science- and technology-based PhDs may not be as simple as has often been imagined. As he revealed, and we will see more and more in this thesis, what students learn is often unpredictable, unplanned and accidental.
To finish this discussion of the theory and practice of supervision in Australia on a positive note, one of my academic informants spoke eloquently about the pleasures he finds in supervision:

*Peter, faculty-level administrator, social sciences*

The other thing I like about it to be frank is when my students graduate. It's just a wonderful moment. It's not about me it's about them. That's the moment I find most rewarding is when they've done that - and then when they've gone and got a job. I almost feel that it's like me getting my first job, because you know how hard it is out there to get a job?

One of my students just got a job - a tenured job - in the Arts faculty, and I'll be thrilled to pieces because I know what the competition would have been like for that job. He thinks he got it because he was a PhD student here, and maybe because of me, but I know that's not how it works at all: he got it because of the merit of his work.

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**The University's role in supervision**

Grant (2005, p. 11ff) continues the discussion begun by Green and Lee (1995) and Johnston, Lee and Green (2000) on the difficulty of considering supervision as a rational, transparent process, and imagining it can be ‘managed’ somehow by policies and procedures and well-meaning advice. The student may be advised to work regularly and steadily and communicate clearly with their supervisor about their needs; the supervisor, who is also probably looking for opportunities for publication and ways to advance their research profile, is often advised to treat the student as a peer-in-the-making, while the institution must somehow insert itself into this relationship to ensure that its strategic needs (and, indeed, those of the federal government who is funding this enterprise) are met. As Grant (2005) puts it,

> Supervision may happen in the relatively private space of a supervisor’s office, but it is also given shape and tempo by systems and forces beyond individual supervisor and student. (p. 4)

Gilbert (2004) feels that “the evaluation of the outcomes of doctoral programs has generally focused on…”

(a) the quantitative analysis of outputs of research (publications, etc.) and programs (graduation rates, time to completion, etc.) and
(b) surveys of graduate satisfaction, where attention has focused on pedagogical processes and resources, the ‘how’ of supervision or the level of support services (p 301).

Acknowledging the difficulties inherent in evaluating HDR process, he suggests that a dual framing of extrinsic and intrinsic evaluations is necessary:

In the case of the doctoral curriculum, an evaluation would ask:
● to what extent does the research training provided in various doctoral programs achieve the stated goals of these programs (extrinsic evaluation);

● to what extent do the goals and content of doctoral programs lead to research training which meets the needs of students, interested parties and the community as a whole in a context of social, cultural, economic and technological change (intrinsic evaluation)? (p. 303)

Pearson (1999a) also highlights inadequacies in the way that Universities were trying to report on the quality of their HDR degrees at the time:

…it is evident given that there are still serious concerns about postgraduate education, resourcing, supervision, and outcomes (Mullins & Kiley, 1998), despite significant efforts by institutions to monitor and improve quality (Poole & Spear, 1997). It could be argued that this is due to the preoccupation at the policy level with structural and procedural issues over recent years, which has led to inadequate attention to issues of process and purpose. (p. 270)

These pressures at the policy level have not become any less; indeed with the increased government interest in research training they have, as seen in Chapter 3, intensified. Lee and Green point out that What emerges [from a consideration of supervision] is the ineluctability of difference, and the necessary inequality of powers: power and difference are necessary principles of the pedagogic relation. (1995, p. 44)

One area of supervision in which there has been almost no theorising is that of how students and supervisors come to be matched. I have already touched on this area in my discussion of how students approach their investigations into institutions on the web; the reality is complex and messy. In an ideal world – the world that is still often imagined to be the real world – a student who is already familiar with the University and with the staff in their disciplinary area approaches a staff member with whom they already have a positive relationship and discusses the possibility of forming a supervisory relationship. This is more likely to happen to a student who has recently completed an Honours or Masters degree in that AOU, or who works at the University like myself, than it is for a mature person who has not been involved with a university for some years, but who would like, for example, to learn to research within their profession.

In the real world, students come to the AOU in many different ways – the University’s website being an increasingly important one – and many AOU’s do not have standardised methods for dealing with enquiries from prospective HDR students. 46 Most AOU’s, one would hope, canvass staff in an attempt to provide a good match in disciplinary interest and methodologies, if not

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46 Several Universities have installed software systems to deal with enrolment queries. The difficulties these can bring to the process of applying to do an HDR degree, in which the student is greatly advantaged by being able to discuss a possible project with individual academics before enrolment, is yet to be fully revealed.
personality. Grant (2005) suggests when providing the following way of thinking about ‘types’ that might match fruitfully (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psy-supervisor (wise, supportive)</th>
<th>Psy-student (inexperienced but willing to learn)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trad-supervisor (distant, formal, all-knowing)</td>
<td>Trad-student (tough, resilient)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techno-supervisor (orderly, training-focused)</td>
<td>Techno-student (organised, malleable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Com-supervisor (dispenses services),</td>
<td>com-student (consumes services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rad-supervisor (gendered, classed etc; very aware of power differential)</td>
<td>Rad-student (gendered, classed etc; very aware of power differential)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psycho-sup (aware of desire and its role in the relationship.)</td>
<td>Psycho-student (aware of desire and its role in the relationship.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Six ‘types’ of supervisor and student (Grant, 2005)

It is certainly worthwhile to hope that a simple exercise in matching could be achieved by a wise AOU administrator, who is aware of the many pitfalls that occur in supervision, in these terms. However, as Grant herself points out, much of the literature on the management of supervision is concerned with the relationship as: “murky”, “elusive”, “mysterious”, “ambiguous”, “difficult”, “even ineffable” (2005, p. 12). Essentially, she says, the shifting and unstable desires involved mean the process is “not amenable to rational explanation”:

…desires to please, to challenge, to do well, to demonstrate independence, to push towards independence, to resist, to be respected by, to be recognised as clever, to be told, to become like, to become authoritative, desires for the (powerful or vulnerable) other and towards the emergent thesis. (p.12, emphasis in original)

These desires, she says, are fruitful and part of any pedagogical relationship, in all its “messy complexity” (p.15) in which, as Lusted (1986) points out, both the human actors and the knowledge itself are continually changing and recreating what can be known – particularly appropriate in the supervisory relationship, in which the student is charged quite specifically with the creation of original knowledge.

I have heard, anecdotally, of students being ‘snapped up’ by the senior staff who deal with the enquiries, or of students being ‘offered’ to staff members who ‘need’ students (possibly those who are not as research-active as the norm), rather than being given an opportunity to meet and discuss their ideas with several staff. Although the new Resources Policy at the University of Sydney (Armstrong, 2011) does specifically encourage free choice on the part of students, it is not likely that many people would find this document prior to enrolling.

* * * * * * *

My own history of supervisors is an example of how a student can ‘manage’ their supervision. When I planned to begin my PhD studies I wrote to the (then) Dean of Graduate Studies, who passed my enquiry on to a senior staff member
in the Arts Faculty who never responded. As I worked at the University and was more interested in working in Education than in Arts I then used my own knowledge to approach three staff members who seemed to be working in the area in which I was interested. One of these was Judyth Sachs, then a Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, but also at the time the PVC (Teaching and Learning) and thus my ultimate boss. She invited me to visit her, and I did, in the hope that she would suggest some other academics who might be interested in working with me. To my surprise she professed an interest in my project herself, and eventually became my first Supervisor. Another academic I had approached was appointed by the University as my Associate Supervisor, but he never evinced any interest in my project, so in time I approached Professor Peter Goodyear, who had not long arrived at the University when I enrolled, and who agreed to be my Associate Supervisor – a decision I have not regretted. When Judyth left the University it was eventually thought to be easier administratively for Peter to become my main Supervisor and Judyth to become my Associate. Only in the appointment of my first Associate Supervisor did I feel I was going to be assigned to a staff member, and I was able to change that, as I understood that I had rights in these crucial decisions. This may not be the perception of all students.

* * * * *

Preparing academics employed by the institution to competently supervise HDR students is part of the institution’s responsibility to maintain the quality of students’ HDR experiences. Peseta and Brew (2009, p. 132) list six questions that universities were likely to ask themselves about supervision training as a result of the federal government’s 2004 funding structures, which introduced the RTS. I would have found it hard to discuss these questions: if I had been handed them in the course of my work I would have immediately changed their order so that 2 came first, followed by 6, then 1, then 3, 4 and 5 as a linked group. However, I have briefly commented on each of these in the order that they listed them (my comments in italics). I’ve done this because it seems to me that this kind of list is part of the problem that students face in their desire to clarify just what is expected of them in the supervision relationship. It mixes up intrinsic and extrinsic evaluations (Gilbert, 2004), and does nothing to clarify institutional thinking about how the experience of doing a PhD might be improved

1 How can universities ensure that supervisors develop their supervision?

*What does the word ‘develop’ mean here? According to what schema, or plan, or, indeed, curriculum should this be done?*

2 What is an appropriate mechanism for appropriate supervision?

*Can this be decided across disciplines? How does this question take into account the personal, intimate and unique nature of each supervisory relationship?*
3 How can we ensure initial education/training, as well as ongoing professional development?

*The initial can be regulated for; a university may even have a responsibility to do this. The ongoing has to be seen by academics as worthwhile spending time on – there must be some rewards for the individual.*

4 How can supervision training be assessed?

*Should it be? Perhaps a better question might be “How can supervisory effectiveness be assessed?” (see next question)*

5 How can a university ensure that a supervision training program is effective? What are the measures and indicators of effectiveness?

*Staff who have been through the program could be surveyed at intervals after it is completed, once they are ‘trying out’ the ideas with their students. A question could be included in surveys of student experience. Plus the number of submissions by the students of graduates of the program can be considered, along with a measure of the amendments that are required on those theses. All are indicators, if taken together, although none give a complete picture. Is it even possible to build one?*

6 Does developing supervision improve students’ experiences of higher research degrees?

*Although it might seem like an obvious outcome, no-one knows the answer to this, because no study has been done to investigate it. A question about supervisor satisfaction asked in the SREQ and PREQ at the University of Sydney has shown positive change over time, but this could be related to many different factors, not just supervisor training. And it begs the question of what kind of supervisor development students might find most helpful.*

On the other hand, Pearson (1999, p. 282) provides a list of questions that she would like Australian institutions to consider in relation to their PhD ‘program’

1. How does the program—
   1. provide access to resources (and expertise) essential to conduct high-quality research?
   2. give students flexibility/choice of learning and research conditions within a negotiated structure?
   3. ensure adequate supervision for administrative matters and for intellectual leadership, and identify who is responsible for what?
   4. ensure students engage with practising researchers and are in conversation with a community of peers/experts/others?
   5. be responsive to students' career goals and the opportunities and demands of relevant employment markets
Unlike other lists of this type discussed in this thesis, (AQF, 2007, 2013; Brew & Peseta, 2004; CAPA, 2011; Wissler & Borthwick, 2005 for ADDoGS), Pearson’s list is based on a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how students might be expected to learn in their PhD process, rather than on improving the outcomes of that process based on instrumentalist provisioning.

As an agreed pedagogy of supervision has not emerged in Australia, it is difficult to see what training for supervision can be based on if not an institutional view of the ideal management of the process of ‘doing’ a PhD. However, as supervision provides an important institutional link between the intended and enacted curriculums for the PhD, it behoves institutions to think carefully about their requirements for supervisor certification. Grant points out the difficulties:

…supervision as a discursive object, as a palimpsest-like field of triangular relations, as a project of governmentality, as a fantasy, as the relation of Master-Slave, and as improvisation – give an overarching sense of supervision as a messy and unpredictable pedagogy in which the academic and the personal come together in an unusual way. The significance of this understanding is that we cannot easily or meaningfully regulate or ‘train’ for supervision. Because of its implication in the production of original, independent academic work and the authorised academic subject, it must be as much a practice of improvisation as it is of regularity. (Grant, 2005b, p. iv)

Her expression of supervision as an “improvisational practice” supports my view of what students learn through their PhD as largely accidental. The practice of the PhD, based in supervisory relationships that are slippery and uncertain and involving the creation of knowledge that is new, gives the lie to an institution’s natural desire to present it as a rational ordered process.

At Sydney some faculties offer supervisor support and training, but all supervisors at the University are mandated to undergo an initial program provided centrally. This training is one of the key ways in which the University’s policy on quality in Research Training is enacted. For many years the training offered was highly contested, and controversial as to both purpose and content. As this controversy is not directly related to the matter of this thesis but provides an interesting example of supervisor training that was eventually discontinued, as it was perceived to not be meeting the needs of a University community, I have presented it as Appendix 5 for interested readers.

The University also offers a financial prize every year for the best HDR supervisors, for which staff are invited to apply. In the light of that, Debra’s opinion of her supervisors as her submission date drew near is interesting. Perhaps the University should ask for references from students when considering these awards.

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47 I believe this may be about to change with a new policy in March 2013. It seems like a backward step not to mandate any training at all, but this may be a reaction to the insistence that experienced supervisors transferring from other institutions undergo training.
Participant blog: Debra

I have been creating the artwork for my thesis, so right now things are going smooth and easy with that. I'll meet up with the Sups in another week or so to check in. Lots of meetings with them lately since getting near the end. The meetings have been good - recording our meetings helps immensely. Believe it or not, one of my Sups won a Vice Chancellor award for PhD Supervision! Ha! I thought, what a joke of an award - according to who has she become the best Supervisor? And to pay her $10,000 for it. Obviously the judge of that award had never read my blogs...

Skills training

One of the constant threads in discussions around the PhD since about 2000 has centred on the acquisition of ‘skills’, often but not always focused on the supposed requirements of employers. (As already pointed out, many students already have years of experience in ‘what employers want’; they may even have been experienced employers of staff themselves before enrolling in a PhD.) This fits well into the concept of an intended curriculum, as it is often based on lists of provisioning to be supplied. The themes of skills training and employability of HDR graduates can be found in 25% to 35% of papers offered at QPR conferences (M.-H. Ward, 2010a).

As well as the presentations at QPR, Manathunga Lunt and Mellick (2007) list nearly 20 academic articles which discuss the provision of skills that employers have stated they would like research graduates to have, and a further seven on the subject of schemes for skill development (such as the ATN LEAP program), many of which do not seem to be still available. The most successful programs reported seem to be based in applied science and technology; as seen in Chapter 3 those are the areas in which government funding might be more readily available. Manathunga, Pitt and Critchley (2009) look at the development of graduate attributes in CRC-funded projects from the point of view of the future employment of graduates, comparing students based in a CRC with those based in an academic school or department within a university faculty. The point they make is that the CRC programs, although limited to only a few hundred of the PhD cohort in Australia, better meet the employment needs of both industry and the individual students who undertake them.

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48 LEAP is a series of online modules for students at ATN universities. It aims to “provide … postgraduate research students with the opportunity to increase their employment prospects through an increased awareness of key issues that increase their employability” http://www.atn.edu.au/students/LEAP.htm
49 Students based in the CRC claimed fewer of the graduate attributes when they enrolled, but more of them claimed to have developed them by the time of graduation.
The increasing interest in this discussion in the last five years is partly a recognition of the shift in the purpose of the PhD away from being an entree to an academic career; not all people who gain a PhD now wish to work in academia. Other career options may lead them to wish to claim or to develop a range of skills to apply for work in industry, government, professions, or other workplaces. It also reflects the gap that has been developing for years, and that is now perhaps being tacitly acknowledged, between the large number of PhD graduates and the relatively smaller number of academic positions for them to fill. The academic workforce is growing in size – it increased by more than 28,000 between 2000 and 2010 (DIISRTE, 2012b). However, the number of domestic PhD graduates in that period was 53,000 (DIISRTE, 2011), so the numbers of PhD graduates outstrip the number of vacancies by nearly 50%. Not surprisingly, more than half those who graduate with a PhD in Australia will not work in higher education, and only one-third of them “will undertake careers dedicated to research-based work or to producing new knowledge“ (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2011 p. 464). This does not, of course, mean that HDR graduates do not use their research skills, and other skills that they developed or improved upon during their candidature, in their future lives.

The AQF framework, as we have seen, provides a list of ‘core’ skills that PhD graduates should be able to claim. Some of the discussion around skills is about these core skills that are directly related to research work: software training, advanced information literacy, writing, critical thinking. The AQF also lists what it calls ‘generic skills’ for all qualifications, breaking these into “Fundamental skills, people skills, thinking skills and personal skills” (AQF, 2013, p. 63). These are the skills, it states, that universities articulate in their Graduate Attributes.

Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2011) point out that ‘professional’ skill sets (contextual knowledge that you need to be a member of a profession such as academia) need to be distinguished from ‘generic’ skill sets (knowledge that will be of general assistance in many situations), a point that is apparently not well understood by many proponents of ‘skills’ in the PhD context. There is much confusion about which skills students need to complete their degree, which skills have been deemed useful to them in later areas of their lives and, indeed, which students need skills training at all. As Borthwick and Wissler (2003) report “…many universities tended to interpret generic skills for postgraduate research students as being to do with research process.” I have also personally observed such lack of clarity at meetings, conferences and seminars. Despite continuing discussion around the concept of ‘skills’, Australian universities have not generally articulated specific lists of ‘generic’, ‘peripheral’ or ‘transferrable’ skills, ‘graduate attributes’ or ‘generic capabilities’ (all of these phrases seem to be somewhat interchangeable in this debate) that should be acquired or developed by HDR students during their enrolment (Manathunga & Wissler, 2003).

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50 As was discussed in Chapter 3, the Federal Government is presently seeking to increase the number of PhD places, because it fears that the retirement of academic staff in the demographic known as the ‘baby boomers’ will leave institutions short-staffed.
The call for skills provision in HDR training agendas is also a reaction to the more professionalised nature of academia in the 21st century. (See Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2011 for a detailed discussion of the implications of considering research as a profession.) Publication and gaining research funding have now assumed much greater importance in academic life, and teaching is also being taken much more seriously, even within the research-intensive universities. Graduating with a PhD may signify that one knows how to conduct a research project within a discipline but, taken on its own, it does not indicate whether the bearer knows how to shape their knowledge into a suitable form for a journal publication, to apply successfully for a research grant, to strategize on a departmental committee, to communicate what they would like students to learn, to assess student work, or to plan a curriculum.

In the context of the changes to government funding after 1999, Barnacle and Usher (2003) suggest that government claims that students lack (unspecified) skills that they will need for employment is unsubstantiated – they suggest that this claim is really related to the government agenda, rather than to any strongly expressed view from employers. They also point out that the ‘older’ cohort of PhD students (at that time around one-third of enrolments but now higher) who may not have undertaken a PhD as an entree to an academic position, will be bringing their own skills into their PhD experience – none of which are considered in various statements calling for ‘skills’ to be included in research training. As we have seen, nearly half of current Australian PhD students (45% of 2010 enrolments) come to their studies from full-time work, and 40% of them are studying part-time (DIISRTE, 2011), indicating that they are likely to be employed during their candidature. Participating in Barnacle and Usher’s (2003) research, candidates who already had many workplace and life skills identified the skills they developed and improved during their time as an HDR student as “…analytical skills, such as critical thinking, and written skills, and that these are of particular value within the workplace” (Barnacle & Usher, 2003, p. 355). They go on to explain that

Such capabilities … are not developed exclusively through the experience of doing research. It is clear from the responses that the workplace also provides a range of skills that are productively deployed within research activity as well, particularly networking and project management skills (Barnacle and Usher, 2003, p. 355).

Writing in the context of how the articulation of curriculum goals might clarify examination of the PhD, Gilbert (2009, p. 63) lists what might be called core skills for a PhD graduate. These tie back to the AQF statements as to the purpose of PhD, and his point is that “appropriateness” of skills for the individual methodological and disciplinary context is paramount to any local (i.e. institutional) examination criteria that are developed in relation to these skills. Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2010) concur:

By denying the contextualisation of generic skills within subject knowledge, however, the rhetoric around generic skills untethers the relation between knowledge and practice; as if knowledge can emerge from nowhere. (p.463)
Taking the list of skills that are purported to be covered in the LEAP course as an example of this untethering, I would have said that Project Management skills are intrinsic to completing any PhD, but for many people this means no more than managing themselves and their own project and process. For others it might mean working with a group of other people within a complex environment, negotiating access to equipment on a complex schedule, timing various parts of the project in quite detailed ways, and even managing some aspects of the work of staff who provide services to a team. ‘Leadership and Communication’, similarly, requires context-dependent skills; leading a team of artists involved in production of art works is quite different from leading a government policy unit or a teaching department in a school. The skills and knowledge you would need for success in these situations would be quite different. The other three items (Entrepreneurship, Research Commercialisation and Public Policy) relate to the way that the debate on skills in research degrees has been captured by the “dominant government discourse of the PhD as the timely production of a particular marketable product – the skilled PhD graduate” (Mowbray & Halse, 2010, pp. 654, emphasis in original).

Further, say Mowbray and Halse (2010), the purpose of the PhD itself is in danger of becoming “entangled in the skills push” (p. 654) – they see a danger in allowing an under-theorised demand for insufficiently described skills to overtake the emphasis on development of new knowledge (as we have seen, still the universal justification for the PhD). In their study at a major Australian University, the skills that 20 final-year, full-time PhD students from several disciplines felt they had developed or improved were, in order of importance: “Personal resourcefulness, cognition, research skills, workplace and career management, leadership and organisation, written and oral communication and project management.” (p. 656) This study, with Barnacle and Usher’s (2003) study of mature students discussed above, are among the few studies so far that have asked students what skills they valued in themselves by the end of their PhD enrolment rather than what skills academic managers or employers think may be important. Both studies also have the value of theorising the PhD itself, and the skills they discuss are seen as serving the personal development of the whole graduate, rather than as ‘add-ons’ or ‘things you’ll need to get a job.’ In this way, the skills debate can be untied from the employment debate, two things that are often presented as connected in an uncomplicated way – what Mowbray and Halse (2010) call “a seamless, linear transference from instruction to mastery and workplace application.” (p. 654, emphasis in original)

There has been much discussion at the University of Sydney, in working parties and committees, in the last five years about skills for PhD students, but it is hard to single out many results that would directly benefit students. My interviews with faculty-based academic administrators at the University have uncovered some faculty-based initiatives to improve skills and professional development provision within PhD experience since 2008, including:

- Taking over responsibility for the bi-annual student presentation seminars from a struggling volunteer student group (although this could be seen as lessening the skills of graduates!)
• Organising regular semi-formal discussions between more- and less-experienced supervisors
• Strongly encouraging students to attend PhD level seminar series on methodology or thesis writing, as opposed to masters-level courses

With the exception of the last, these changes at the level of the AOU are almost never justified by or discussed in terms of pedagogy or of curriculum-based planning.

In 2009 I informally interviewed a staff member of the Sydney University Careers Service who had undertaken a research project to determine how the service might better serve the needs of PhD graduates. She had interviewed many students (I venture to suggest mainly younger than average and inexperienced in career pathways) who, when confronted with the fact that their candidature was drawing to a close, even after they had submitted their theses, seemed to expect a job to simply materialise, perfectly tailored to their skills. They were unable to articulate, in many cases, just what these skills might be; she reported several students who, when asked to list the skills they thought an employer might be interested in, looked at her blankly and simply restated “But I have a PhD!” My analysis would be that these students’ identity of PhD candidate was so strong that they had lost sight of the fact that while doing a PhD you are in a liminal space that you must prepare to leave. As Manathunga, Lunt and Mellick (2007) point out, relying solely on the knowledge and skill displayed in your thesis for future employment limits your attractiveness to employers, even within academia. This is a situation in which the older PhD graduate, who has the life experience of applying for and being granted jobs on the basis of skills gained outside the academy, might be at an advantage.

Examination

Assessment is normally a key item in any intended curriculum: how will I know, educators ask themselves, whether students have learned what they need to in order to be granted a pass mark. How can I measure their understanding or achievement fairly? Writing on the examination process for PhD in Australia, Mullins and Kiley (2002) comment on the surprising lack of research into the processes involved in PhD assessment, what Johnston (1997) calls “… the platform on which the standards of doctoral qualifications rest” (p. 333). It is especially surprising, according to Holbrook and Bourke (2004), that “the connection between expectation, judgment and outcome” (p.154) is so little explored in this educational setting when it has been exhaustively discussed in every other educational setting.

This may be because the PhD is often considered to be the province of the research world in which education is just another discipline, not the education world. As earlier discussion has shown, the idea of research pedagogy and any kind of agreed curriculum for PhD study is not one that is widely accepted in Australia. Gilbert (2009) discusses examination of the PhD as the degree’s ‘assessed curriculum’, and Morley (2004) points out the difference between

51 See also, on this point, (Cryer, 1996; Manathunga et al., 2007)
‘declared’ and ‘actual’ practices of examination. Gilbert goes on to conclude that for the PhD examination to become more than a simple assessment of ‘what someone knows’ (rather than what they have learned as generic skills or personal development, or a real assessment of their contribution to knowledge), the doctoral curriculum would need to be re-envisioned.

Probably the first discussion of PhD examination in Australia was the work of Nightingale (Nightingale, 1984a, 1984b) reporting on a 1982 Commonwealth-funded study at one university on, among other things, postgraduate research supervision. Her final conclusion is that examiner guidelines need to be very clear (still a recurring theme in discussion on examination, see Johnston (1997) and the more recent publications of the Newcastle Project discussed below), and that all the descriptions in the world of what a thesis should be probably boil down to ‘substantial and original contribution to knowledge, set in context of framing in the discipline’ – an enduring definition.

Nightingale’s last ironic quote on the matter of thesis examination – “I know one when I see one”’ (2004a, p. 149) – is often echoed in later work (eg Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Kiley & Mullins, 2004; Holbrook & Bourke 2004a), but is most neatly deconstructed by Morley (2004), with her two-sided explanation of the “values and assumptions … highly visible in examiners’ reports” (p. 94). She provides both the benign interpretation of “tacit professional knowledge” and the less benign one: “an elite process of mystification” (p. 94). Johnston (1997) also characterizes PhD examination as “based on assumptions which are largely untested and on understandings which are not necessarily open for discussion” (p. 334) and “enshrouded in mystery and even sometimes secrecy” (p. 333). One assumption that I am personally grateful for is that examiners always expect a thesis to be of passing quality – the process of having produced it, presumably to the supervisors’ satisfaction, being the barrier that the student is expected to have hurdled (Kiley & Mullins, 2002; Mullins & Kiley, 2004). On the other hand, according to the same writers, this expectation can backfire badly on the student if the thesis falls far short of the examiners’ expectations.

The reports written by examiners potentially provide a rich textual field for the researcher. In 1995, Pitkethly and Prosser reported their study of comments on a sample of theses (74 from one year in one university), comparing the comments of a total of 224 examiners – about half from Australia – and concluded that there was little difference between the contents of the examiners’ reports; they concluded that Australian examiners are generally examining to the level expected in other countries. A much more detailed and broad-ranging piece of work was begun in 2003, when Holbrook, Bourke and Lovat gained a three-year ARC Discovery grant, referred to here as the Newcastle Project.  

As part of the Newcastle Project, Lovat, Monfries and Morrison (2004), building on Lovat (2004), applied Habermassian ways of knowing to over 800 examiners’ reports, and reached some interesting conclusions. Despite the

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52 This project looked at 2100 examiner’s reports on 800 candidates enrolled at eight universities. It resulted in the publication of nearly a dozen articles.

53 These are ways of categorising how the ‘expert’ (teacher/supervisor/examiner) relates to the learner, as an ‘expert’, a ‘partner’ or a ‘listener’ (Lovat, 2004).
continuing assertion in all university regulations and rhetoric that a PhD thesis should show evidence of an original contribution to knowledge, the examiners’ reports researched were very largely concerned with gate-keeping, minor corrections and negative comments – even on theses that were classified as ‘accept as submitted’ or ‘accept with minor correction invited’. In regard to the tasks in the examination process of thesis reading and report writing, the examiners were most often operating at an ‘empirical/analytic’ level – concerned with technical issues on the text – rather than at a ‘historical/hermeneutic’ level – which might involve a discussion between peers. Very few reached what the researchers considered a critical or ‘self-reflective’ level, at which “the learner may actually be acknowledged as the one in control of the pertinent knowing, … the examiner relegating all power as a result, choosing to accept the role of listener” (Lovat et al., 2004, p. 164).

In another attempt to understand the PhD examination process, Mullins and Kiley (2002) interviewed 30 ‘experienced’ examiners to probe the basis on which they make their judgments on a thesis presented to them, and later interviewed 26 less-experienced examiners on the same basis (Kiley & Mullins, 2004). The result is a nice deconstruction of many of the ideas that float around PhD fairly unexamined (e.g., how examiners are chosen, their motives for accepting, how seriously they take their work). The problem of how to ensure that novice examiners get enough theses to build their skills is addressed by the researchers in both 2002 and 2004 articles. However, they do conclude that novice examiners’ reports aren’t markedly different, on balance, than their more experienced colleagues.

One thread running through publications from the Newcastle project is that training for examination report writing might be based in a more conceptual, generous and less summative way of responding to the texts examined. Another approach suggested by Hill, Sankaran and Swepson (2006) is for supervisors to consciously discuss with each other both how they go about examining theses, what they value in a ‘good’ thesis, and how they advise their students to prepare their theses for examination. If this idea were to be developed in faculty- or institution-based supervisor training, some of the air of mystery, mystique and fear might be lifted from the examination process.

This lack of training or context for PhD examiners is not confined to Australia: Tinkler and Jackson (2004) report that 92% of the academics they surveyed in the UK had no training for thesis examination (p. 109), and of course many theses are examined outside Australia. Johnson (1997) also cites the lack of training, and the dangers of isolation in the examination process: as the examiner quoted below is only too aware, the writing of an examiner’s report feels like an exercise in futility if processes are not transparent, and examiners feel that no notice might be taken of their recommendation.

_**Interview with Susan, Experienced supervisor and examiner**_

The worst thing about examining PhDs is that you almost never know what happens to your report, or to the candidate. I sweat over the report for days, or even weeks, write a thoughtful report that’s as positive and helpful as it can be, make my recommendation, and that’s it. I never
learn what the other examiners thought, what notice was taken of my comments or my recommendation, nothing. I sometimes see a publication out of the thesis, and think, OK, so he got through then, but that’s the nearest you often get to feedback. I assume I’m quite good at examination, because I get quite a few theses offered to me to examine, but I have rare confirmation of this from any of the institutions I’ve examined students from.

The process used at Australian universities is that the examined thesis is returned to a university-wide committee, sometimes via a faculty-based committee (Kiley & Mullins, 2004). As shown by the Newcastle Project, clues to the attitude of the examiner can be found in his/her report, which the Head of Department and/or an institution-wide committee must read and interpret (Johnston, 1997). At Sydney a PhD can be confirmed as suitable for award by the faculty if the examiners have recommended a pass without change or with only minor corrections; it only goes to the central PhD Awards Subcommittee if the reports place it in another category or there is a problem for the final determination. How the thesis and reports are presented to this committee, and the basis on how differences between them are reconciled, is a significant but generally unacknowledged part of the way that the final determination is made. Johnston (1997) highlights the need for institutional process, both at faculty and institutional level, to deal with the examiner’s reports in a subtle and nuanced way, rather than as a straightforward kind of ‘report card’:

It is important for these committees to go beyond an acceptance of overall recommendations and scrutinise the nature of the evaluative comments made by examiners. There is a need to weigh up global comments against what can sometimes be numerous but far less significant negative comments or suggestions for improvement. Hidden within the text of examiners' reports are many clues about the value which the examiner has placed on the thesis. These clues must be recognised and interpreted. (p. 346)

However, “micro-political processes” still mean that the way examination is experienced by the student can be a poorly managed and a painful part of the process, as will be seen in Chapter 5.

**Leaving liminal space**

Debra was the only participant in the study to come close to submitting her thesis within its duration. The realisation that her period as an HDR student is coming to an end hit her quite suddenly one day.
March 2007

Participant blog: Debra

Reality shock

Well, it's all very scary because this is my last semester and I don't have to reapply for loans, and I am going for a "marking visa" now and no longer a "student visa" - and what this all means is I'm no longer going to be a student - and that scares the living poo out of me! What do I do with myself now???

So, I went to the Faculty of Arts and started discussing some other degree I could start on. I only know life as a student. I don't want a career - I just want to be a student. I don't even feel like I've done all the "student" things that I want to do - like clubs and societies and all that fun student stuff that teachers aren't invited to. I feel like since I've gone this far in my education it's time for me to grow up and start being an adult with a career - but I don't feel ready for that yet. I still want to play! I still want to be in school - I'm not ready for the "real world."

Well, it's made me a bit sad. To think I won't even be a student in September to enter the student art show. My husband says don't do another degree because it just means taking out more loans and we're already over US$100,000 in debt for the past 10 years of schooling the US government has financed. So, what does that mean? I have to go find a real job now to pay my bills? I can no longer depend on the US government? Oh, that is so very frightening - I would much prefer to just stay in school and live off the government. Plus once I am no longer a student, the damn government is going to want me to start paying them back... maybe that's the real reason I want to stay in school ...

But nearly five months later she was able to write:

July 2007

Participant blog: Debra

I'm really looking forward to being finished with my PhD - Once I am done, I have a feeling I will do nothing with it. I feel like that is such a waste, but the process of writing a PhD has made me lose pretty much all my interest in academia - I really feel like having no part of it any more. I think I'll just play piano and make art - and see where that takes me. But I'll finish the PhD regardless just because I have already put so much time and money into it.

I say this, yet I'm attending this 3-week tutoring workshop that gives me a certificate saying I'm cool to tutor. Maybe I just want to keep all doors open. Deep down inside I want to just make [creative pursuit], but the reality of it may be I have to do some uni stuff on the side so that i can pay the bills.
However a student might feel about the implications of completing and submitting their thesis, the University places clear boundaries around its involvement with them as students. Until 2009, students lost their library access privileges the day they submitted their thesis. This was of course problematic if they needed to do more research to rewrite sections of their thesis after the examiners’ reports were received, or if they needed library access in order to publish out of their thesis, and access has now been extended through to graduation. There is a story, probably apocryphal but indicative of the general angst around leaving the liminal space, that a PhD student in the Arts Faculty (with more than 850 HDR students this Faculty is always short of space for them to work) once returned from submitting his thesis in the next building to find his dedicated desk in the Postgraduate Space already occupied.

The move from the liminal identity of PhD student to the permanent identity of ‘Doctor’ in Australia is one that students can choose to simply slide into, having their degree sent to them after confirmation, or they can choose to graduate into, attending a formal ceremony. In the US and many European countries, students must be present for their final thesis defence, after which they are formally advised they have passed their degree. In the UK and in New Zealand the viva after submission forms part of the examination process, which concludes with the student being advised of the outcome of their degree. Without their presence being required for any part of their egress from the liminal space, many Australian PhDs, especially those who chose not to or are unable to attend their Graduation, report a very anti-climactic conclusion to their candidature.

**Summary**

The intended curriculum, in Lee’s schema Level B, is the place where knowing, being and doing are brought together. In practice, this activity is very much a product of forces at the local level – often as local as the individual supervisory relationship. Overall conceptualisations of the PhD in the bureaucratically-based literature tend to be thin and instrumentalist, and are rarely based in student experience – although they frequently claim to be improving exactly that experience. This reinforces the liminal position of students, and increases the accidental nature of the pedagogical events they encounter.

The Guidelines produced by the AQF and TEQSA provide the framework within which Australian universities enrol, provide resources for and graduate HDR candidates. There is also a body of knowledge on how this should best be done, which is shared by administrators largely through meetings and conferences such as QPR. The administration of PhD at Sydney has changed markedly since the position of Dean of Graduate Studies was disestablished in 2009. Even if they are involved with the student representative organisation SUPRA, students do not generally take part in discussions about how the degree is administered at their institution (Leonard & Becker, 2009) and may not even be aware that expectations, rules or regulations are changing. An example of how myths over the federal government’s policies and practices play out locally is the widespread confusion over the Federal government’s RTS payment on completion, discussed in Chapter 3. It is often believed to be $30,000 or even $40,000 per student, and I have been variously told by different students that their supervisor gets this money directly (which would be a surprise to any
supervisor I have spoken to); that the University gets it and the faculty never sees any of it; and that the faculty gets some of it but the supervisor gets nothing. Far more students, of course, are entirely ignorant of the existence of this payment and one supervisor I spoke to was adamant that it wasn’t operating any more. The University’s 2009 White Paper, which required faculties to be much more transparent about actual costs – down to the Unit of Study level – has had the contrary effect of making staff much more alert to the way funding is distributed from the centre. The willingness of the Director of Graduate Studies to openly discuss distribution of the RTS funding with me may be a sign of this more open environment.

To fill this space, institutions (including the University of Sydney) have recently become exercised about both documenting infrastructural provision for HDR students (desks, library facilities, money for conferences and so on) and ‘skills training’. This is evident in the increase of both institutional support and skills provision as a theme at QPR conferences (M.-H. Ward, 2010). However, there is little pedagogical theory in this area, and much confusion about what infrastructure and skills are needed, how to assess these for an individual students, and, most controversially, how these could or should be provided in a higher education environment in which resources are shrinking.

Institutions attempt to present rational pictures of what doing a PhD means, but the practice is much more messy. It is relatively easy for an institution to produce policies for infrastructure provision, resources for skills training and timetables for progress and achievement. It is much harder to provide safe spaces for staff to interact with students as peers, and for students to demonstrate their own development in scholarship. It is much easier for institutions to rely on tick-box systems of progress reporting work as representing the truth of students’ development as scholars, than to engage with the messy realities of supervision.

In an attempt to move discussion of the PhD from its focus on supervision, institutional context and student ‘satisfaction’, Cummings (2007) discusses the ‘doctoral enterprise’ in terms of learning environments, socialisation and knowledge production. He categorises the experience of these three elements reported by each of his candidates within both a ‘conventional’ and ‘emergent’ framing, and thus reveals a richness and complexity to PhD candidature that could in no way be addressed by either a skills framework or an induction program (both, as we have seen, being commonly suggested ways to improve, variously, ‘the PhD student experience’ or the ‘quality’ of graduates). The tension between the individual’s research project and the need for the institution to manage its resources and apply standards to its degrees is played out uniquely in each candidature, but that play is done within the boundaries of institutional structure, set in response to national funding decisions. These factors both determine and are determined by the conceptualisation that academic managers have of what a PhD is – or could be. In specific policy areas such as skills assessment and provision, examination and rituals for leaving doctoral study, Australian institutions generally have been seen to demonstrate a less-then-rich conceptualisation.
Students’ experience of their AOU, being supervised and examined, and pedagogical practices in their institution generally will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5 – The enacted curriculum: pedagogical practices

Participant Blog: Kylie

The PhD student’s Theory of Everything

Any of you who are science-y types may know that the Theory of Everything [linked] You can supposedly use a single model to explain all known physical phenomena. Einstein had a lot to say about it. What I would like to propose though is that PhD students have their own Theory of Everything - the theory is, PhD students are expected to do EVERYTHING!

Just now commenting on a post by Grainne I was reminded of this theory - I developed it a few years ago to use in presentations at student conferences etc. Grainne made reference to the idea that when it comes to teaching during our candidature, it seems to be an 'either-or' situation: you either get your research done in a timely fashion, or you neglect your research to spend time getting/maintaining teaching experience … .Somehow students are expected to have finished their PhD as well as maintained professional practice and tertiary teaching experience if they want to apply for an academic job after the PhD.

But that's not all! In the model of the PhD as a 'Research Apprenticeship', the PhD student is expected to get experience doing quite a few different things. Here is my list of the main categories of experience that students are expected to fulfil:

1. Do your research

Obviously. If you don't actually finish your thesis, you'll never actually get that PhD.

2. Teach University subjects

Very important if you are the kind of student that is trying to break into academia (as opposed to old-school lecturers that never got their PhD and are being made to get the qualification). It is very hard to land a University job if you've never done any University teaching.

3. Maintain industry contact

For education students …, the 'Industry' is schools. For nurses this would be hospitals or other health care providers, and so on. Even though you are taking time off to do research, you can't appear to have fallen 'out of the loop' or out of contact with industry needs/practices.

4. Attend conferences

I would say the expectation is at least one per year, and the more prestigious the better. International conferences are best. And unless your conference happens to be in Sydney, this also means costly travel interstate or overseas. And a lot of preparation.
5. Publish academic writing

Again, at least one publication per year is probably expected, and publications that are peer-reviewed ('refereed') are worth far more than ones that aren't. This can also include conference papers, but the same rules for applying for getting it refereed. Getting your work through the peer-review process also takes more work, and more time to get published, so plan...

6. Increase professional exposure

This is something that I don't tend to see on lists of required attributes on job advertisements, but I think it's a really important part of a research apprenticeship, and personally I find it very important that I build a name for myself in my field. What's the point of doing research if the only thing it's good for is filling up a library shelf and being added as that all-important line in the 'Education' section of your CV? I want my research to shape the dialogue in my field, and I try and make this happen by being engaged in professional associations, and by meeting and talking to other researchers (not just to flesh out my 'network' or 'contacts').

7. Build all-round research skills

Another thing that is never listed on the job ad, but is certainly implied. Are you experienced in a range of methodologies? Can you use various research software packages? Are you experienced with working with other researchers collaboratively, or have you only ever done your own individual research? Working as a Research Assistant for other bigger projects can help build these skills.

So, there you have my list of all the things a PhD student is expected to be doing during their candidature. But my Theory of Everything is not just a dismal list of all the things that we know full well we don't have time to do. My Theory of Everything recognises that no human being can successfully do all of these things at once, and my suggestion is that PhD students pick the areas that they want to strengthen. ...

At the end of the day people have different paths they want to follow, and different strengths to play to - the important thing is that you recognise how much pressure there is on you to do EVERYTHING, and that rather than panicking and bowing to pressure that you make choices about what you will and won't do based on your needs and desires for your future, and based on how much you can do without burning out, because then you'll be no good to anyone!

It is common for students to report the kind of ‘overload’ described in this passage while they are doing a PhD. Kylie summarises the conflicting pulls she feels subject to, most of which she’s inferred herself rather than been told directly. The increase in students’ use of social media to discuss their experience has increased this pressure (as I will discuss in my final chapter), but it is exacerbated by a lack of clear guidance from supervisors and AOUs on
which activities are most useful in your discipline. Lee’s Level A is the level being discussed in this chapter: local practices, and, in this framing, how they are experienced by students.

Having set the PhD experience in the context of history, culture, funding and the national agenda, and discussed how theorists and institutions describe the experience of doing a PhD, this chapter will focus on various pedagogical technologies that students experience during their enrolment. In this chapter the student will be seen to have an active role as an agent instead of being the subject of discussion, speculation and assumption.

When I use the word ‘pedagogy’ in this chapter, as elsewhere in this thesis, I am using it in the sense that Lusted (1986) uses it: “the process of production and exchange … the transformation of consciousness that takes places in the integration of three agencies – the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce.” (p.3) However, as Cumming (2007) has shown, in the context of the PhD there are usually more than two human actors in the act of creation of both the thesis and the new doctor, and what is learned is rarely confined by any kind of plan, being, I contend, largely accidental.

Despite the persistence of unquestioned supervisory practices and a lack of awareness of pedagogical theory in faculties and institutions outlined in the last chapter, pedagogies, of course, continue to operate – invisibly, as it were, incidentally or accidentally – to bring about outcomes that may or may not be intended. I started this chapter with the long quote from Kylie, because it seemed to me to encapsulate not only the things that students are told they need to achieve in the process of doing their PhD – what you might call the agreed pedagogical goals of doing a PhD in Australia – but also the inherent difficulties of meeting all these goals. It also provides a neat summary of the ‘skills’ of research training discussed in the last chapter – focused on employability – along with an awareness that students are not empty vessels to be filled with skills and experience by the institution, and but are often – as Cumming (2007) suggests) – actively gaining the experiences for themselves.

The fact that this learning is largely accidental is not a bad thing – indeed, acceptance of the uncertainties inherent in research work is an important (and often difficult) achievement of the PhD process. An understanding of the immanence of learning throughout the PhD, and perhaps a more conscious discussion of it, might help students to understand that the boundaries of learning in their earlier experiences of education are being removed, and they are now truly in charge of their own learning.

Cumming (2007) extends the discussion of the pedagogy of PhD in Australia beyond the supervisory relationship, the "primary pedagogical technology" (Johnson et al., 2000; Lee & Green, 2009, p. 2) experienced by students. He foregrounds various pedagogical strategies in each vignette he analyses. In line with his view that the most useful model for the PhD is one in which activities, relationships and experiences are integrated rather than separated, he resists the notion (Holdaway, 1996) that there are primary activities, leading to the writing of the thesis, and secondary activities “designed to generate broader knowledge and skills” (Cumming 2007, p. 86).
In stressing the lack of agency that students experience, I am not lessening the role of supervision or the importance of the person of the supervisor in candidature – far from it. But I am questioning the assumptions that both supervisors and students understand their role to be based in, and wondering what other forms that role might take if a supervisor consciously considers what kind of scholar they would like their students to become, and that the process might involve (inter alia) dependence on a variety of other people. Remember the responses from academics that I received when recruiting students to take part in my study, described in Chapter 2? It would have interesting to ask them why they were acting as a barrier to their students spending time with other students within my project.

One of my informants articulated student learning in the PhD and how he tries to support that by making students conscious of the social nature of academia in his mind as he works. Actively encouraging students to think of academia as a network of networks, and for them to find the place for their new knowledge in that world, is a pedagogical technique on which the literature is largely silent.

Peter, faculty-level administrator, social sciences

How do they [PhD students] learn? Mentoring, and they talk about scaffolding. It is scaffolding in a sense, and feedback. Giving the feedback, and the supervisor knowing where they [student] have got to get to. And always anticipating, you know, problems that could happen if they don't deal with it in a particular way - and I'm very mindful of that. I'm seeing it in terms of how the examiner will read that piece of work. I'm seeing it in the sense of how well someone else would think of what you've done, or what you've said. A well-informed person in the field, working with a similar methodology or sympathetic to what the student's doing, how they'd feel about what you're doing, would it fit with the current arguments about how you'd do a piece of work like this.

There are many pedagogical experiences within any individual PhD. Some of them (e.g. supervision, writing) have received a large amount of attention in the literature, while others (e.g. student presentations, entry to research communities) remain undertheorised. I have considered those that were discussed by the blogging participants, but have also made comments on some other issues that have been discussed in the literature and on student blogs as difficult for students to negotiate (e.g. authorship).

What do students do?

Cumming (2007) drills down into the actual activities undertaken by candidates and picks these apart, analysing them in terms of pedagogical structures. From this he has built a new model for the kinds of work that are involved in the doing of the PhD – what he calls the doctoral enterprise. Breaking down Holdaway’s (1996) duality, which represents the kind of task-focused analysis that is very common in books of the PhD ‘help’ genre and in skills-based provisioning by institutions, Cumming has provided a more detailed and
complex way of looking at how and what people learn in the process of doing a PhD. He talks about ‘doctoral practices’ (organised activities that are part of an individual doctorate) and ‘doctoral arrangements’ (additional factors not often considered as part of a doctoral but intrinsic to it), seeing these as being “mutually constituted” and “inextricably linked” (p.113). He centres the candidate and the individuals whom they deem as significant to their doctoral study within first the academy and their community (their doctoral arrangements), and secondly within work, curricular and pedagogical doctoral practices.

Another major contribution that Cumming has made to my understanding of the PhD is that he identifies a “constellation” of individuals who are involved with any PhD: “peers, postdocs and technicians” (p. 91) as well as academic staff. He decentres the roles of the supervisor by identifying other significant pedagogical relationships. For example in the case of ‘Jane’ (p. 42), a bench-top lab researcher in a project funded by a food production industry grant, three pedagogical models are discussed: panel supervision, pedagogic continuity and peer learning. Cumming unpicks these models and is able to identify a complex and nuanced set of relationships that support Jane’s learning. These include the emancipatory leadership of the academic in charge of the lab, the support of a fellow student who is more experienced in both the industry and the work than Jane is, the support that Jane in her turn is able to give him, Jane’s contributions to developments in the way the lab works, the “striking…range of agencies” (p. 43) that the lab is associated with and which Jane has contact with during her candidature, strategic support given to the trainee researchers in the lab (which is consciously distinguished by all concerned from ‘mollycoddling’), and finally Jane’s own search for conceptual rather than technical support during her candidature.

Cumming (2007) discusses the ‘doctoral enterprise’ in terms of learning environments, socialisation and knowledge production, aiming to move the discussion on from focus on supervision, institutional context and student satisfaction (which have been the main constituents, as we have seen, of discussions in Australia on research training). The “undue emphasis” on the student/supervisor relationship in the theorising about PhD in Australia has obscured the fact that “contemporary candidates not only interact with a diverse range of individuals from within and beyond the academy, but also engage in creative mixes of education, training, research, work and career development.” (Cumming, 2010, p. 26).54 He analyses his case studies in terms of what he identifies as “pedagogical events”: situations, interactions or relationships that he sees as being spaces where knowledge is being created. Most of these fit my definition of accidental in the introduction to this thesis: they weren’t envisaged by students or supervisors at the outset of the degree, and most weren’t noticed as the PhD progressed, but were rather identified on reflection in his interviews.

During the course of the blog-writing project, there were many exchanges that demonstrated both communitas and accidental pedagogy. In the following conversation Grainne, while writing an emotional post, realised that she had

54 I will discuss the extended reach of these interactions in the 21st century in my final chapter.
distilled two key questions in the course of that writing. Others then chimed in with advice they had been given about distilling the essence of their work:

**Participant blog: Grainne**

**Nearly a year in and NO BLOODY QUESTION!!!!**

I have no research question. None. How bloody obvious. Why did I not see how much I was crawling about in the dark? Here I am, randomly collecting data from very good participants about everything from their childhood experiences to their experiences of mental health issues (in their students, not themselves), yet I never really extended upon my definition of identity to think about what I'm researching.

This outburst is continued by a long rant about her subjectivity, finished by a list of five questions. She concludes her entry with…

**PHEW!!!** Too many questions, yes, but I can see how I can firm this up.

Still feel like Sisyphus dragging his rock up the endless mountain, but. I would appreciate it greatly if the Muses would pay me a visit. They are much overdue and their absence is most impolite, given the circumstances!

**Comment by Esther**

Grainne, This is a tough time in your candidature. And I remember going through EXACTLY the same feelings - up then down ... OK so mainly I remember feeling down. I think you've got to cut yourself a bit of slack though and realise that this is in fact part of the process. The way that you are developing your questions is exactly right. […]

The emergent nature of your data also will determine where the end point of your research is. I think we all go into our research with a degree of confidence as to a) what we are going to ask and b) what we are going to find. And then the research itself blows both of those things out of the water. Research is not a static process. It is dynamic. Changing. It ebbs and flows. It moves with you and how you are thinking. It changes how you think and puts you somewhere that you weren't expecting. At least that's what good research does. And by the sound of things, that's exactly what your research is doing

**Comment by Debra**

Some very helpful comments I received when feeling confused about the direction of my PhD: When I was told I should be able to summarise my thesis in one sentence, I would be on the right track. May sound slightly
bizarre, but was very helpful for me to think about. I feel much better being able to describe what I am doing in one sentence - my research makes more sense to me now that I can do this.

Find a title for your thesis that has less than 10 words. This totally helped keep focus.

[…] 

So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I just grabbed onto random things that I heard - bits of info I received that seemed to connect with me - and everything else fell into place - but over three years, of course - so, it was a slow process...

7 November 2006

Comment by Grainne

Thanks Esther. I'm still feeling a bit uuurghh, but I guess the most positive thing I can do at the moment is NOT read through all the comments on my last chapter again!

It was interesting to me how accepting participants in this exchange were about uncertainty. The uncertainty of the research process is perhaps one of the most important differences between HDR study and earlier experiences with education.

**Pedagogy, academic culture and the AOU**

In Chapter 4 I made the point that the socialisation of doctoral students into their discipline is a process that may not be foregrounded as part of a PhD program within an AOU or an institution – that there is often a lack of clarity as to who is responsible for what. However, as we saw in Chapter 1, the notion of disciplinarity itself is not as straightforward as it sometimes appears. Cumming (2007) discusses some of the ‘taken-for-granted’ aspects of disciplinarity on the ‘socialisation’ of the PhD student (p. 66ff; p. 104). He concludes that, as everything else in the PhD process, it is impossible to generalise: some of his participants felt integrated within their discipline throughout candidature, some felt more or less connected as their project progressed (particularly those who were working on an interdisciplinary project who felt their identity shift as the project progressed), and a few never felt they had fitted into disciplinary culture, but – interestingly – that had not prevented them completing their project, their thesis and their degree.

As discussed in Chapter 1, PhD students generally relate most strongly to their AOU as the ‘place’ where they are enrolled. Although it would be a stretch to consider the experience of most Australian PhD students as being a ‘program’ –

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55 Even in the formerly fixed science disciplines, disciplinary boundaries are now more porous: my son-in-law has completed a PhD in physics but with strong elements of biochemistry. He now has a postdoc in horticulture related to his PhD project, in which he used NMR in an attempt to measure the ripening of fruit at a molecular level without damaging the fruit.
it is usually more contingent and quotidian than that – most AOU’s have some kind of regular seminar series or chance for PhD students to present their work. This may be the only ‘official’ PhD activity students participate in outside the relationship with their supervisor(s). Informally, however, they may learn a great deal from their fellow students (if they are able to do their daily work where there are other students), lab or other ancillary staff, people in the industry partner in an APA(I)- or CRC-supported degree, other academics in the faculty and people they meet at conferences. In this chapter of the thesis many of these ‘accidental’ pedagogical relationships are being uncovered. These might constitute what Gilbert (2009) is referring to as the “informal curriculum”, which he vaguely describes as “other sources not originating in the practices of the institution and program” (p. 56).

In 2009 the Education Faculty where I have been enrolled held a series of Methodological Colloquia on weekday evenings. Staff members or invited guests explained a research method or methodology, a discussant was asked to respond, and a short general discussion completed the session. My attendance was spotty, but each one I attended taught me more about the showcased methodology and its methods – its strengths and its weaknesses – than I would have by attending a class or reading a book chapter. This proved to be a valuable addition to my research training, and a practical help with the writing of this thesis. In a faculty such as Education, where a broad range of both methodologies and methods are employed by researchers, this struck me as a practical and interesting way to both build collegial understanding and induct new students into the breadth of quantitative and qualitative paradigms possible. It also enabled me to identify the staff members who were most knowledgeable in each paradigm.56 I recorded this on my blog.

September 25, 2009

From my public PhD blog

Methodological Colloquium

Last night’s Methodological Colloquium was on the subject of policy analysis. It was a thorough, scholarly presentation that really helped me to get a handle to how to use the material on the University’s textual material on PhD, along with the interviews from key stakeholders in the administration and supervision of PhD.

The next exchange from the project blogs is long, but I feel it is important in what it reveals about students’ conceptions of academic life – the mention of a faculty administrator, for example, who “Does this as well as her academic role” (an academic role which includes service to the faculty, which this administrative role fulfilled). I found the role of the Faculty-based Graduate Student Society discussed especially interesting – when I first enrolled it was a society like this in my faculty which was responsible for organising a bi-annual

56 In 2012 another series of colloquia was held in the faculty, this time focussing on “Education Heresies”.

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forum at which students were invited to present their research – in fact, presenting twice at this forum during candidature is still mandatory for students before they submit their thesis. Thus, the society’s roles seemed to include rescuing the faculty from its responsibility to organise an event that contained a mandatory requirement for students, and also from accepting its responsibility to actively foster a research community beyond students’ relationship with their supervisors. There was also a lack of support for students in other ways at that time: desks, computers and lockable filing cabinets were seen as privileges rather than necessities. I have wondered whether some students, feeling a lack of agency in their own PhDs, shifted that desire to the student organisation. When the three-year limit on PhDs became a reality in the mid-2000s, the numbers of students willing to take part in these student-run organisations to support research culture dwindled, and faculties at the University were forced to take on responsibility for this work.

**Participant Blog: Dawn**

**Student Research Experience Questionnaire**

I just filled out my SREQ and to be honest I found it a really depressing experience. Apart from the sessions I go to at [Research Unit] (thank heavens for them!) I have no sense of a research community in the faculty. I've already blogged about my disappointing annual review, and my main blog has my impressions of the research seminar evening. … But I think there's a serious problem with the Assoc Dean of postgrad studies. I get no sense at all that she is an advocate for grad students - well, not p/t ones, anyway. My supervisor is kind of out of the faculty (she'll soon be out of the university!), so she doesn't have any influence on what goes on there. It is a big faculty - I know about much smaller ones who take all this a lot more seriously. It's just, well, depressing really.

I've got the published copy of last year's SREQs and it seems that my feelings are pretty common. Imagine how much worse it must be at a non-research uni! :)

**Comment from Grainne**

It's never easy, is it? The nature of the game is that those who do seek to be an advocate for students rarely wind up in positions of power. I don't get a sense of being in a research community either, most of the time. I think that research students really need to be taken seriously AS RESEARCHERS, and I also think that they need a lot more support in terms of advice as to how to position themselves so that they can get a relevant job later on. By the way, the sub-Dean of graduate studies is my assoc supervisor. She is pretty competent in that role.
Comment from Esther

I’d agree down here at [Faculty]. The only opportunities we seem to have to interact with other researchers is at the annual postgraduate seminars. Although having said that, we are encouraged and supported to go to conferences - … one is coming up … in a couple of weeks - both in Australia and abroad. But perhaps that has more to do with my good supervisors than it does about the research culture of the place.

3 November 2006

Comment from Kylie

Worryingly, [faculty Graduate Student Society] may not have enough interested bodies to run next year, so there will be our last arm of advocacy gone. The good news is that the Faculty is going to employ a dedicated admin person to deal with Research Higher Degree student questions/problems, and the Faculty will take over the running of student forums and international social teas from next year.

I see a lot of benefits to increased faculty involvement esp. funding for events and initiatives, but it was important to [faculty Graduate Student Society] that students actually ran their own gigs, so that disappearing is disappointing.

[Named person] (pro Dean Grad studies) is a good lady, but her hands are tied with how much she can do, and she does that role as well as her own research, which I think is a stupid set up. I’m looking forward to seeing a dedicated admin person on board, and watch with interest to see what if anything changes. There was also talk about a Faculty seminar series for students (not just [named research centre]) so watch that space too.

3 November 2006

Comment from Kylie

Sorry, I'm being [Faculty]-centric...[faculty Graduate Student Society] is the Postgraduate Students' Association in the Faculty…. They have been running for 11 years with varying degrees of success. A lot of the changes such as the seminar series and the admin person are a result of [faculty Graduate Student Society] being part of the Faculty strategic planning and putting that stuff into the Strategic Plan - now they have to stick to it!

You thought the SREQ was depressing in 2006...I shudder to think how it was before [faculty Graduate Student Society] were around. Students weren’t allowed in the Common Room to heat up their lunch!!

3 November 2006

Comment from Grainne

I must say, the perception is that … students (attached to a [named] research centre …) have it pretty good. The problem is that, for the rest of us, our research can be in pretty diverse topics, so sometimes it can be really hard to have a good dialogue.

I am involved with SUPRA, which is why I’d find it hard to fit something like [faculty Graduate Student Society] in. It's difficult when it's hard for people to find the time.
I don't know that having an admin person will make much difference. I feel very isolated, in any case. I wonder if it makes it worse that I did my undergrad degree here as well? Not only am I not taken seriously as someone who will hopefully one day be in an academic role, but I don't even seem to be taken seriously as a research student!

One thing that I did find interesting was that my officemate received an email to become part of one of the faculty's research networks. It was in an area relevant to my research. I know that part of being involved in things is sticking your neck out and finding opportunities, but it seems to be so much easier for some people. I wonder (without jealousy, I might say, for she is a lovely person) how it is that some people manage to establish a profile quickly and people like myself seem to be hidden away doing the dreary bits of other people's research without notice? I know I'm just as bright as they are, dammit!

3 November 2006

**Comment from Debra**

It's interesting to read people's thoughts on wanting to be part of a research community. I'm confused as to where I stand on it all - but seriously, I have been going through a MAJOR identity crisis (like I hide from people that I am working on a PhD - I don't even like to bring it up) …

At the moment, I don't care if I'm part of a research community or not - I easily could be if I felt like putting forth the effort (there are certainly plenty of opportunities) - but it is not my priority - and it is not my priority mainly because I have no plans to stay in Australia once I'm done. (But I love Australia! I just miss my friends back home…)

9 November 2006

**Comment from Kylie**

Grainne, I found that when I felt like I was missing out on opportunities in the Faculty I just had to get up the courage to email the person in charge and say 'ah hem, I would like to do that'. Then again, I tried literally for 2 years to join the [named] Cluster with no success, later to find out that this was because they were so poorly coordinated that they didn't have someone permanently in charge, the mailing lists kept getting lost, meeting times weren't publicised etc. So there is also only so much you can do when the research structures are crappy - chances are that other mob were working off a three year old student mailing list, ha ha!
And, from an earlier post…

Comment by Grainne on her own post

I am ashamed to say I am in a good faculty with a lot of people milling around and a very nice office mate and yet I don't really feel connected in terms of being part of a community of researchers. Seems to me that folks in academia in general are sometimes either too busy or too interested in shooting each other down or too caught up in their own pretensions (this may be a bitter twisted comment, as my ex is doing a PhD in another faculty) to really feel like a community. I have some great interactions with individuals, but largely I have a feeling of encroaching aloneness a lot of the time. I must say I am starting to get really into this blogging thing. Particularly since I'm spending an abnormal amount of time transcribing at the moment, so I may as well feel that I can communicate with people when I sit down at the computer.

I find it interesting that Grainne felt ‘ashamed’ that she did not feel connected. It shows, again, that students sometimes use what agency they feel they have to take responsibility for a situation that is in fact not their responsibility. She is developing a negative (some might say realistic!) view of relationships in academia, but something is still attracting her to be a part of that world.

In the next exchange – also a long one – there is an outpouring of anger and even distress at physical provisioning in AOU's that is an excellent example of ‘troubles talk’ (Mewburn, 2011). The lack of conceptual framework around PhD in both the institution and the AOU – and the confusions even within the AOU as evidenced by Esther being told two different things – leads to frustration among students. It seems obvious that AOU's are not communicating clearly to students what their local rights and responsibilities are. Their multiple roles as tutors, research assistants and HDR students further complicate their liminal status(es), and clearly add to the pressure they are feeling, exacerbated by the AOU’s failure to communicate clearly, but rather by “talk floating around the faculty”.

Other things of interest in this exchange are Esther’s assumption (unchallenged by any of the others) that the University will own her work, and Dawn’s poorly-worded explanation of University funding triggering yet another outburst from Debra about the unfairness of ‘the system’. Here the institution could be seen to have failed to present students with guidance on their rights and on how they could expect the University to behave toward them, and how they in turn can understand their place in academia.

57 In fairness, for a student to have had a swipe card for parking was an anomaly based on the distance of Esther’s faculty from the main campus, and at the time this was happening her Faculty had lost half of their designated parking places.
This is a participant blog post by Esther titled "That's it ... I'm not coming back in." The post describes Esther's decision to work from home due to receiving two parking fines of $77 each in the last two weeks. She finds it unaffordable to continue commuting and expresses frustration with the research community's inclusion policies, particularly concerning parking spots. Esther, who lives in a far western suburb, highlights the nausea and vomiting she experiences after taking the bus and describes her swipe card situation, which once worked beyond paid time and was authorized despite security objections. After stepping on her swipe card, it required assistance from two allocated people to get authorization, but when she spoke with them, she was denied a parking space. The blog post ends with the frustration of receiving another parking fine and the rhetorical question about the university's inclusion policies for postgraduate students.
my car every 1 or 2 hours depending on what type of car space I get on the street and the all day parking spots are taken by either the office workers or the nurses who start their shift at 0630hrs. I'd have to get in here at that ungodly time of the morning so that I could stay in as late as 2000hrs because I tutor on some nights. Most of the PhD students here at the faculty are staff members, so they get their parking access that way. That's discounting the admitted minority of PhD students who have to come a fair distance and aren't staff anymore because they want to focus on completing the PhD!!!!

Am I being unreasonable?

Comment from Dawn

No, you're not being unreasonable. I am shocked at how little support faculties give part-time students. [My faculty] doesn't even help us with photocopying of the ethics proposal. ... But seriously, it's an important point and I'd be interested to read what other people think about faculty support. However, I believe that at some Unis PhD students don't get inter-library loans for free, so we're not the worst off in the Sydney area.

Comment from Esther

I realise that we're not doing too badly and that most things are provided for. It distresses me however that here we are, working really hard to get a big, challenging, inciteful piece of work that the uni owns eventually and we have to a) battle with the powers that be to get our work done and b) are not particularly supported when we do make suggestions as to how to make the experience better. And I'm a full time student! I'd hate to think how they treat anyone who is more remote than myself! It makes me tired.

Comment from Esther

... I hear every claim that you have made there. It's frustrating. I realise that I'm not particularly hard done by, but when the talk floating around the faculty is that they want to support postgrad students in every possible way and then rescind on vague promises made I get ticked off. I'd much rather know that something isn't available than be promised it and then have it taken away. There was the vague promise that postgrads would have parking here at the faculty. I shouldn't have banked on it, but did so it is partly my fault.

Talking the talk, the PhD is meant to be a journey isn't it. How can you put a timeframe on that? I've worked like the clappers to get this far and will continue to do so to get it done in the timeframe. As I understand it, there is a little leeway on either side of the eventual due date. For example I've got to get mine in by the end of exam period next Nov/Dec. Realistically that means I've got till when uni resumes the following year. I don't know that I'd want to leave it that late but it's good to know that there is a bit of time to play with. I want to get mine done by Aug/September next year allowing for reading, changes and eventual submission. So little time really!!! AAAARRRRRRGGGHHHHHH!!!!!
Comment from Grainne

I once read an article that claimed that the position occupied by postgraduates was on a par with that of part-time research assistants and just below the status occupied by the professors' favourite cat or dog! If that puts things into perspective...

I wish you luck in the completion of the thesis - it does take a long time, and I have a feeling that the last stretch is the worst stretch...it's not helpful as well when small things like parking have to become an issue, especially when you've probably feel that you've done so much work there anywhere. I am starting to mark and am appalled at the number of essays that can supposedly be marked in 36 hours. I am about 20 hours in and have done about a third of it.

Comment from Dawn

The time thing is of course imposed by the govt. The faculty doesn't get any money for everything they've invested in us (ha!) until we submit the thesis. I think this is a really important thing that most candidates don't know. Lots of academics think it is ridiculous and we should be allowed longer but there is really nothing they can do about it.

Comment from Debra

oh this is good - I have much to respond to this - I so know about helping these academics write their silly articles and receiving zero recognition when it is published - especially when I feel it was all my damn effort that went into making their article what it was. Anyway, I don't take those jobs anymore - I just say I don't have the time.

... 

Well, anyway - there's always a way to work the system. And when it comes to milking it for all it's worth - another little tip of insight I have found works - kiss butt to campus security and they'll do just about anything for you. All I did was bring back little wire lizards from South Africa for the attendants (and once I also brought them Tim Tams, and definitely learn their names!) and now they are my best buds - always keen to help me out - hooking me up with a brand new computer, filing cabinets for my office and home, a desk for an art project - whatever I need, i can usually turn to them for help and support. Just because I showed them I care - which I don't think many academics on campus do to them.

But you're right about being pushed along to hurry up and finish. What's up with that? Why do they keep wanting me to hurry up? I used to think it was because my references are just getting older - but that's not what they care about - they just want their paypacket! I'll work to my own schedule and submit when I feel ready - but I always am sure to let them feel I am working as fast as I can.
And to comment on marking and the amount of time they expect you to do it in - ya, those [two first-year unit] courses were the shits when it came to not being paid for the total amount of time it took to mark. So now, I don't accept those jobs anymore. I ask the Unit Coordinator "Will there be essays to mark?" If they say "yes," I say "no". There are plenty of other teaching jobs for me there at uni that don't have essays as an assessment task. I haven't had to mark an essay yet this year! Thank god! I have finally got my foot in the door to teaching [subspecialty practical] courses!

Resentment about being used for semi-skilled academic work, evident in these extracts, is interesting too. Students recognise they need this kind of experience if they are to apply for academic positions, but there is a disconnect between that knowledge and how they feel they are treated doing this work – work they also feel compelled to do to earn money. Debra’s ability to effectively choose the work she will do may be a measure of her wider workplace experience giving her more confidence.

**Managing the supervisory relationship**

Despite the focus on supervision pedagogy in the Australian PhD literature, and institutional schemes to ‘certify’ supervisors as competent, students’ expectations of supervision are documented only by Grant (2005) Knowles (2007) and Owler (1998) in their studies of supervisory dyads. Their general conclusions are that the relationship is complex and not amenable to managerial control, and this is the case at the University of Sydney, which does not tell students how supervision should work; this is left to individual supervisors or to AOU58. While every supervisory relationship will meet the needs of participants in different ways, I believe it is important to think and talk about how students understand their role while being supervised. In this exchange, Grainne expresses confusion about how the relationship should work (despite her having recently been an Honours student) and Debra describes a relationship that seems to be working – she wryly comments on her personal desire to be ‘special’.

—

3 September 2006

**Comment by Grainne on a post by Debra**

Can I ask a daft question, Debra? Are you enrolled full-time or part-time? The reason I ask is that I (I'm full-time) always wonder just how often I should see my supervisors - I know it's a different thing for everyone, but I'm in one of those periods where I'm doing stuff, but not the sort of thing you can really

58 The University’s only formal information for HDR students at the time of writing is the final section of the “Code of practice for supervision of postgraduate research students” (1997, p. 336ff), in which no less than 18 responsibilities of students are listed (assuming students know the document exists), with no information about how to carry out any of them. It was updated in March 2013, too late for me to review here.
give someone to read...hearing that you haven't seen yours since May has
made me feel a lot more comfortable about it! I never know how closely I
should update them on things - do you send them an email to let them know
you've finished your first round of interviews or do you wait until you've
analysed the data for that round? Should they help with the analysis or would
that be unethical because it's your PhD after all? That sort of thing...

5 September 2006

Reply by Debra

I'm full-time, yep. When I say I haven't seen my Supervisors since May - that
is true - but I haven't had any reason to see them (i haven't done any work).
Back when I had reason to see them because I was doing new things all the
time, I would see them every couple of months or so. Honestly, I avoid them
on purpose as much as I possibly can because I get pretty depressed after our
visits. But we do e-mail, and that works better for me. We 'check-in' with
each other. I was once told that every time you see your Supervisor you
should have something to hand in to them - so I've just been sticking to that
philosophy. Lately I haven't had anything to hand in - but i sent an e-mail last
week telling my Supervisors that i am hoping to have my Data presentation
done by the end of October and that I hope we can meet up then. One of my
Supervisors wrote back offering me three weeks of … Workshops to teach
(and get paid for) - so, maybe it's a good thing to stay in touch. (See, my
Supervisors are not really all that bad, remember - they just don't ever tell me
that I am the best PhD student to ever walk the planet - like i want them to -
that's all!)

Kylie has found a way to work with her supervisors that suits them all, but it is
interesting that she takes responsibility for earlier lapses in the relationship.

15 October 2006

Comment by Kylie on a post by Debra

There was one year of my candidature when I saw my main and assoc
supervisors TWICE each over the whole year.  Yep, that's a total of four
meetings all year.  I was working almost full time hours, which I hadn't
planned on doing when I took on a certain part time job, but it got way out of
hand. When no work is getting done I think it is the instinct of the student to
avoid the Supes - but I think a good Supe should keep tabs on this kind of
behaviour. I'm now in a position where I've virtually lost an entire year of
candidature because no-one was paying attention.  Also mostly my fault, of
course, as I'm the one who took the stupid job and didn't self-regulate my
workload, but there's only so much that this 'journey', this 'academic
apprenticeship' is supposed to be self regulated. A supervisor should be more
than an editor of finished work, in that respect.
I now see my Supervisor when I have work to hand in, but in my first year I used to see my main Supervisor every fortnight, then once a month to discuss concepts. A great idea, but that put too much pressure on me to have 'something' each time. Rock and hard place, anyone?

Oh, and in regards to praise - my Supervisor praises me a lot, and that certainly has the effect of motivating me to do my work. When my PhD work is criticised it can be very hard to face it again. On the other hand I do feel like the quality of my work is poorer now as a result. If someone pitched my own project to me today at a conference or something, I would be asking a lot of questions of it, especially of its methodology, and I'm not sure the answers would be good enough. For me this was a problem of having to change supervisors - the first didn't do enough with me on Methods and Methodology, and the second assumed that I had covered it all already.

Kylie’s comment on how difficult it is to handle criticism on PhD work is also interesting. Student’s reactions to critical feedback will be explored later in this chapter.

An unusual approach by Debra to demonstrating her work brings a positive response from her supervisors, after much earlier strife – but that also brings more pressure.

I wanted to share about my progress interview and meeting up with my Supervisors. Well, first, after all the rushing around to get my chapter to my Supervisors at their request - they never even got around to reading it by the time we met. So no feedback from them regarding that. All well - I will just post the Data Presentation off to my participants without my Supervisors' feedback. When we met, I did take in my laptop to show them slideshows of my artwork that corresponds to my Data Presentation and they were EXTREMELY impressed. Seriously! They acted more positive than ever - I mean with "Ooohs" and "Ahhhs" - I had never heard them be so positive towards my efforts. It made me feel so good. It was like the best day ever with them. They made comment that even though they hadn't seen me in so long, they could tell I have been working really hard. And then they started going on about all these positions in the Faculty that are opening up and how I would be a good candidate for them. They did, however, recommend that I should spend this next year trying to get as many academic articles as possible published and be sure to attend another overseas conference. Which is great and all - BUT HOW DO I FIND THE TIME??? I'm trying to submit here, afterall! I'll see what i can do...

As she gets near her submission date, after recounting an email exchange between herself and her supervisors, Debra expressed her frustration with
contradictory advice, and reveals an expectation of a response that her supervisors might have found surprising – had she revealed it to them.

Ok - so all right - lots of mixed messages going on - for one, in our last meeting they said to me to write another article for publication because publications will be what I need when I start looking for employment. And about a year ago, they suggested I ask M. to proofread my thesis - maybe they just forget all this?

I agree, my novella (data presentation) probably should be broken up into themes maybe - although I like it the way it is. I do know it needs to be cut back - but do they have ANY emotional reaction to my findings!???. That's what I want to know! What do they think of the CONTENT!!!! I know what they think of the writing - that hasn't changed since day one - what I want to know is DO THEY RELATE TO THE FINDINGS!! Trying to get any emotion out of these ladies is like sticking a corn cob up my ass!

And, in response to comments on the post above, a revealing observation…

Honestly, I was thinking this morning... my Sups remind me of my mother-in-law. She's a very nice lady, very intelligent - but incapable of putting herself in my shoes. She only understands things from her perspective. A perspective that's often quite different from my own.

Debra talked more (and more openly) about her relationship with her supervisors than any other participant except Grainne. The maturity of her reflection can be seen in her characterising her supervisors as like her mother-in-law. Although she continued to find the relationship difficult, her railings became less intense; she seemed to accept their failings more easily, while still acknowledging her hurt (see the post I discuss next).

The absent supervisor

The distant supervisor who “acknowledges that the students go through considerable stress and pain, but this is necessary to the process of development, of attaining maturity” (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 142) may not represent a remnant rump of PhD practice. Even for supervisors not to take what students feel is the proper time and pay close attention to their students’ work – to indeed feel that
they are a nuisance to their supervisor – is perhaps one of the most difficult things my participants reported.

14 April 2007

Participant blog: Debra

Just get through it and let it be done...

Well, I saw the Sups yesterday - and as usual I left feeling like a worm. I even cried this morning over it. Honestly I felt like leaving the university all together, taking my PhD and finishing it elsewhere. I wish I could have recorded our meeting. I think about doing that sometimes. Basically, not one positive word came out of their mouth, they were in a hurry to get on to their next meeting, I am redundant and superficial, my thesis is chaotic because I have images of people I quote next to their quote - and, here's the best part - when I (excitedly, 2 months in advance) handed over my Analysis Chapter to them, one of my Supervisors rolled her eyes! As if, oh god, she has to do more work. I hate them (I know "hate" is a very strong word, and I use it lightly here - but I just am so hurt by the way they treat me).

At her first international conference, Dawn observed an interesting situation in the work of a student (from an Australian university).

10 October 2006

Participant blog: Dawn

The post-conference post

… The PhD colloquium on the first day mainly showed me yet again me how vulnerable PhD students can be - many of the problems raised were properly the concern of supervisors. I wondered how much people had shared their worry (some of them were quite major) with supervisors, but a couple of times when I asked people what their supervisors thought about the issues they had raised in their presentations, they rolled their eyes and said things like "He doesn't seem to know" or "She gave me some readings but they didn't really help." (I've been on the receiving end of this in the distant past so I know how frustrating this can be.) Of course, it may be that they aren't listening - I have no way of knowing - but it was astounding how many people were bringing concerns to a group of strangers.

This is a phenomenon often seen in online forums and in comments on PhD blogs (discussed in more detail in the final chapter), that students will bring their problems to a group of strangers. It feels safer than asking locally; one never knows how the supervisor will react if complaints find their way back to their ears. Such is the power of the ritual elder that students may wander blindly in their liminal space, seeking advice from anyone they encounter, rather than
find out what the local structures for complaint might be. This phenomenon can often be observed in online forums, or in comments on student help blogs.

Of course, some students are not afraid to take steps to solve their own problems – although sometimes the outcome turns out to be more painful than they imagine. Dawn feels she is suited by a more distant relationship with her supervisor than might be considered ‘normal’.

““

Comment from Dawn on a post by Grainne

When I was thinking about who to take as a supervisor …several people warned me against my supervisor, because she's so busy and travels a lot. As I couldn't think of any instance when I'd need her urgently (a PhD is hardly a life-or-death thing!) I didn't take that too seriously, and certainly it's worked out all well so far. But I notice on the report you have to send back to the faculty you have to say how often you meet, and there seems to me that some judgement is implied by this - some minimum that you have to fulfill.

However, despite her pride in her own independence, Dawn was shocked to learn there might be a change in her supervisory arrangements. Changes of supervisor are often mentioned as a source of stress for students, and this would be much worse if such changes were initiated or completed without their input. As it happened, Dawn’s Associate Supervisor proved more than able to meet her needs. But stories abound of students whose supervisors leave their university, become incapacitated or even die, and another supervisor is appointed without consultation – this had happened to Esther earlier in her PhD when her supervisor had become ill. Although she here discusses her present supervisors warmly, her examination process was to reveal some flaws in their relationship.

““

Participant Blog: Dawn

Bolt from the blue

My supervisor is leaving the University in two months! And I know that the … Faculty doesn't allow supervisors from outside - I tried to get an Assoc. Super. from another Uni when I first enrolled.

I've got a meeting with her on Wednesday, so we'll see. I do have a good Assoc but I like having [Name] as my main woman.

If I can't keep her maybe I'll have to go to another Uni - [Named] (which is where [Name]'s going) … .AAARRRGGGHHH!!!
Comment from Grainne

Boy - that must be quite traumatic! Especially as it's been so unexpected for you. 

Have you discussed it with her? What are you going to do? I mean, you could change to [Named Uni], but if you work at Sydney and feel comfortable here...and it is quite far away...I can't believe they wouldn't let you keep her as an Assoc - it does seem unfair that they won't allow them from different universities. It sounds really sudden, I always imagined that there was a huge gap between being appointed somewhere and actually having to leave. It is October now!

Comment from Esther

Holey mackarel that's soon! I know when my Honours supervisor left, he only gave me a month or so to get used to the idea. He was really lovely about it but it wasn't really a question if I wanted to find a new supervisor. It was a statement. After all of the disruption (and after I had picked myself up off the floor claiming that my academic life was over and that I'd never find anyone to replace him 'cause he was so good and I had such an excellent rapport with him) I did find a new supervisor. Unlike your situation Dawn I was able to find someone outside the faculty if needed but it wasn't directly encouraged. I ended up with a bit of a mish mash of people, but with some guys who I would a) never have thought to have asked and b) who had lots of experience in areas I had not thought to explore.

And then the same thing happened with PhD my supervision - not quite as bad but definitely a disruption. 2 entirely new supervisors and I thought that my world was going to hell, that my work was going to fall over in a heap because so much had been invested in my first supervisors' expertise. Now I really like them both.

I know it is a terrible time. I hope you find strength and that your Ass. supervisor (and primary one for that matter) have some great suggestions as to who might work with you. Otherwise, is a temper tantrum out of the question - at least to make you feel better?

If a supervisor were to be physically absent for more than a few weeks, the University policy in place while the blogs were running was that an arrangement should be made by an AOU “to ensure that appropriate alternative supervision is provided” (Academic Board, 1992 (Amended 2001)). However, how an AOU determines the ‘appropriateness’ of the arrangements may or may not involve consultation with a student. I have presented the story of Grainne’s supervision as a narrative in which we see how a student who did not understand the limits of her responsibility, seemingly unable to accept guidance of any kind in very complex circumstances, became extremely distressed. When re-reading her blog yet again while writing this section I saw for the first time how distressed she really was; this has been an emotional return for me.
During much of the time that the blogs that inform this thesis were operating, Grainne’s main supervisor was absent on six month’s study leave, and no arrangement had been made for a replacement – or, possibly, no arrangement that Grainne found satisfactory. Almost as soon as the blogs began (at the beginning of her supervisor’s leave and in the middle of her first year of enrolment), she began to mention the absence; lack of effective supervision was a continuing narrative on her blog (although it was by no means all she wrote about). Instead of presenting all of the more than 20 posts and comments in which she mentioned this lack and to which others responded, I have summarised the conflicting emotions she expressed over several months. I'll use two quotes to set the scene: they detail her history with her supervisor and her expectations of supervision.

**Participant Blog: Grainne**

**Supervision**

Yet supervision seems like such an elusive thing to describe. I know that I am really satisfied with mine (though I am lucky as I had the same supervisor for honours, and so I knew it would work well before starting the PhD), yet I can't quite pinpoint why. Certainly my supervisor is reliable, answers emails, makes regular time for me - but I think the thing I like about my supervision sessions are, strangely, that they are quite unstructured - I always feel that my ideas are the ones that shape what I will do in the thesis, and that supervision is mainly about refining those and maybe throwing some more thoughts in and also having to spend quite some time reminding me of all the requirements and limitations and structural things.

**Comment from Grainne on a blog post by Dawn**

… I think I am a person who genuinely doesn't need close supervision. This isn't because I'm some sort of genius with an IQ of 220 or something, but I think it's the direct consequence of having come in straight from honours. I knew what I wanted to do because it emerged out of straight from honours. I knew what I wanted to do because it emerged out of honours. I knew how to structure my writing, and I didn't have to relearn skills that I might had to done if I'd been out for a few years...

A few weeks later she commented that she’d found it hard to get feedback on her method and writing; her Associate Supervisor “isn't really in my exact field” (7 Sept). A few days later, a post headed “Let us record that I am missing my supervisor” (10 Sept) appeared, including “…I'm finding that I really need advice about a lot of small things – well, things that are small now but may
become not-so-small if I can't figure them out – especially if I wind up writing poor drafts that have to be discarded.” (comments from the others that drafts are what you write in your first year were ignored). Again, she mentions that her Associate Supervisor’s advice is “too generic”. Other participants sympathised, and suggested various people that she might like to discuss the issue with, but she insisted she was fine: “I was whining about this to someone [in the faculty] yesterday who told me that I didn't need a supervisor anyway.” An experienced voice responded to this rather shocking statement with advice to document everything, and bring her concerns up at her progress review.

Her continuing protestations that she is ‘fine’ are overwhelmingly contradicted by her ongoing anxiety. Posts in the next few days indicate she is desperate for someone to talk to about her work.

13 September 2006

I have done some research assistant work for people, but that tends to be fairly impersonal and one can't suddenly start ranting on about one's work when it's meant to be about theirs!

18 September 2006

It's funny, but in terms of my last post about missing my supervisor, I suspect the main reason I do miss her isn't actually the technical supervisory stuff, but the ability to talk to someone about the whole process (this is where blogging comes in: talking to delightful people like yourself online!). My friends think it's sweet that I'm so excited, but since they aren't engaged in the same processes it honestly does feel very self-centred to blab on into infinity about it!

At this point, a presumably well-meaning staffroom inquiry into her situation, giving her a chance to talk just as she had said she wanted to, set off a defensive blog post headed “Pleasant or Patronising????” (21 Sept). There is almost a touch of paranoia in this post; Grainne discerned implied criticism of her absent supervisor from a faculty member, and reacted very defensively to the feeling that someone “felt sorry for her”.

Several weeks and many posts referring to her aloneness later, Grainne wrote a post entitled “In which I submit mediocre work” (6 Nov). A supervision meeting (presumably with her Associate Supervisor) has left her with the impression that she can’t write and is not making enough progress; she is “having a moment where I don't feel especially competent or capable.” (At this point, less than one year into her enrolment, she has had two articles accepted for publication, has carried out several interviews to collect data and has written more than 20,000 words of her thesis.) She is confused about the direction and quality of her work, and she is overwhelmed with marking of undergraduate assignments, there has been a suicide at her part-time workplace, and she is extremely short of money. Other participants suggest repeatedly that she find someone to talk to, but she never responds to their suggestions.
While she is dealing with these stressful components to her life (virtually everything she is doing is a source of distress at this point), she receives news that a close relative has gone missing in mysterious circumstances overseas, and on 21 November she receives the terrible news that this person’s body has been found: they have suicided. Due to “red tape”, it takes over two weeks for the body to be returned to Australia, but Grainne is still denying that she needs time off and refusing to ask the faculty (officially) for support (although she does mention a couple of staff members who are being very supportive and that the faculty arranged for flowers to be sent to her). In the absence of a supervisor she checks the University website for information about taking leave and learns that she would have to take a whole semester, which she doesn’t wish to do, but appears not to listen when other participants explain that other arrangements can be made.

Her supervisor returns in January, but it seems that Grainne’s former trust in their relationship has evaporated. She is very concerned that nothing be known ‘officially’ about her distress: “I hope that post didn't sound like I do want my supervisors to hear all about my personal life! Because I don't - you always want to appear as uncomplicated as possible to people who you know professionally.” (21 Jan) “[The relative’s] death was in difficult circumstances that I am unwilling to discuss in any detail with my supervisor, for example. I did, however, feel offended when she told me to see a counsellor when I emailed her to notify her of it.” (29 Jan) At the same time, she has been regularly seeing one of the AOU staff (who is a trained counsellor) since she learned of the death, even phoning this person at home; this seems, in her mind, to be acceptable. Having struggled through February, applying for part-time work and being very miserable, she posted again on 1 March.

I March 2007

Participant blog: Grainne

Suspension

I suspended my candidature yesterday. I spoke to my Associate Supervisor who was very supportive and understood my reasons. I haven't been able to speak to my supervisor in person, although I mentioned over the phone to her the other day that this would probably take place. I'm just too tired to think about things and I've had it.

I'm going to look for some [professional work]. I'm hoping to find some and I've had a couple of potential leads already. I'm quite excited about this new turn in things and think that what I actually need is a semester off so I can come back refreshed with a new attitude to it all. I spent last night celebrating about actually having made a proper decision about things.

Grainne continued contributing to the blogs for three more months as she decided whether to continue her PhD part-time. She withdrew completely on 28 June, posting then for the last time.
Grainne’s story now reads to me like a train wreck. She exercised her agency in ways that acted against her best interests in both the AOU and the institution, and she also resisted amelioration or even empathy from her fellow participants. This was probably a function of the mess in which she found herself (none of which seem to have been the result of her actions), and a strong personal desire to behave in what she considered the appropriate (‘professional’) way. I know how inclined I am to play my part in situations according to old scripts, and the more stressful the situation, the older and more intransigent the scripts seem to be. Grainne seemed to have found a place where she trusted no-one and where kindness was a cause for suspicion.

Many other examples of the “messy and unpredictable” (Grant, 2005, p. iii) nature of supervision pedagogy were revealed on participants’ blogs. There are many demonstrations of the complexity of the supervisory relationship; it will not be news to experienced supervisors that some students require a delicate touch. Gracious acceptance of having one’s work ‘criticised’ in supervision sessions is a skill that many find difficult to achieve. Of course, this needs also to be considered with earlier complaints that not enough feedback is being received.

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### Participant Blog: Grainne

**Supervision**

I hate having my work criticised. I think I am particularly sensitive towards this in a way that could almost be called immature. I just can't bear it because it's so close to me - even if that criticism is mainly about the structure and order of what I am writing. I tend to overreact to criticisms - either I shelve the whole thing and procrastinate for ages, or I feel very argumentative even though I can admit that the criticism is justified. The reason why I'm thinking about this is that one of my friends has just had to change supervisors, and is having problems with her current supervisor as well, and one of the patterns that I can see is happening (and I have told her this) is that she is convinced that she knows so much about her topic area (as opposed to knowing so much about writing a thesis or about her field in general) that she is unwilling to accept criticisms about her ideas. I haven't started writing my thesis up yet, but I really dread the inevitable criticisms that will come - I read through my diary today and I remember how intensely I reacted to these sorts of things in my Honours year. I wonder if accepting criticism ever becomes easier, and if it is somehow related to maturity or self-esteem issues or if it's just that I am a bit bloody-minded about liking most of what I write!

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**Comment from Kylie**

It is tough though, getting "feedback". It can be worse though, to get no feedback, and I have a few friends in that situation. Either not getting any feedback at all, or the feedback is glowing - very suspicious. My supervisors
have always been encouraging, but I wish now they had've been more critical...

Some participants were more self-aware in their relationship with their supervisors. We have already seen Debra self-deprecatingly comment that her supervisors don’t praise her enough. This was a continuing theme in her writing, but she also demonstrates her understanding that writing about her feelings is part of her way of dealing with them.

23 July 2006

Participant blog: Debra

And on another note - I promised myself I wouldn't bag on my Supervisors in these entries! And darn it! I already broke my promise. What is up with me? Geez - anyway, look - my Supervisors are actually not that bad. I have a tendency to look for their faults rather than see the good in all they do. I think maybe I'm just not good at taking their criticism, or something. So i try to put them down to make myself feel better. Please excuse me. They could honestly be so much worse than what they actually are. The truth of the matter is, I just want them to praise me and tell me how wonderful I am and that i am the best student they ever had and that my future will be remarkable - but they never do. So, boo hoo...

Others were more robust, and responded well to a ‘kick up the bum’.

20 November 2006

Comment by Esther on a post by Dawn

I have had a pretty similar speal from both of my supervisors recently given that I was really worried about not writing enough. Their general advice was that if I wasn't thinking about the PhD at all, then the three of us needed to get concerned. As it was I was champing at the bit to get stuff down which was a blessing when I had to write it.

Esther, already a working professional, understands that criticism is not always personal, and is able to use negative comments to motivate her. Debra, on the other hand, has found an interesting way to avoid what she perceives as a lack of interest and over-criticality from her supervisors, and thus to ‘grease the wheels’ of their relationship.
I have a bizarre relationship with my Supervisors - something I will have to get into at another time through all this blogging. But I have come to terms with the perception I have of them as being not really interested in my honesty, or attempts to open up to them. When i do try to be honest, or open up to them, they just shut me down. So I give my Supervisors the quick simple answers so i can move on and move out with as little complication and confrontation as possible. This method has proven to work much better for me.

An interesting question for me is how much risk a supervisor should encourage a candidate to take with the form of their thesis. There is very little on this in the literature, and the answer probably depends on how you conceptualise the supervisor’s role vis-à-vis the new researcher and the thesis. One of my key informants was very clear about this. When asked about what research training/supervision meant to her, she replied with her views on how the writing of a thesis should be done. To Emily, the thesis represents the knowledge the student has created, it is central to their future identity as a researcher, and it should be showcased in a particular way.

**Emily: humanities, senior central administrator**

My own writing advice for students: (this is me as a supervisor and it's not necessarily shared by my colleagues in [discipline]): A thesis is a thesis and you can have more incarnations later. So there might be a range of different kinds of thesis. I need you to give me a good rationale for doing something outside the range. so the range signals to me - not that there is a right way, but there is a range and it covers certain things. This is training again - a thesis is within a range and it is a certain genre within this range, and for many - not for all students but for many students - this is what they need to do first as far as I'm concerned - then the thesis, the knowledge itself - can have any number of incarnations after the event. So this is not the one incarnation of the work and nor should it be. This is the thesis incarnation of the work. After that, write to your publisher and your publisher will work with you. You can turn it into a book; you can turn it into any kind of book you want. You can turn it into academic articles, you can turn it into another kind of creative work, you can turn it into a radio documentary - you can do whatever you want. Which is not to say - obviously we have ways of making those part of the thesis.

But I'm a firm believer in this as a training exercise, which trains people in a thing called a PhD, which is not the same thing as a novel. It's a particular thing and this is why it's called a PhD. Not all of my colleagues ... some of my colleagues want to push this, and advise students to think of this as a book right from the beginning and for a really good student...
this works very well. But there are very few really good students and there are a lot of just fine students. And I think for the ‘just fine’ students the point is to train them in writing a thesis first and that's my position.

She may be right. One of the clear findings from the Newcastle Project was that examiners (especially the less experienced) may feel more comfortable with standard, low-risk theses – that, as Emily states, it is the training that is important to showcase, and that elements of originality may be secondary in the minds of examiners (see particularly Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, & Dally, 2004b, p. 90 on this point).

Not all supervisors feel the same, obviously, and a discussion on the blogs reveals one student who was being encouraged to move outside the conventional paradigm, and another who was not, despite her sophisticated argument and confidence with writing.

11 September 2007

Participant Blog: Dawn

Nice feedback

I had an excellent talk with my second supervisor today … He is really interested in my ideas about how I want to write my thesis (unconventionally) and gave me some good tips. I have to write the long piece for the faculty to get my candidature confirmed and I’m a little anxious about not being forced to waste my time doing a conventional “lit review and methodology chapter”, which is what most people do. He encouraged me to ‘flex my creative muscle’ on it.

13 September 2007

Comment by Debra

My writing is quite non-conventional as well - my data presentation is in the form of a Novelette! I had to fight to do it that way - initially being discouraged by the Sups - but I said I couldn't see it being done any other way - so I'm doing it - I just have to back it up as to why. So, arts-informed inquiry is my theoretical grounding - the artsy style of writing a novelette, the artwork that I create - all this informs my research.

Dawn, when I read your blog Laurel Richardson came to mind. Are you familiar with her articles? Here is a paragraph from my Lit Review that gives part of my justification for creative writing within a PhD thesis:

… [long quote]

See, I also write a self-narrative in my thesis - and I am a character in the Novelette - I am a participant in my own research just as you. Anyway, I
thought Laurel Richardson had a lot of good words to quote that would support my uncommon methodology.

So far in this section on supervision as experienced by students, I have pointed up many of the difficulties that participants talked about. Of course participants also reported positive stories of supervisory relationships. One of the constant discussion points (as can be seen above) was how often students should meet with their supervisors, and how much they should share, and what help they could reasonably expect. In other words, the ‘rules’, or perhaps boundaries, of the relationship were not clear to students; in general they appeared unable to take the lead and set a pattern of meetings that suited them (with the possible exception of Debra as reported on page 183 – and her arrangements were still not completely satisfactory to her). However, a new person joined the project rather late, and she had a more pragmatic attitude to her supervision.

6 September 2007

Participant Blog: Jules

Interconnectedness

Funny how sometimes when you're trying to work you can use endless avoidance strategies, and other times you can be 'in the zone'. I've just had a very productive day or so setting out the framework for my literature review and rethinking the guts of my research question (this could just be a strategy to avoid writing up methodology as recommended by my supervisor). In that mode where somehow it's easier to make connections between ideas and you can make all kinds of links in reading and writing. I've been pulling together all kinds of bits and pieces from old stuff that I've written, but thinking about them in a slightly different way. Reminds me a bit of Dirk Gently and the "the fundamental interconnectedness of all things". Kind of satisfying, but every now and then I pull myself up and wonder whether maybe I'm just nuts. Still, days like this are better than those other days when you read what you've written and wonder whether maybe it was written by somebody else. Luckily I'm conscious that tomorrow is the day I email my supervisor (fortnightly emails at the moment), and she's a realist. So while I'm having a fine time pondering the interconnectedness of all things, part of me is still thinking about what it means for my project. All a pleasant distraction from APEC and the real world.

7 September 2007

Comment from Dawn:

Interesting that you email your supervisor fortnightly. I'm just reading a new book (I'll blog it later today) called "Helping doctoral students to write: Pedagogies for supervision". This would be an approach they would favour - regular writing like this forces candidates to think their ideas through and structure them rather than talking vaguely. And it gives supervisors a chance to write back in depth too - and you both have a record. Maybe you should set up a blog with your supervisor were you can write and she can comment.... :)

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Comment from Esther

That's a great idea to email fortnightly. You have a very sensible supervisor I suspect. It is really easy to wander around in your ideas, getting lost and interested and distracted and involved and all of the other really good and exciting parts of inquiry. Who said being nuts was a bad thing? I think it's good to know your boundaries, what line you will and won't cross over because it mean's that you've thought about it. Keep on wandering and coming back to the writing. Onward and upward from here!

Esther’s response seems to me to get near the nub of the issue of the ‘professionalism’ that underlies the supervisory relationship that is working well: boundaries, and clarity of expectations around them. The false notions of ‘professionalism’ that underpinned Grainne’s distressing aloneness lacked these constructions of limits and regularity and dependability (on both sides).

The focus of this chapter now moves from issues of supervision to the issues of presentation and representation that students must negotiate in the writing of their thesis. Although writing is acknowledged as an issue that students need support with, I’ve also looked at other issues that have received less attention.

Methods

There is surprisingly little in the literature on how students choose their methodology and method other than by undertaking a research methods course. It is a key part of the project that usually develops in discussions between supervisor and student – but a less formal sharing of methods and methodologies (such as the “Developing A Research Project” series of seminars in my own faculty) might be more help students than formal coursework. A seminar series has the advantage of giving students something to discuss with their supervisor as they develop the first framing of their project, and is more pedagogically suited to the less didactic learning that is more appropriate within an Australian PhD. 59 Unsurprisingly, most of the discussion on methods on the blogs was instituted by students who were in their first year of enrolment.

Grainne first brought up the subject of the researcher’s position on their own project.

59 In a blog post as I was finalizing this section, Pat Thompson discusses her unease with Methods Courses as a part of preparation for a PhD project and thesis writing in her blog (Thomson, 2013). She sees the way that many are envisaged as too concerned with concrete outcomes to be useful in the messy world of research.
Teach me to feel, and not to feel/Teach me to sit still

There's a lot of people I know who research their own work, or have told me that it's somehow better to interview people you know. I've always thought there might be something in this, although this week proved otherwise. Of the eight [people] I'm interviewing, I knew two previously (others are friends of friends or members of associations etc). The ones who I knew were so busy trying to present a facade or say things that were consistent with what they thought was my previous impression of them. There was a lot of roletaking (reflection on and in action) in our interactions as they tried to either say things that they thought I would like, or present themselves as a particular sort of professional. So it feels very liberating to interview people I've never met before. I thought it would be awkward, but it really isn't - it's far better in the sense that there's nothing to prove, they feel more anonymous, they don't presume I know anything about them, and they often feel comfortable talking about themselves to someone who isn't in their social or professional orbit.

Comment from Esther

As I am writing up my stuff at the moment I don't know that there should be a hard and fast rule to how you approach your work. In this type of research you do need to be guided by what your participants say, how they approach it and what topics they cover. Depending on how many participants you have and how many interview you have with each one of them, I suspect that if you approach them all in the same manner that the reading of your final document may be a little predictable. Your work is far from that, and so if you can, weave a story. Intersperse it with literature and make the examiner want to keep reading! Does that make sense?

Comment from Grainne

Thanks for your comments about writing up, they do confirm what I thought about it - I want my data to guide my results, but at the same time I am somewhat resistant to complete narrative approaches since I worry that, in seeking to give voice, they end up creating and constructing voice, and either transcribing verbatim without much analysis or putting words in people's mouths...

This was an ongoing concern for many of us. I have already discussed my own struggles with representation and the use of technology, and they were shared by Grainne. These are concerns that anyone who is creating original knowledge from (the small amount of) what they know of people’s lives must struggle with. I have quoted Grainne’s concerns with representing participants’ lives in Chapter 2; she goes on...
Letting their voices speak or analysing what they say...

My PhD is constructed around a belief in methodological individualism, or the idea that individual voices have valuable things to contribute and can be used to make broad and pertinent points. I love what my interviewees are saying, even though I don't always agree with their viewpoints. And I'm trying really hard to be able to include those divergent beliefs, even when it means that I may produce a less clear narrative or may retreat into relativism at times. I don't agree with some elements of narrative research, for example: I have a suspicion that it is not totally ethically sound to construct a narrative around a participant that runs the danger of putting words into their mouths. Yet, at the same time, I'm aware that my own voice and perspective continually challenges and overlaps with my participants' voices. I am letting them read what I write, and at the same time, I'm aware that the links I've drawn between such things as neoliberal policy imperatives and their attacks on teacher agency are things that I feel are coming out in the data, but my participants may feel that these things do not directly affect their work. They are so immersed in their professional context and I in mine - my perspective as a researcher and theirs as teachers are really different. I'm beginning to become frustrated by research that does claim an "intimate familiarity" (a very interactionist concept and one that researchers who use the same theoretical orientation as I often claim). Yet, merely asserting my distance and trying to avoid imposing my analysis on their voice can't lead to objectivity as scientific notions of objectivity are fallacious anyway! I do love being able to affirm subjectivity, but then it sometimes gets in the way of me feeling that I can say very much!!!

A participant who wrote very little and dropped out of the project quite quickly also contributed on the issue of research methods.

Lifestyle Issues

Oh to find the time to do a PhD! I'm writing about how to measure lifestyle. I've decided the most important factors include:

- choice
- balance
- variety
- independence
participation
meaning
satisfaction

...Yet as a working mother trying to do a PhD it seems I have limited choice, time, variety etc... I'm writing about balanced lifestyles yet am failing to find one!

Mind mapping was a useful exercise yesterday to clarify my thoughts re the important factors, at least I can articulate what it is I'm missing, as well as components that need to be in my thesis. Wish I'd done mind mapping long ago, it would have saved me heaps of time. Now I can move on with small bite size chunks, which reflects the small bite sized chunks of time I find to study.

Csikszentmihalyi states that optimal experiences in everyday life contribute to giving life an overarching quality of life and meaning”. A thought for all PhD students!

Comment from Esther

Welcome Marg. My supervisors said something really interesting to me a little while back and it sparked in my thoughts as you were wishing that you had done some mind mapping a long time ago. Perhaps you weren't ready for it then, hence why you didn't embrace it at the time and all the exposure in the world to mind mapping may not have convinced you of it's benefits. I find that those types of techniques - mind mapping being one of them - are only good when you have some use for them in your life. Have you had cause to think about bringing big ideas like this together? I am finding that the PhD process really involves simultaneously thinking in generalities and in details, so mind mapping makes a lot of sense to me because it is useful to my current work. Having said that, I think in pictures so have been using this technique for what seems like an eternity now - well throughout my tertiary education life anyway. But there was a time where my mind simply wasn't able to accommodate that type of thinking. It was an absolute revelation when it kicked in though and I have been using and building on the technique ever since. Perhaps you just weren't ready to take it on board at the time.

Esther’s encouragement led Marg to open up more about her own dilemmas about method, a process she clearly enjoyed.

Participant blog: Marg

Statistical analysis and other thoughts

Having been reviewing the benefits of Rasch analysis at work, I've discovered more things about Rasch concerning my own assessment. As a noise
statistician, the range of analyses I need to complete is somewhat overwhelming. However I like Rasch for the clarity and simplicity of it (even if analysis of each result is more complex). Having questioned my own approach in developing this tool, based on my own opinion primarily, as part of how I wanted to improve my service (as opposed to being a dedicated researcher with a more academic approach).

Overton defined construct validity as “the extent to which (a) test (or score) may be said to measure a theoretical construct or trait” (Bond and Fox, 2001). Rasch analysis provides strong evidence that each item in a scale provides objective data that contributes to a uni-dimensional construct and moves away from the view that construct validity involves experts in the field agreeing an item should be included (it challenges assumptions that test developers often have when constructing measures and highlights the need for sound theoretical basis for each measure (p. xv and 192).

So, apart from expertise in brain injury, I also have expertise in living a lifestyle of my own choosing. As a working studying mother, the idea of choice (and freedom to choose) is more interesting, as my baby seems to making many of the choices for how my time is spent (when I sleep, eat, shower, speak to my friends). Life has a daily and weekly rhythm not all of our own making, and this is informing both the progression of my PhD (its at the bottom of the list) and the content of it (we need to do many things that are not truly "engaging" and contribute to our sense of self identity).

This leads me back to mind mapping. With so much more in my head, I have a greater need to list things down beyond the chapter headings in a thesis...and the development of my own conceptual model, in fact, the fact that my thesis involves writing my own model rather than seeing my study as evaluating someone else's (well, the World Health Organisation's ICF) has been a recent development in my thinking. Perhaps this is part of the PhD journey in developing greater independence in your thinking (as well as what you study).

Thanks for the comments, I'm enjoying the blogging tremendously.

Even the seemingly small matter of pseudonyms was worthy of discussion, as a result of my asking participants if they wanted to select one their own for this thesis.

I had my participants choose their own pseudonyms for my research - I gave them the parameter that it needed to be an artist that they identified with - and therefore I had a window of insight into their personality as well.

It was very interesting to see the artists that my participants chose - I have a Maggie (after Margaret Preston), Marcel (Marcel Duchamp), Bridget (Bridget Riley) and Meret (Meret Oppenheim). Then in an interview I asked my...
participants to give me reason as to why they chose that artist. It was interesting to see how closely the artist and the participant actually had similar aspects about themselves.

Now the artwork that I create for my thesis has aspects of the pseudonym artist and the participant all combined. So I have had to do a fair bit of research on these four artists - ordered books off Amazon to read. Then I cut the pictures out of the books for my collages - all sorts of things - learning family names of the real artists' family so that I can relate other pseudonyms for people mentioned in the data (like a husband, brother, boyfriend...) The pseudonyms have played a big impact on the overall design of my study.

And humour was sometimes used to illustrate a phenomenon we are all familiar with in academia: theory one-up-man-ship.

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4 September 2006

Participant Blog: Grainne

Go Foucault Yourself

...I saw this on a tshirt yesterday and I cracked up! Does anyone else ever get a bit frustrated by what seems like gratuitous references to Foucault everywhere? I find him quite heavy-going - I am the sort of person who flips through the index of his book or reads articles about Foucault and then goes back to find the original sources. I know he's meant to be amazing, but I have a suspicion he is also over-used to a degree...I remember someone in my faculty saying, "I use Foucault in my work" with such pride, and I honestly thought, "How irrelevant is he to your research interests?"

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Writing

In absence of an oral defence or viva, it is on their writing that most Australian PhD students will be examined. Barnacle and Mewburn (2010) claim that, regardless of discipline, “Doctoral candidates learn through doing research projects under supervision and producing theses” (p. 434) and thus, following Kamler and Thompson (2006), it is through writing that doctoral identity develops (Aitchison & Lee, 2006).

This focus on the final presentation of a thesis as an ‘all-or-nothing’, extremely high-stakes production has lead to a high level of angst around writing and ‘writing up’. Lee has been thinking and writing about the role of writing in research and the PhD since the mid-1990s, pointing out (1998) that writing is part of research, not something you do when the research is finished and, more recently, she investigated the role that the pressure to publish can play in developing a pedagogy that sees writing as an integral part of research (Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010a; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Lee, 2010; Lee & Aitchison, 2009; Lee & Kamler, 2008)
The complexities of writing as a researcher is an issue that “remains significantly under-theorized within research degree programs in universities” (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 265). Apart from acknowledging that students who do not have English as their first language require extra support, writing at the HDR level is usually discussed in terms of skills acquisition, and support is undertaken in general learning support units in institutions. As Aitchison and Lee (2010, p. 265) point out, this approach leads to “problems of writing [being] most often construed either in terms of individualized deficit and trauma (the problem) or of clinical_technical intervention (the solution)” (see also Cotterall, 2011). Lee and Aitchison (2009) discuss the emerging need for “institutional capacity building” for writing in doctoral work (p. 87) – yet, although constantly identified by academics as an issue, research writing is not mentioned at all in the report of the working party on the PhD at Sydney 2009. Such support as is available is in the ‘problem/solution’ model described by Aitchison and Lee.

Based on her sophisticated understanding of the role of language in knowledge production and representation of research, Aitchison runs peer writing workshops for HDR students at the University of Western Sydney: “…from a desire to move from a model of writing development as crisis control to a proactive program that embedded writing with research…” (Aitchison & Lee, 2010, p. 270). Lee ran a similar program for academics enrolled in doctoral programs at the University of Technology, Sydney (Aitchison & Lee, 2010). Their article details both a way of thinking about research writing and a practical way of dealing with the high degree of angst about research student writing that all institutions report (Kamler & Thomson, 2006), and their pedagogical approach is summed up in an earlier paper: “successful practices occur in situated, authentic contexts which characteristically include peer review” (Lee & Aitchison, 2009, p. 95). This approach goes against the received view of writing as a stage at the end of PhD work – the ubiquitous (but wholly inadequate) expression ‘writing up’ captures this well (Lee & Aitchison, 2009, p. 95).

There is a huge genre of ‘self-help’ literature on the PhD, much of it devoted to writing, almost all of it focused on writing as a skill rather than a practice (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Paltridge, 2002). With a few exceptions, most of the texts cited by Kamler and Thomson (2006) as useful in considering writing as a practice are not directed at student writers, who are more likely to encounter the plethora of books aimed at ‘helping them write’. Of course, students find these books because they need them: structuring a thesis, for example, is not something you would magically know just because you are enrolled in a PhD. Paltridge (2002) looked at some of the common advice books and measured their advice against a number of successful theses, and concluded that students need to be presented with a broad range of thesis ‘styles’ early in their enrolment, so that they can understand that the shape of the thesis is a decision to be made, not a given (see also Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Lee, 1998). I was present at a workshop led by Susan Carter in the Education Faculty in 2007 as part of an international study that aimed to do exactly that, presenting us with the Tables of Contents from a variety of very different successful theses. Many of the students present found this very challenging – one asked me quietly
which of the proffered examples was the ‘right’ one. Carter later published a paper on the results (Carter, 2011), which aims to support and inform both students and supervisors in the decisions around thesis structure.

Cham captures the nature of uncertainty around thesis writing with his usual whimsy—wit—underlying bite, presented here as Figure 4:

Figure 4: How do you know a thesis is finished? (Cham, 2012)

Publication

Publication is a key part of 21st century academic life. Academics are expected to produce a steady stream of refereed publications, and students also feel a great deal of pressure to produce publications during their candidature—some of this pressure comes from supervisors who want their name on the publication, and the question of ethics around authorship will be discussed below.60

The question of how and what students should publish during their enrolment (and immediately afterward) is another area of the literature that is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions. One student commenting on the ThesisWhisperer blog said that her supervisor had told her that a publication accepted for a journal (presumably with the supervisor’s name on it) was a prerequisite for submission of her thesis; however, when she checked the University regulations this was not the case. Students now see a list of publications as crucial to their chances of gaining an academic position (if that is what they wish to do when they graduate), and the thesis achieved ‘by publication’ is now common enough to be a topic for discussion at conferences and in institutions. (Some of the pitfalls of this change were discussed in Chapter 1.)61 After conducting an international survey, Dinham and Scott

60 As discussed in Chapter 1, there is little hard evidence about the amount of published research that is carried out by PhD students, but it has been claimed to be as high as 65% of all published research.

61 There is another debate related to this about what should be ‘counted’ as a publication, with some academics wishing to claim their public profile in social media and the press as part of their publications record (and indeed some institutions are considering the implications of this);
(Dinham & Scott, 2001), found that support for student publication was very variable; generally, at the time they were writing, students had to have a personal desire to publish, and many were not mentored or supported in that work.

A long discussion on the blogs revealed many of the myths and uncertainty that students feel in relation to publication. This conversation was conducted at a time when ‘quality’ of publications and journal rankings was a ‘hot topic’ in Australia due to government funding changes, and many academics were as confused as the students. Keep in mind that at this point Grainne is still in her first year of enrolment, while the other two are nearing the end of theirs.

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**Participant Blog: Grainne**

**Writing/publishing**

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One thing that always mystifies me is the idea of publishing: are PhD students supposed to publish? If so, how much? Do you have to have published a lot to get an academic job? Why does getting a job seem so random? It's one of the things that continually makes me feel edgy - you look at the people you know who do or don't have jobs, or do or don't have tenure, and there doesn't seem to be much of a pattern to it. It's great to know that there are so many paths to take and so many things that look good on your CV, but I find the whole notion of applying for jobs to be really intimidating lately - one of my friends is going through it and she seems to spend hours and hours on every application. Initially, I thought that publishing articles would probably be the best go in terms of getting a good CV etc, but I'm really learning why people seem to publish so little - it's not so much that it takes time to write, but the reviewing process is so long, and the comments so unfathomable, and editing and revising things takes ages and often means that you're either faced with getting something accepted that you hate or cherishing an unpublishable article that you really like...

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**Comment from Debra**

It's interesting for me to read your thoughts on publishing, Grainne.

I have been under the impression (mainly provoked by my Supervisors) that the more you are published, the more credible you are. I also thought I didn't get the IPRS scholarship my first year because some one who had publications did. Only, his publications were not from refereed journals - he just had publications - full stop.

…

however, in this discussion I will confine myself to formal academic publication, as that is where students presently feel pressure to achieve.
Sure, referred journals may look good, but I also think if a few non-academic publications are thrown into the mix on your CV it's going to look more full and still have an equivalent impact.

Yes, the referred journals take a long time - but some of these other publications - such as all the student publication opportunities on campus (which are basically a sure-thing to get published in) can certainly beef-up the looks of your resume in the meantime.

I have been getting about two non-refereed articles and one refereed article a year - and then about 4-6 [professional] publications. And it hasn't been that hard to do. The one academic article pulls the weight - but the other randoms fill in the gaps.

Right now I am writing an article for a journal called "The Suspicious Humanist." I'm writing for them because I like the title of the journal and it is a sure thing to be published in (because my husband knows the editor). My article is about the title of the journal - how funny is that?!

Anyway, I feel nobody will even stop to think whether or not "The Suspicious Humanist" is a refereed journal. They'll just look at how many publications are listed on my CV, go by quantity rather than quality, and move on in the everyday hurried fashion that academics always seem to be in.

Comment from Kylie

Don't forget though how snobby academics can be - with some of them they will look down at you even if they don't recognise the journal, they don't necessarily even think that refereed = credible. When it comes to getting a job I think in that sense it is the luck of the draw, whether the selection panel are snobs or not!

I can say from talking to a lot of academics that publications are very important to landing an academic job, as well as university level teaching. Enter our big problem - where in our eight fulltime (or equivalent) semesters are we supposed to find time to write articles and teach uni subjects, as well as finish our PhD?!

Comment from Grainne

Kylie, if only we knew the answer to that question...there aren't enough hours in the day! I suspect there is a certain snobbery about WHICH journals etc (and that getting jobs has a large element of luck in it).

Although the idea of putting in non-referreed publications on my CV hadn't actually occurred to me. Would poetry then count? Articles in political journals? Because I do publish things (many under a pseudonym), but I hadn't thought about including them. The Suspicious Humanist is a good title, Debra, it does sound quite critical!
Comment from Kylie

I think it can be a double-edged sword...if you include non-refereed journals in your CV in amongst the refereed ones, then an employer may see the list, notice one of the journal titles as non-refereed, and assume you have 'padded out' your list because you don't have enough refereed stuff to include.

In my CV I included both refereed and non-refereed, and this was because I only had the one refereed article and it looked lame on it's own - the non-refereed ones I included were in the area that the job interview was for … so they went in for relevance as much as for padding. Non-refereed publications that had little relevance to the job I was applying for were left out. I listed conference papers seperately, only because none of them were refereed either and I didn't want to look like I was dredging up every last thing to fill my 'publications' list out.

22 January 2007

Comment from Grainne

This is actually really interesting for me to think about, Kylie, because my publications list at the moment is basically FULL of nothing but non-refereed conference papers, one refereed one and one article. I worry that when I look at it, it looks as though I've thrown in any old sludge at the moment. I worry that if I do include all the non-refereed stuff it might look as though I'm trying to 'cheat' and slip irrelevant things in? (Of course, I'd still discriminate between refereed and abstract-only papers.) I figure that it's better to at least have a longer list than little at all. Can I ask, is there a distinction between 'published conference papers' (I have some) and 'refereed papers' and 'non-refereed non-published ones'???

22 January 2007

Comment from Kylie

Re the distinction between published/refereed papers: as far as I know the important thing is not whether they were in a journal or at a conference, or whether they were 'published' or not (i.e. it absolutely counts if your paper was on a CD of conference proceedings or whatever), the important thing is whether they were refereed, or 'peer reviewed', and the reason for this is that a peer reviewed paper has been read by others in the field and approved as being 'good enough'. On the other hand, some non-peerreviewed publications will let anything get published. I only listed my conference papers seperately because I had so many of them.

23 January 2007

Comment from Debra

Reading these comments is interesting to me because I had never actually put this much thought into - nor did I ever think people looking at my CV would put this much thought into it. I feel I have always been under the impression that the more the better - quality (i.e. refereed publications) great, yes - but other non-refereed publications, just as well.
I have always included everything on my CV (so Grainne, I would say go for the listings of published poetry!) - BUT - maybe I should rethink this - after reading what you say Kylie. Am I presenting myself as a fool by listing all the publications I receive? If it truly is not a good idea, I should probably redesign my CV. Maybe I should reconsider how I spend my time - gear up for more quality... forget about quantity?

I just am under the impression academics are always in such a rush they really wouldn't take the time to carefully read my CV that close - and the longer the list, the more active I appear. Hmmm... Perhaps, I should probably rethink this theory...

Thanks for waking me up a bit!

24 January 2007

Comment from Kylie

Well, my theory is certainly only an opinion - I'm no expert, and I didn't even get to the interview round of the only academic job I applied for, so how good can my CV be! I wouldn't say that listing everything would make you look like a fool, but I would say that academics are more discerning than you give them credit for. If they're serious about hiring someone, they WILL read the CVs. And usually the person doing the hiring is someone in the field (i.e. if the job is teaching maths curriculum method, you'll likely get someone who works in that field on the selection panel), and they will have an eye for what is relevant and what's not.

I've been applying for a few jobs recently, none academic, but I've modified my CV a little for each job depending on what they want.

I think it is wise to ask the supervisors questions about how to write an academic CV (they should be there for more than PhD stuff, I think), or other academics in the faculty. It would make a great [Graduate Student Society] keynote! I might suggest it to the NSW IER for their student conference this year...

Reading this exchange and many of the comments left on public blogs such as ThesisWhisperer and Patter, it is apparent that a workshop on publication in the discipline would be a useful thing for AOU's to provide students with at an early stage in their candidature, to dispel some of the myths and misunderstandings that occur in this area. Also, advice on academic (and other) careers, on how to construct a CV, along with the part that publication plays in appointments at ECR level in the discipline, would clearly be useful. Publication rankings and the differences between peer- and non-peer-reviewed work (and the way that academics use non-peer-reviewed work to try ideas out) are now bread and butter knowledge for academics and researchers.

The feedback that students receive on their first submission for publication can provide a salutary learning experience, and may put supervisors’ ‘critical’ comments into perspective. Grainne had just received her first lesson in academic reviewing when she wrote this post.
Hum.

Have received reviewers' comments on my article (see above). They have rather missed the point, I felt. Particularly since they were coming at it from a psychological/positivist/quantitative perspective, whereas my article was a sociological one. One even mentions reliability and validity, which makes me think that maybe they weren't a particularly appropriate person to review a qualitative paper.

Strangely, after SCATHING SCATHING comments (if I was a student and someone wrote that on my paper, I would consider it unprofessional behaviour and would appeal), the recommendation was to revise and resubmit. I'm not even sure I want to do it if that means taking comments on board that completely miss my intended meaning! Of course, a reasonable response is to assume I haven't made that intended meaning clear enough, and I'll try to do that. But honestly!!

I am incensed. Not by the criticisms in themselves - I got a lot of criticisms for my other article, but they were things I could change and things that were relevant to the nature of the study.

Also, what individual spends TWO pages rubbishing someone else's article? Surely if it was that appalling, you'd restrict yourself to a few patronising and acerbic comments?

Again, my writing style is apparently at fault. There you go. I guess I need to take that criticism on board - although it's somewhat mitigated by the fact that, in the next line, the reviewer doesn't seem to understand or appreciate my theoretical orientation (or rather, I suspect they do understand it and just hate it).

A discussion on the Patter blog about whether journal editors should know if a submission is written by a student (Thomson, 2012) revealed confusion between the roles of editor and reviewer, and no agreement between commenters about the editor’s role in ‘softening’ reviewers’ responses to people whom they knew weren’t experienced at receiving academic critique. Dawn learned these lessons in an easier way, by volunteering to check the responses to reviewers’ comments for a conference. Doing academic work such as attending conferences, assisting with journal editing, or the preparation of conference proceedings can also provide HDR students with an interesting insight in academic culture. These activities are often brokered by supervisors, but they are activities that students sometimes seek out and find for themselves – and learn more than they expected to.
Academic reviewing

I spent yesterday making sure that the second submissions of a bunch of conference papers had addressed the comments of the first reviewers.

They had, where those comments were reasonable. But I was surprised at how many of the reviewers thought that it was OK to spit quite venomously at the authors. Some of this will be the result of anonymity, of course. You can feel safe being quite rude to someone who doesn't know who you are.

But most interesting to me was the number of pieces in which a reviewer didn't actually read what the authors’ intentions were, but felt free to point out the perceived shortcomings anyway. One, writing on an interesting philosophical piece, said “I'm not clear what the authors actually DID... “ Well, dude, what they did was read, then think, then write. Maybe you could take a lesson from that, hmmm? Another reflective piece by two young academics (I know that they are both PhD students) on their first semester's teaching was criticised for not providing 'hard evidence' (of what? their reflections?) and not describing an LMS that they didn't use. Then there was the qualitative project, clearly explained in detail, which was criticised for a) not reporting its quantitative findings and b) not reporting on a method it didn't use.

It was illuminating. I will certainly be very well prepared for any inadequate reviews I get in the future and will take a leaf out of the book of the young academics, who replied that the reviewer was “irresponsible and unjustified” (emphasis in original). Of course all of the critiques have to be considered, but they don't all have to be addressed. Although I do understand that a mistaken reviewer might point to a weakness in an explanation.

Comment from Grainne

I've done a bit of this as well, and it's a real eye-opener. Justified criticism is great and of course you'd encourage constructive criticism, but you often find (and I say this in relation to other people's papers as I've had a relatively good experience with mine) that reviewers are often quite unbalanced in their comments and don't really come to grips with the author's concerns in their comments. They often seem to give comments which are really inconsistent with the theoretical orientation of the paper, as well - I remember getting back one paper which suggested that I use feminist theory. Which is well and good, and I understand those theories really well - but the fact is that it didn't happen to be necessary to a study which wasn't about gender issues and wasn't a study of women etc. I read some comments for other people's papers, and it actually seemed to me that the weaker papers didn't tend to attract much real criticism - but the papers who were making original points came under fire for all sorts of things!
In publication, balances of power between supervisors and students can be clearly seen in discussions around authorship – a high-stakes area of academic work. Although the main government funding bodies in Australia publish a comprehensive guide to research ethics (including authorship) (NHMRC&ARC, 2007) most students would not be aware of its existence, let alone its contents. This is an area in which the micro-political can make ‘doing the right thing’ very difficult: Cumming (2007) reports the case of Lisa in some detail (pp.45ff), and the difficulties of authorship for her as “a variety of operational dynamics that reflect negotiation, conflict and compromise” (p. 54). Morris (2008) discusses the question of ethical authorship in some detail, and suggests that students should be informed of the conventions in their discipline and of the appropriate national code of practice early in their candidature to avoid misunderstandings later – misunderstandings which are by no means always on the part of the student, but that she feels may blight the supervisory relationship. This is certainly an important way for students to claim agency in a matter that, in many disciplines, will be vital to their employment. Comments on internet sites and in the project blogs (as we have seen) indicate that publication and its implications (including authorship) are areas in which students lack clarity. This is not helped by confusion over who ‘owns’ student work – in the UK some universities insist that students sign away their copyright in their own work before submission (Newman, 2011).

Presentation

Of all the experiences a PhD candidate can have, presenting their work to an audience is often considered the most stressful. However, it is also considered an important way to develop academic and personal confidence, and most PhD programs in Australia have some kind of verbal presentation(s) of research work as a compulsory item that a student needs to tick off before they can submit their thesis for examination. Various roles of the seminar in PhD practice internationally are canvassed by Dahlen and Bjuremark (2012), They compare the US tradition (based in the German model), in which the seminar is considered a way for individual students to showcase themselves and their work, to the Swedish (and, they suggest, Anglo) tradition, in which the seminar acts to introduce the student to the notion of collective practice.

Forms of public presentation that are considered part of PhD process in various institutions in Australia include a formal presentation for confirmation of enrolment about one year into the degree; a regular contribution to an informal presentation series involving students and staff in a research unit; a more formal presentation at some kind of organised symposium or workshop, or a presentation at a national or international disciplinary conference – often brokered by the supervisor and funded, at least partly, by a university or AOU. From my discussions with academics, attendance at various conferences and seminar series would indicate that the pedagogical framing of Australian practice varies among disciplines, and also between institutions, being

62 Although the (crucial) paper she published was three pages, she was forced to accept 18 co-authors – she being the first author and another (well-known) researcher whom her supervisor had tipped off as to the importance of the phenomenon she had first observed – so he then also observed it – being second. The others had no part in her work.
something between encouraging students to ‘own’ their ideas by defending them in public, and giving the AOU a chance to both assess and interact with the new knowledge being produced in their midst. In a few cases it may be part of a formal assessment process, allowing students to progress beyond their first year, for example, or to proceed toward submission of their thesis.

Participant Blog: Dawn

My first PhD presentation was at a formal event where PhD students present to the faculty. You have to do this at least twice while you are enrolled. I was the third in a session of three presenters. I was surprised that there was no audience for the first two, except for each other and the chair. A few people wandered in for my presentation, but they gave me no feedback - no questions, no comments, nothing. I'm still not sure if this was because it was so dreadful that no-one knew what to say, so boring they had all switched off, or so high quality that no-one felt they could approach me. This experience was in the first few months of my enrolment. It was an eye-opener for me, as I had assumed that faculties (especially [discipline] faculties) would understand the need to support and nurture PhD candidates.

Comment by Kylie

I vividly remember my first conference that I had to travel to get to….all that way and I was rescheduled parallel to the keynote speaker and had 4 people listening, two of whom were from the conference organising committee and had to leave before the end to set up a stall.

But there may be worse things than being ignored. More disturbing was the experience of an award-winning young-adult novelist (Bateson, 2007) whose PhD presentation was completely disastrous.

Public blog: Catherine Bateson

RIP PhD

With a sense of failure and a fair degree of crankiness, I announce my withdrawal from academia. I attended the Colloquium - which went quite well but for some offensive, un-called for and aggressive comments from a Senior Lecturer. These were about my creative work. He had an agenda to push and he pushed beyond my limits.

I walked out with a shredded belief in the process, no happy confidence in what I was doing and growing anger that a single person had been allowed to dominate the process.
After some discussion she added this:

…no heads of departments or deans present, my supervisor was there. No one attempted to ameliorate comments at all. I sent around a robust email of complaint to each member of the colloquium and the Head of dept. I've actually been away for a week, but it took my supervisor a week to get back to me after the email. She quite possibly got my dates confused. I can't actually be bothered to complain further. I'm not that anxious for academic work and there are a few good reasons for me to give it up. But I'm nursing a bruised sense of self. Which I will get over with time.

She has never returned to PhD study.

The presentation of the key points of a thesis to a faculty audience approximately three months before submission was one of the recommendations of the 2009 Report of the PhD Working Party at the University of Sydney. However, I have not heard of any faculties who have incorporated this into their formal practice, with the exception of the College of the Arts where students must present and discuss their work at a two-hour meeting with a group of academics before they are allowed to submit their thesis for examination. As we have seen in the case of Catherine Bateson, this kind of event needs to be carefully managed by an AOU, with a clear agreement as to the purpose of the presentation, strong chairing, and good will on the part of attendees.

Further dangers of mandating public presentations of a work-in-progress are demonstrated by the story of Michael Noonan, a PhD student who presented on his film work at QUT in 2007. The complex story of the outcome of this short presentation, which two academics attending found offensive and took to the national press, is told in Appendix 6, but for Michael personally the fallout was devastating. Although he did complete his doctorate, and even won a university teaching award while he was doing it, in an email to me in 2010 he detailed the extreme lack of trust that now makes it difficult or impossible for him to function in academia, or even live in a city where he is known – where people “threw drinks on me in bars even though they hadn’t seen a single frame of footage” (Noonan, 2010 n.p.). It is hard to see how QUT could have done more to protect Noonan, but the price he paid for showing his controversial work was huge.

**Teaching and other academic work**

Sessional teaching by PhD students is a traditional way for students to prepare for a future career in academia. It may be well-supported, either locally or by the institution, or it may simply be a matter of handing on a work plan (possibly a rather vague one) and trusting the student in the classroom, or handing them a pile of essays to be marked and leaving them to get on with it. Similarly, casual work as research assistants (RAs) on academic projects other than the subject of one’s PhD is eagerly sought-after by PhD students as good experience. During the period in which Australian universities understood that they would be
penalised for ‘late’ submissions of doctoral theses (from 2004 until 2010 approximately), the pressure on students, torn between needing to supplement their income by tutoring and/or working as research assistants, and the need to make steady progress on their PhD, was high. As we have already seen, there are many posts on the blogs in the project demonstrating these pressures being keenly felt by full-time students.

“ “

22 January 2007

Comment from Grainne

Of course, I guess for me the real question is: how on earth (or is it possible to) gain a job without much teaching experience? That is the question...I'll try and get more experience before I finish the PhD, but it seems to be a situation of either-or in terms of finishing or getting experience!!

Comment from Kylie

22 January 2007

I feel exactly the same way, which is one of the reasons why when I finish this thesis I'll be going back into [my professional work] as well as trying to keep casual teaching work at Uni where I can. It really has been a question of either-or for me, there's no way I could have gotten this far in my research if I was teaching at the same time. I know plenty of people do it, but I really put a lot of energy into teaching...more than is warranted when it is just a casual job.

The following exchange discusses the importance of ‘downtime’ from PhD work, which the pressures of teaching or RA work may prevent, as it is ‘more of the same’.

26.October.2006

Participant blog: Grainne

Oh wretched marking, oh vexed work!

I am in the middle of marking 60 essays. Some of them don't even appear to be essays (since when does anyone shove massive graphs from Wikipedia in the middle of their essays? Since when do people reference Wikipedia?). The more essays you mark, the harder it is to approach the question with a fresh eye. And you really do become so much more aware of issues to do with marker bias. One of my officemates and I tutor in the same course, and the things she thinks are important are so different from the things I think are important - and then we're given these prescriptive criteria, whereby specific marks are actually allocated for things such as grammar! Fair enough - you have to be able to write. But it does make it all a bit more difficult.
And then I have to go and summarise some articles for someone. It's a great example of how, having attained something, you no longer really desire it.

I worked in administration at the university during all my undergraduate years, often for over 20 hours a week, and full-time during the summer. It was an interesting experience … yet at the time I longed to do research work for someone. In my innocence, I had a view of it as being incredibly engaging and exciting. I would sit there filing and watch one of my terribly snooty classmates wonder past on her way to the office of the professor she worked for … and I'd long to do something more exciting than answer endless enrolment questions … and angry phone calls.

You know something? Admin was actually quite nice. Okay, the filing wasn't exactly scintillating, but the environment was pleasant and human and we'd have a laugh. Summarising articles for people is not nice. Not especially high-level stuff, either! I know I'm literate, but that's all you need to be to do this stuff. I'm helping someone restructure one of her courses, which is fascinating, but golly I loathe summarising quantitative stuff!

Comment by Kylie

Having a job that is not in any way research related is very, very underrated. I completely understand what you miss about admin, because it's the same thing I miss about hospitality work. Working in the bar and managing the restaurant was sometimes frustrating, and I had to deal with a lot of idiots … but it exercised part of my brain that research does not. The tasks are smaller, more achievable. There are less major deadlines. If you stuff something up, you can fix it easily. And there are lots of people to talk to!

Sometimes I think that having a research job while you're doing a research degree (I did this in my first PhD year - it was horrible) is like being an aerobics instructor and then going for a run in your time off. Unless they actually do that...I wouldn't know, ha ha!

Comment from Grainne

… Do you think it's honestly better (I mean for morale, not the CV) to have a non-research-related job? I'm beginning to feel that way. I feel like I can't concentrate on my own research because I do so much writing for other people.

Comment from Esther

I think time away from the PhD which does tend to consume your life is really important. I drove the monorail for a while which apart from being the biggest hoot ever, allowed me to not think about anything except driving the monorail. And there was no lane changing. Pretty cool I have to say.

Other academic work, such as peer-reviewing (discussed above) may be easier for students to enjoy, as it is usually done in small bites. Conference
organisation and support work encompasses a skill set that is quite different from most academic work, and is something that many students find rewarding.

Examination

From my public PhD Blog

Writing about PhD examination

It's a bit weird, writing about how the PhD is examined and knowing that possibly the only people who will ever read what I'm writing (apart from my supervisors) will be the examiners. In *The Reflexive Thesis*, Malcolm Ashmore begins his thesis by quoting from the Regulations of his University on the form of an introduction to a thesis, then deconstructing that in the form of an address to his readers (i.e. the examiners):

The first task of my Introduction is to introduce my readers into my text: You're welcome. The text is now yours. The second task of your introduction is to consider whether what follows (preceding the first chapter of the thesis) is a contravention of the Regulation quoted above.

I don't think I'm that bold (or that confident!)

As we saw in Chapter 4, the process of examination in Australia is often theorised as a ‘black box’, with uncertain parameters. The Newcastle Project and the work of Kiley and Mullins (2002, 2004) has revealed much about how academics approach the task of examining a thesis, but have, generally shown that examiners feel they ‘know’ a good thesis ‘in their bones’; that their judgement boils down to “I know one when I see one” (Johnston, 2004a, p. 149).

The choice of examiners is perhaps the most important nexus in the examination process – even, it could be said, in the whole process of candidature. For most theses this choice will occur in a small and relatively closed community.63 Tinkler and Jackson (2000, 2004) discuss these ‘hidden issues’ in examination, such as relationships between examiners and/or examiner and supervisor, and the careful management that is necessary to avoid ‘cosy’ situations. Many Australian theses are examined by at least one person outside the country, in an attempt to ‘widen the pool’. Several informants talked about their care in selecting the ‘right’ examiners; the difficulties caused by the appointment of an ‘inappropriate’ examiner and a subsequent left-of-field report is discussed in detail by Johnston (2004). In this situation Morley’s “complex micropolitical factors” (2004, p 92) can play out in the examination process in sometimes quite local ways.

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63 This was remarked on as early as 1996 by Kamler and Threadgold (1996).
Susan, Experienced supervisor and examiner, Health

I recently had a situation in which I was Associate Supervisor. The thesis had come back, and the experienced examiners had recommended pass with minor amendments, while the inexperienced examiner had detailed four pages of errors that ‘had’ to be corrected, some of which weren’t in fact wrong. The main supervisor, very inexperienced, was in a state and making long lists of things for the student to do. I had to intervene diplomatically, and convince him that it wasn’t necessary for the student to do everything - that between the three of us [two supervisors and the student] we could sort out what was reasonable for the student to do. All this without anyone losing face.

The release of the thesis into the hands of the institution can be quite a wrench for the candidate. One key informant told me that her submitted thesis copies had been mislaid by a university office after submission, and had sat on a shelf for nine months before she insisted on its being tracked down.

20 November 2009

Personal email: Esther

Examination reflections: Limbo!

As I worked toward submission of the thesis, I had reasoned with myself that once it was down on paper, had been bound (at least in temporary form) and sent off to the examiners for marking, there was not a lot that I could do but wait for it to return. It was out of my hands - no point in now worrying about what I could have done better, changed, emphasised or restructured. Would I have the facility to be able to make any of the changes that might have been? No. Would those changes have made a substantial difference to the timbre of the work? I suspect not. Was I happy overall with the document I had just submitted? You bet.

…

Forgetting about something that has been a part of you for six year though, is easier said than done, and, while I replaced my disquiet about putting the results of six years worth of work in someone else’s hands with much more pleasurable activities, the promise of the examiner’s reports (and my research) coming back was a constant presence in the back of my mind.

…

I think that up to the two and a half month mark, I had given myself permission to do whatever I wanted with my time, and trusted that the “university” would do the right thing in terms of getting the examiner’s reports back. But when the three month mark sailed by, and the university still
couldn’t get the third examiner to return her report or hard copy of the thesis, and when people would ask me “So, has the doctorate been awarded yet?” and I still had to answer them “Not quite”, I began to feel like I was in an intellectual limbo – not quite a student, not quite a doctor.

...  

Then of course, my emotional pendulum swung the other way. Clearly, the third examiners’ report hadn’t come in because there was a problem with the thesis. ... I returned to feeling as I did when I was having difficulties with my primary supervisor. Small and insignificant. Undermined and unintelligent. Clearly stupid. That’s why the examiner was taking so long. She had so much to criticise. And although I realised (at least intellectually) that she would be criticising my work, not me personally, this distinction is hard to see when you have convinced yourself that the work is of an appalling standard.

At about four months after handing the document in, I had some fairly savage nightmares with me being the centre of professional and personal ridicule at conference presentations. I have never had a problem presenting my work, but doubt was creeping in. ...My partner was a bit worried now too as she too could see my anxiety rising. She would calm me down by making excuses as to why the examiner hadn’t returned her report – “Clearly overworked and underpaid”, “Maybe the faculty has burnt down”, “They’re probably on annual leave”, and temporarily the fug lifted. She made me laugh and this was really important as I reconnected a little with my fun side. We had people over for lunches, dinners, afternoon teas. I experimented again in the kitchen – I love to cook – and tried to settle myself down.

...  

During my waking hours, I realised that getting my doctorate wasn’t actually within my scope of control. This, however, was the problem. This limbo where I didn’t have any power over what was happening was an incredibly destabilising time.

And so the wait for the examiner’s reports to come in can be viewed as having its ups and downs. Of immense relief that the work is finally out of your hands, but some guilt that you would let it go so easily. Of incredible freedom from having to think about the thesis, but being bound by concerns about the goodness of the work and the marked anxiety that this can cause because you don’t have it at your disposal to be able to change it any more.

Having been (inappropriately) informed by an administrator in the department that her thesis had been at last returned from the examiners, Esther felt “Pure and absolute relief. Thrilled. Suddenly tired.” She was not sent the examiners’ reports prior to meeting her supervisors – she was sent a précis made by her primary supervisor – and consequently felt blindsided when they met.
Post examination reflections

Monday’s meeting was very different to what I had anticipated. As I waited for my primary supervisor to return to her office, my secondary supervisor walked up the corridor and we proceeded to chat. She had also been invited to the meeting – a fact that I was completely unaware of. This wasn’t going to be a “Let’s tinker with little sections of the document and you can look at the examiner’s reports more closely when you get some time” type of meeting. This was going to be more like the meetings that all three of us had had throughout my candidature. The ones where I had done quite a lot of preparation work to ensure that I was saying intelligent things and making sensible comment about the topic at hand. The ones that I had digitally recorded, transcribed and blogged about soon after they happened. My heart sank, not because my secondary supervisor was there. On the contrary, I was hugely grateful for her time and insights into my work, and loved the thought of having her comment on the examiner’s reports. Rather, my heart sank because I had been forced into the uncomfortable position by my primary supervisor of being unprepared for a meeting which I should have been really excited about and totally engrossed in. Suddenly, I felt incredibly tired.

I was given all three reports to look briefly at, at the beginning of the meeting. I had brought a gift for my primary supervisor … and so gave this to her as a way of stalling the meeting while I tried to speed read the examiners’ reports. … I didn’t have a lot to say because I hadn’t had the opportunity to pore over the reports as I would have if I had known this was the type of meeting it was going to be. I was supremely ticked off, because I felt I had been sideswiped, undermined and made to look stupid. I certainly felt stupid. I knew I was going to remember this day not as one of “How am I going to make this document better and ready for final and printable submission”, but one of “What the hell happened?”. I was, and still am, pretty angry at how it played out and am saddened that the closing period of my PhD candidature had been marked by feelings of supreme irritation and frustration. I have vowed to myself that when I come to supervise research students of my own, that I will not do as has been done to me. I will not allow this cycle to continue in my own academic practice.

Debra emailed me after her degree had been awarded with the story of how the results of one examiner’s report had been presented to her. (One other examiner had recommended that her degree be conferred without further change and that her thesis should be put forward for an international award; the third had said only that he had found five typos.) She understood that her supervisor was working with her in order to answer the questions of one examiner, but still felt resentful that it was necessary as she thought his judgement was inadequate.
23 October 2010

Personal email: Debra

My Supervisor was allowed to know who the anonymous marker was and she could paraphrase his comments to me. We scheduled a meeting and she was allowed to share with me the gist of this anonymous examiner’s feedback. We both didn’t understand a few of his comments because they were noticeably inaccurate – as if he hadn’t really read my thesis either. I can’t remember the specific details, but I recall wishing that I could have a discussion with this anonymous marker because his feedback did not make sense – to the point where I believed he skimmed over chapters and missed much of the most pertinent information in doing so. This examiner also stated in his comments (that my Supervisor was explaining to me in her own words) that he believed Australian theses were too long.

Happily, for some candidates the process of return of examiners’ reports and notification from the University can be almost anti-climactic.

22 January 2008

Public blog: Jim Cummings

Obtaining examiners' reports

I received a letter from the ANU on Friday advising that my PhD has been approved. The reports of three examiners were enclosed, each recommending that the thesis be accepted without amendment—along with a few comments and suggestions. So I guess it’s a case of mission accomplished! … Looking back, I have learned a great deal—as much about myself as my research topic—but have also become increasingly aware of how much I don’t know.

Summary

There is much to learn in the long process of PhD candidature: how to learn in an unstructured environment, how to participate in the supervisory relationship, how to participate in the social and working relationships that constitute their AOU, how to position ourselves so that we will have an advantage in the employment market once we complete our degree. Students may find it difficult to prioritise their work. They are also often confused about how and when they can or should claim agency or take action; many are uncertain of boundaries and of their own status. Without an orientation to the process of doing a PhD that moves beyond instrumental provision and regulatory frameworks many flounder, uncertain of where to look for help. There is little in Australia that resembles a program of study for students to follow; their learning is largely unplanned and accidental. The conceptual framing of this chapter has been very local: Lee’s Level A, which is the nuts and bolts of any education: the pedagogical exchange between participants.
We have seen that, for many students, there is confusion. They are not sure what they should achieve, sometimes in their PhD work, but perhaps more often in publication, presentation, teaching and other academic work. There are many levels of orientation that students might find helpful: an introduction to the history and nature of the PhD; guides to the mores of the institution in which they are enrolled and to their discipline and AOU. Although most are reasonably well informed about the actual work they will do – most AOUs have specific milestones for the first year at least – there is a definite lack in students’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities and the expectations of them as trainee researchers. A lack of boundaries or changes in the supervisory relationship may further add to the feelings of powerlessness that uncertainty engenders.

The process of examination is perhaps the most mysterious part of PhD enrolment in Australia. Micropolitical factors can become very powerful in this process, in which the person of the student moves from the liminal to the almost invisible.
Chapter 6 – Some conclusions: Effective pedagogy in the liminal space

I stated in my introduction that my intention was to reveal micropolitical factors and the microcontexts of candidature in an AOU in the context of macropolitics of government and institutions. I have done this by using a complex, three-dimensional curriculum model to structure this thesis, and data from an ethnographically-informed study of a university environment to show how the seemingly rational discourses produced by government and institutions play out in the messiness and uncertainty that are actually experienced by students. The accounts of students, captured over more than a year of real time, supplemented by interviews with key informants from the staff of the University and a careful reading of University documentation concerning the PhD, have given me a window into the lived experience of undertaking the degree, within a framework of published theory, institutional mores and documentation and national policy.

In her discussion of PhD curriculum, Lee (Hopwood et al., 2010) suggests that, when thinking about future developments, it is important to consider

1. The probable: where current process will lead
2. The possible: extrapolation from current circumstances
3. The desirable: what we might dream of (need to think about global and local)

I have tried to weave these three considerations into this conclusion, with an exception: I have not extended the discussion to the global and have, in general, specifically excluded detailed discussion of developments for the PhD outside Australia. I will, however, comment in passing that there seems to be a never-ending thread of articles in overseas publications on the ‘oversupply’ of PhD graduates, the future of the PhD and the value of a PhD. Kelly and Brailsford (2011) comment that “There is something of an ‘industry’ of research into the US doctorate” (p. 369), and I have a large file of (digital) clippings on the subject from publications such as The Chronicle, The New York Times and the Times Higher Education Supplement. The common theme in these articles (particularly from the US) is that there is no longer any point in enrolling PhD students, as there are no jobs for them to step into upon graduation. An alternative discourse, typified by a blog post by the then president of the Modern Languages Association, (Berman, 2011) is that the degree as it stands is not fitting graduates for academic work and thus must be reformed. I think there is at least one major difference between students graduating with PhDs from US and Australian universities: life experience. Although US doctoral graduates take longer on average to complete their degrees – Berman (2011) quotes the 2009 Survey of Earned Doctorates as giving an average time for a humanities degree at nearly nine years – they probably are no older than the average of PhD graduates of a 3.5-4 year PhD program in Australia. Australian students, as we have seen, are increasingly more likely to have come to their degree from full-time work, and thus have a broader notion of what work they could undertake when they have graduated. Thus the angst about the availability of academic work, while it exists in Australia, does not seem to be at the same level as it is in the US. There is not the same focus on the degree in the press in Australia.
either; although feature sections of the daily press will often focus on a specific PhD project, there is rarely an article about the future or purpose of the degree.65

One thing that has been both difficult for this project and a pleasure to me has been the amount of change that has taken place in the administration of the PhD at Sydney since I enrolled as a part-time student in the second semester of 2005, and also the increasing focus on the student experience in the thinking, research and publication that is being undertaken on the PhD in Australia. While this has caused me frustration – changes in administration of the PhD are being put in place at Sydney even as I write these words – there is no doubt that the experience of doing a PhD at Sydney is better for the changes that have occurred at both the level of the institutions and its AOU. Unfortunately, this change is generally undertheorised, and positive effects are often somewhat accidental. On the national scale, a team of researchers at the University of Newcastle (Australia) have been collecting data for a major study of PhD students (in which I have been a participant).

Limitations of this study

This study was very small in scope: it was undertaken at only one institution, and involved a small number of people: 8 students (including myself) and 11 staff. All the students were working in the social sciences and/or using social-sciences methodologies. The 11 staff members included one non-academic and 9 academics with responsibility for the conduct of the PhD. They represented the broad disciplinary groupings of humanities, social science, science, applied science, fine arts and health. It was not possible to increase the number of student bloggers or to broaden their disciplinary bases; my efforts to do this were detailed in Chapter 2. My requests to interview more people in the central administration were either not successful or, when we met, they asked not to be recorded or quoted.

The project was undertaken and the thesis was written during a period of very great change in the University, with considerable uncertainty and unrest amongst its staff due to restructuring of the University’s financial arrangements. These included a shift in responsibilities for some work to the centre, and a devolution of other responsibilities to the faculties (including the responsibility for orientation of PhD students). There was much uncertainty and some ill-fated attempts at change at the institutional level detailed elsewhere, and this general atmosphere has meant that it has often been difficult to pin down just how the University views its responsibilities towards its PhD students.

I regret that I was not able to do more comparative work between the PhD experience in Australia and other countries. Although there was a plethora of

64 The Australian Financial Review featured my project on 8 October 2006 (Cervini). Despite my spending more than an hour with their photographer, they choose to illustrate the article with an anonymous young woman at a keyboard. I may have been too mature for their purpose.

65 Having said that, there has been one in the press recently. ABC radio did a short item on 15 January entitled “PhD students struggle to find jobs”, covering a report commissioned by the Australian Council of Learned Academies.
PhD blogs when I began my study, many of the writers graduated or stopped writing their blogs. I was also reluctant to add more data about people working in often quite different situations, and eventually decided to focus on the local experience and try to say something useful about that. I have tried to incorporate information about other PhD regimens where it seemed relevant.

Finally, as I alluded to in Chapter 2, I had technical issues in administering the blogs that formed the major part of the data for this study. Apart from a slow start and difficulties for participants logging in, there was a major software crash about a year after the study started. This did not affect my data, which was well backed up. However, I then lost access to the original blog sites due to a lack of communication in the faculty where they were held. These are incidents that we have come to expect in the digital age, but they were disappointing and prevented me analysing the ways that participants had decorated their digital writing spaces.

Research questions

Having begun this thesis by positioning myself as an experienced thesis writer, administrative manager and blogger, I now ask myself what I learned in the process of doing my research and reporting it in this thesis. The ordering of my research questions wasn’t crucial to my thinking; I am here dealing with them in a reverse of the order I listed them in the introduction to the thesis, as that enables me to begin with my method and methodological issues, and finish with the experience of students at the University of Sydney. But before I do that, I’d like to share a personal insight I had while I was writing this thesis about my own development as a researcher.

Because such a long time elapsed between the blogs finishing (at the end of 2007) and my serious coding work, which began at the end of 2010, I have both the privilege and difficulty of knowing what happened to most of the participants – not just during the period in which they were writing in the blogs, but in the elapsed years. (These are detailed at the end of this chapter.) And I also have sufficient distance to see character traits that I didn’t notice in the process of keeping the blogs. I am irritated at some blog entries, and even more at the responses – some of which, even my own, now seem hopelessly flippant or inadequate. This was written after the sudden death of Grainne’s close relative in circumstances that meant that the funeral was long-delayed.

Post in participant blog: Grainne

Vale

Well, the ashes were interred yesterday. I found a couple of old pictures of [close relative] and I thought I’d stick one here because it’s so sweet. It was taken in [town] sometime in the late [decade].

Isn't it lovely? My [relative] is the youngest one and the others are [other relatives]. There is something really poignant about old photos and somehow
archetypal. [Other close relatives] and I all released balloons in the 6 colours of the rainbow yesterday after we buried the ashes (or I should say I, because the others thought it was too macabre to touch).

Bye, [Name]

Comment by Dawn

24 Dec 2006

That is a very sweet photo. So poignant, photos of children when you know what's going to happen to them.

I understand more fully now the difference between coding the blog contents - to make a narrative of what was happening then, and to make meaning from it – and reading and responding to the blog entries at the time they were written.

Research question 3: To what extent can PhD candidates be sustained in their development as researchers through the use of social media?

How cutting edge this project was when I began – and how ordinary it seems now! Originally, this research question was: ‘To what extent can PhD candidates be sustained in their development as researchers through the use of blogging?’ Although the use of blogging to collect real-time data was considered experimental in 2005 (and the University Ethics Committee at the time was a little confounded by it), there are now textbooks written on how to collect and analyse such data (Hine, 2005; Markham & Baym, 2009; Walker Rettberg, 2008). Although I mentioned that communitas could be identified globally in my Introduction, this has become a much more obvious point: social media are now an important part of the PhD experience. When I began this project, blogging was a fairly new way for people to communicate, but this question has been overtaken by the growth in social media, and has become: ‘To what extent can PhD candidates be sustained in their development as researchers through the use of social media?’

Students often demonstrate a need to mix socially with other students, and this need that students have for communitas is manifest across disciplines. Part-time students, especially, say they need to be provided with opportunities to meet other students, and need to plan their time to take advantage of these opportunities without feeling this is a waste of time. Although I am a mature and extremely independent learner who had already completed two theses, I felt isolated in my PhD study until I became involved with a research group that effectively became my AOU. But I have found much more companionship and a sense of fellow-feeling though blogs and twitter than I could have hoped to find on the campus in the limited time I was free to look for it. I have joined all the PhD students who, released from the limits of geography and disciplinary silos, have taken their need for communitas online.

As well as personal and institutional facebook pages and thousands of students blogging their PhDs, a number of text-based online support sites for PhD students have developed, such as Thesiswhisperer, PhD2Published, Patter and
PhD Life. Twitter has a very active hashtag #phdchat, which students around the world use to connect with and learn from each other. At least three live PhD chats are held around the world on twitter (in different time zones) every week. None of these could have been imagined when I began this project. Many YouTube commentaries and parodies have been made about PhD candidature, for example “Caught in a bad project” (The Zheng Lab, 2010) which had over 4 million viewings and nearly 19,000 ‘likes’ at March 2013. There are the international competitions “Dance your thesis” (in which students make a video of a dance that demonstrates their thesis, all of which are available on YouTube) and “Three-minute Thesis” (in which students have three minutes and one projected image to explain their thesis to an audience). There is now a feature film about the characters from PhD Comics, which has shown in universities around the world to packed houses.

There is a downside to this, alluded to in Chapter 5: students are bombarded with information and advice, and sometimes find it difficult to discern what is useful to them in their individual situation. For example, a student in Australia, feeling pressured to complete their degree in 3.5 years, will encounter US students discussing their onerous teaching commitments – often part of their scholarship requirements, and also often blamed for the long enrolment times of US students. Students in science, where publication with supervisors is usual, may be confronted to read that students in humanities often publish alone. When these encounters occur online, it may be difficult for students to work out where their own pathway through the degree fits. In the absence of clear guidance from their institution or supervisor, they may become stressed and anxious.

My method of asking a group of willing students to blog their PhD experience, and to read and comment on each other’s entries, is an original contribution of this thesis. As I detail above, there were limits and problems with this method; the technical issues I detailed in Chapter 2 are one example that caused me a lot of frustration. I was also disappointed that the students I was able to recruit were all relatively young and female, and were nearly all qualitative researchers using social science methods. It meant that they were able to support each other in quite detailed ways, but I would have been happy to have included a wider range of methodologies and life experience represented.

Research question 2: What is said about the PhD in Australia?

The answer to my next question: ‘What is said about the PhD in Australia?’ has been threaded through this whole thesis. I have brought together the many voices and discourses, interest groups and commentators, and set their views against each other. I have added the voices of students, who affirm that doing a PhD is a hard, engaging, satisfying, frustrating, stressful, exhilarating, depressing and challenging experience. Most of us are not keen to repeat it; I am horrified that the American feminist theologian Mary Daly completed no less than three doctorates during her life. However, one of my academic informants said “PhD is not meant to be an endurance trial - you’re not meant to leave so

66 For example, as I was preparing to write this chapter, I was able to consider the timely advice of Pat Thomson a month before in a two-part blog post on how to write a conclusion (Thomson, 2012).
physically emotionally and intellectually bereft that you’ll never want to do it again.” (Polly, Faculty-level administrator, Health) I refrained from asking her if she would like to do hers again.

The lack of agency accorded to students in the academic literature, coupled with a lack of pedagogical theorising that acknowledges the reality of PhD study, has left that literature very one-sided. As we have seen, the academic literature on doctoral study has been overwhelmingly concerned with and directed at supervisors and administrators of doctoral students, with another genre – the skills-based self-help manuals discussed by Kamler and Thomson (2006, p. 6ff) – being, if you like, the ‘student half’ of the equation. More recently, online support sites are much more directed at students, although there are a small (but growing) number of sites directed at Early Career Researchers and Supervisors. It might seem unlikely that students would read or contribute to academic literature on PhD experience, but I believe that some of them encounter the literature already, and that many more would if it were pointed out to them. One of my participants pointed out to us “Forged in Fire” (Lee & Williams, 1999), and participants often expressed interest in what I was reading for my PhD. I can’t help wondering whether at least some students might not benefit from a discussion of the usefulness of the literature on supervision, given that they are on the receiving end of its recommendations. (Grant, 2005a)

In late 2011, the Federal Government announced the establishment of a new centre for doctoral training in Mathematics within and between the ATN universities. These centres are based on those in the UK, funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, a government funding body. The information that accompanied the launch claimed “Cohorts of doctoral students will be created with capabilities that are generally not currently acquired during Australian PhD candidature.” ("New centre to build next generation of industry-engaged researchers," 2011) This will be achieved through students working on problems generated by industry to meet its needs. A student “may be a present employee of the company identified for upgrading of technical and managerial skills”, and students would “spend a significant amount of time working at the company site of the industry partner” (Nowakowski, 2011)

As we have seen, the possibilities for confusion and liminality in this kind of arrangement are multiple. The issues of the direction that research may take (which are not always able to be predicted), along with ownership of the emerging knowledge and intellectual property, are complex, and may result in students being disempowered. On the other hand, students will be learning to work in a complex industrial system (if they are not already working in this system, in which case they may learn other skills), and this may be the most appropriate way for them to do this. However, it would be wise for universities participating in these schemes (and there is evidence that the government envisages them as expanding) to keep in mind the issues discussed in Chapter 3 concerning the problems that have arisen between the cultures of academia and industry in the APA(I) and CRC schemes, and the issues for student identity already discussed.
There are signs that this intense focus on the supervisory relationship as the primary pedagogical instrument of PhD learning is lessening (although this may be a mixed blessing if poorly-conceptualised skills-based practices are taking its place). While pointing out that most writing about the PhD, at all levels, continues to conceptualise the ‘learning’ in the PhD as happening primarily between supervisor and student, Lee and Green (2009), Boud and Lee (2005) and Cumming (2007) all broaden their focus to consider pedagogical aspects to the PhD that are not part of the supervisory relationship. They talk of students learning from each other, from staff (not necessarily academic) that they encounter in the course of the study, and from institutions (not necessarily academic) that they work in. Usefully, Mewburn (2011) thinks about candidature as an ‘assemblage’ carried out by both the supervisor and the student.

All these theories of supervision are based in a strong pedagogical framing that takes account of student agency. It is important and necessary for experienced supervisors to research, think and try to write about supervision; if they don’t, training for new supervisors might continue to be less than adequately theorised and become just another ‘skill’ that academics need to acquire. Halse and Malfroy (2010) present a nuanced and yet practical addition to the literature, and Manathunga, Pitt and Critchely (2009), having surveyed students on CRC scholarships, call for more feedback from students into the quality of their experience. I hope that in the future there will be more honest contributions from its liminal subjects – students or newly-minted doctors – otherwise the discussions about supervision will continue to be one-sided and will never become a useful debate on the role of supervision in candidature.

Research Question 1: What and how do students learn while undertaking a PhD at the University of Sydney?

My last research question has been both the easiest and the most difficult to answer: ‘What and how do students learn while undertaking a PhD at the University of Sydney?’ PhD learning occurs in the space that encompasses the illusion of student autonomy (Johnson, Lee and Green, 2000), the reality of supervisory oversight, and, I would add, institutional managerialism. I have written at some length throughout this thesis about the history of the management of the PhD at the University. As the University now has nearly 5,000 enrolled PhD students (around 10% of all PhD students in Australia), I think it is less than ideal that there is no strong academic leadership dedicated to HDR matters in the central administration from a person who is both experienced and knowledgeable. The lack of academic leadership in this area since the closure of the office of Dean of Graduate Studies has left a vacuum that has been filled by policy development and insufficiently theorised managerial solutions. In the last two years there has been a stream of committee reports. Only one of these appears to have been adopted: training needs analysis for new students (Media Office, 2012). Two cohorts of students have now completed this analysis, but it is still unclear how their needs will be met.

Throughout this thesis I have been concerned with collecting together “thin conceptualisations” of the PhD (Lee & Boud, 2009, p9), and fleshing them out.
with lived student experience. These conceptualisations are often related to a view of the PhD as only the project, or only the thesis, or only a process to be managed. However, I found that some of the conceptualisations weren’t as thin as they first seemed – although virtually all of them lacked the dimension of consideration of student experience. The demographics of the PhD cohort was an example of long-held assumptions – on which much theory and many policy decision about PhD candidatures has been based – being shown to be false while I was writing this thesis. As a result of new information about the background of the 50,000 people presently engaged in PhD study in Australia, the issue of skills training within the PhD, which has been taken up as a mantra in many institutions and in government documentation, has been shown to have rich and complex implications far beyond what administrators might be considering (for example Barnacle, 2004, 2005; Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2011; Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). The same applies to institutional thinking about pathways to PhD, about how PhD students learn, and about why they chose to engage in their long and difficult journey; much new work could now be done with the new knowledge about who is in the PhD cohort.

Attempts to include student voices in planning and writing about the PhD to date are usually tokenism (eg the involvement of a single representative of a student advocacy body on a decision-making committee.) Academics and administrators may want to claim that students’ opinions on such matters as resource provision or development of skills training are unimportant, because they ‘don’t understand the bigger picture’. In reality, very few people will understand the big picture of how the PhD operates in an institution – there always be complexities around disciplinarity, scarce resources and funding, pedagogy and hierarchical management arrangements.

Universities need to maximise their return on federal funds, and increase their chances of getting more in the future; it is in their interests to ensure that any support given to supervisors or requirements to report HDR student progress is meeting the needs of both staff and students – not simply seen as adding a layer of bureaucratic obfuscation to an already unclear situation. The measures that the federal government uses to determine the funding (publications, research grants and completions of HDR students, as discussed in Chapter 3) could be transparently and openly discussed with both students and staff, so that the stakes are clear to everyone. There might then be a chance of supervisors and students entering into a fruitful working relationship based in a clear understanding of what will be of greatest benefit to each individual, and to their institution. Progress reviews could provide an opportunity for students to publicly display their increasing prowess as scholars, as well as meeting the institutional need to oversee the supervisory relationship. Students might understand that they are part of something bigger than just their supervisory grouping, and supervisors might feel free to demand support that actually helped them to improve their supervision – whether that be workload points, better budgets for equipment or support when searching for funding for equipment, ongoing discussion with more experienced supervisors, or better support for students in such areas as writing support or crisis counselling.
Change is something that happens slowly in Universities, and it must be introduced and managed strategically if it is to penetrate to the level of the AUO, let alone to individual academics. I know from my day job that what may seem like sudden changes are inevitably the result of months or years of planning, out of sight of students and even of most staff. Researchers in the area of doctoral study will almost never know whether institutions have considered their findings when they review PhD process and procedure. If changes do accord with findings in the literature, it may be accidental; as one of my informants commented “Doctoral pedagogy is invisible: people don’t even realise the literature exists” (Wendy, SocSci, Theorist/advisor). For example, the report of the 2009 Working Party to review the PhD at Sydney did not cite even one of the researchers cited in this thesis. Its only recommendation regarding examination (unsupported by any evidence) was that adding the requirement for an oral presentation some three months before submission might cut down the number of ‘revise-and-resubmit’ reports received, and thus create less work for the PhD Awards Subcommittee. There are excellent pedagogical reasons that such a change might benefit students; they were never given, making the recommendation managerial in its basis rather than pedagogical, and unconvincing to the majority of staff. It was never widely applied in the institution.

From early in 2010 I began hearing discussions about the introduction of compulsory coursework for the PhD at Sydney. As late as July of 2011 the Director of Academic Affairs stated at a public meeting that the PhD at Sydney would look more like the PhD in the US in future – a statement that I found puzzling, given the recent report that attrition rates in US PhD programs may be as high as 50% and that 45% of those who enrol and commence with a minimum of two years of coursework have not completed their dissertation after 7 years.67. By late in 2011 it seemed clear that coursework would not be introduced across the institution – several AOUs simply refused to consider it, although at least two that I know of have now mandated some (Masters level) coursework units as part of the PhD.68. I am not aware that any AOUs are planning PhD-level coursework.

Casual conversations with academics at the University reveal a high level of frustration that the present provision of targeted skills training, such as advanced statistics and other methods courses and support for writing (both for thesis and for publication), is offered to HDR students in some faculties at a high level, but is not available to students across faculties as there is no mechanism to discuss the workload issues that it raises. With the exception of ‘remedial’ writing support (as discussed in Chapter 5), centrally-provided skills training for HDR students is not focused on research or technical skills, but rather on skills such as how to prepare for job interviews, ‘Resume Rescue’, and

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67 A recent report from the US Commission on Graduate Education is now claiming that a doctoral degree program should be presented to students as at least a seven-year commitment (Wendler et al., 2010).
68 The AQF mandates that no more than one-third of the time (volume) of a PhD should be coursework, with two-thirds being devoted to research. It also requires that any coursework offered as part of a PhD (level 10), unless remedial, should be at a higher level than Masters (level 9).
one called, puzzlingly, ‘How to make the most of your brain’. There is no evidence of any pedagogically-based planning for these so-called ‘generic’ skills courses.

**Future directions for research**

There is scope for much more work on the student PhD experience, work that is not focused on efficiency, compliance or other instrumentalist notions. One basis for this work could be the dimensions of the curriculum that this thesis has been based on. A project asking Early Career Researchers (ECRs) now employed at an institution other than where they did their PhD to reflect on their experience now they have seen another system at work would be a useful companion piece to this study.

Interviews with senior academics with responsibility for PhD matters at different universities, investigating their pedagogical approaches and the problems they see for students in their institutions, would be revealing. A comparative study on the processes for PhD progress between different institutions, perhaps building on the work carried out at RMIT by Mewburn, Tokareva, Cuthbert, Sinclair and Barnacle (forthcoming), would extend our understanding of managerialist approaches to HDR work, and reveal ways to understand and measure real success in PhD work.

A focus on the experience of older professionals in their management of their own PhD process in Australia, where this is such a large part of the cohort, could prove informative, as would comparative studies of the success and satisfaction of students on various ‘pathways’ or at differently managed institutions. Much work, also, could be done on how supervisors conceptualise, plan, and carry out their supervision work.

**What could I recommend?**

Returning the focus to PhD candidature, I have discerned three major things that I believe are key to how students experience their PhD, and all are related to student expectations. The first of these, clearly related to the liminal status of PhD students, is something that could be readily addressed by institutions and AOU:s: there are many examples in my data (and in this thesis) of not knowing ‘the rules’ – or even if there are any rules – in a particular situation. The experiences reported in Chapter 5 are often the result of this lack of clear information, which may be available on a University website, but, as we have seen, is often not easy to locate. It is naïve to suggest that students should always turn to their supervisors: their supervisors may not know, may give wrong information, or it may be that the student needs assistance about a problem with their supervisor. Orientation seminars that supply information about the nature of the PhD, AOU and disciplinary mores, AOU and institutional frameworks, ethics of research (including authorship) and funding, backed up with easily accessible textual material, would improve the understanding of students, making them feel part of something outside their
own project or workgroup, and increasing their sense of their own agency. These seminars could, of course, be made available online, although I believe that most students (especially part-time or older students) benefit from at least a few sessions face-to-face.

The second thing that students seem to need is related to the first: they need to have a sense of the boundaries of their supervisory relationship. If these are clearly established by discussion at the beginning of the relationship, students will be better able to understand their role in the relationship, and in managing their own contribution to it. Again, Chapter 5 revealed that these boundaries are not always clear, and in fact, as Grant (2005) shows, they will be different for every supervisory dyad. We saw, in Chapter 5, how Debra reported ‘managing’ a supervisory relationship to suit her needs, but I doubt many students understand themselves to be managing the relationship in the way that she did.

Slow return of drafts is one of the commonest complaints of PhD students. The supervisor who says “I have five PhD students, so I need to balance my workload. Please don’t send me big documents without warning; you may not get them back for a couple of months” is setting up the boundaries for a more professional working relationship than the supervisor who simply doesn’t answer increasingly frantic emails in an attempt to ‘retrain’ the student. Related to this, students will work better if there is both stability and engagement in their supervision arrangements. We have seen in Chapter 5 the effect that lack of engagement, absence or a sudden change in supervision can have on even the most independent PhD student. Widening how we understand the pedagogy of PhD to operate and increasing our understanding of how students learn during their candidature does not mean that the supervisory relationship will become less important to students. In the research training paradigm that exists in Australia, supervision is likely to remain a central part of PhD pedagogy, so supervisors and AOU’s should always manage any necessary change in this relationship carefully. Additionally, as may seem obvious, any change in supervisory arrangements needs to begin with new boundaries being negotiated.

Thirdly, I believe that students have a more satisfying PhD experience if they think outside the supervisory relationship and take risks with their own learning. This is a complex suggestion: it involves questions of agency and how it is understood and exercised by the student, by the supervisor and by the AOU. It is also tied into questions of power imbalances in the supervisory relationship as they are experienced by students. Some students (not in my project) report being afraid to get on the wrong side of their supervisor; they understand (rightly or wrongly) that s/he is a person who can control the career they hope to establish once they have their doctorate. (These fears are often displayed in online forums.) These students assign a lot of power to their supervisor, more perhaps than is deserved. Students who are very invested in their supervisory relationship may not consider how power is being exercised in the AOU in ways that could affect their candidature: one academic I spoke to told me of such a

---

I am aware that some institutions have done more work in this area than others (e.g. RMIT, ANU, and the University of Auckland, which holds compulsory two-weekend introduction to PhD study). My experience of the lack of these provisions at my institution is well-documented here.
situation that arose in his own PhD, in which staff of an AOU considered his project to be moving beyond disciplinary boundaries, and, in the temporary absence of his supervisor, attempted to have his scholarship rescinded. Active dissemination of policies, the presence of an active student community, and supervisors who are clear about their relative importance in a student’s candidature are all factors that will increase the chances for students of happy accidents in their learning.

Initiatives such as those of Claire Aitchison at the University of Western Sydney discussed in Chapter 4, in which students practice writing in peer groups, are empowering and increase students’ sense of their agency. These are not situations in which students are told how something is done; they are learning together how much they already know and can judge how much they have to learn. These could be more use than the present classes built on a deficit model. Workshops on methods – essentially student-led discussions on a set reading – such as those I have experienced the HDR students at the CoCo research unit at the University of Sydney – could be more widely promoted across the institution as an alternative to putting PhD students into units of study on research methods intended for Masters students. AOU’s could provide workshops for students who are writing their ethics proposals, with guidance from experienced academics and informal teaching about what Ethics Approvals are and why we need them – most of what I know about this has been learned from reviewing software for the University in my day job. Much of the ethos around PhD students is presently about ‘provision’, but what students might want is not always what is being provided, because provision is always considered from the point of view of the institution and does not always consider the students to be independent adults..

Rereading the blogs again and again three years after they were written, I began to think that the most useful thing that students learn while doing a PhD is self-management, including how much procrastination is useful and necessary, and how much driving is too much to get something done. Without wishing in any way to limit the work of the PhD to ‘project management’ – a job I have done for many years in real life and the skills of which are only a small, arguably crucial part of managing one’s project, one’s candidature and one’s thesis – it is the successful management of the self that I think may be crucial to success in a PhD. This is something that can’t be taught; it is a skill that each student will develop in their own way as they work through their process – although sharing with supervisors and other students can of course help. There were some interesting examples of discussions on the project blogs that bear this out, and, interestingly, the participants who talked confidently about how they were managing themselves were the ones who completed their degrees.

23 November 2006

Comment from Esther

I tend to work to deadlines Kylie and was wondering whether you did too. Perhaps if the marking is that painful then you set an absolute deadline for
when you want to have them completed (often not hard with university deadlines looming), then grit your teeth, do as good a job as you can stomach and know that you've given it all you could without having to question your sanity too much.

“”

6 October 2006

Comment from Esther

When I had troubles, I approached it from the other direction. Spoke to the postgrad co-ordinator first, then took some action based on her suggestions, then was able to report what I had done to rectify the situation at the annual review, so that the end of the year was not the first time anyone had heard my concerns. So much happens in a year. I'd hate to think there were no other channels to utilise before the formal meeting.

Participant blog: Kylie

5 December 2006

Timeline/Torture

Now that I have finished all of my marking, as well as all of my other work for the year, let me walk you through my method for putting myself in a complete state of anxiety motivating myself to write.

I think it's important to be realistic about your goals. Which is not to say that I believe in setting realistic goals, because sometimes things like the due date for your thesis are just way out of your hands. No, I mean being realistic in the sense that you should know your enemy.

So, if my candidature ends on March 31, then my thesis must be completed and handed into the binders by, say March 29.

15 December 2009

Personal email: Esther (after examination completed)

But I suspect this is all part of the PhD process. About learning what I do during these times of stress and how to tread water when I don’t really know what’s going on. I have learnt a great deal about myself as I have waited for
these results that I want to use in my everyday life. *These* are some of the lessons that I have found most valuable and that want to remember as an integral part of my PhD.

One of my participants deserves the last word. I don’t think I could have summed up my view of how accidental the pedagogical processes are, or of the importance for students that the concept of communitas can play in the liminal lives of students better than she has.

7 November 2006

**Commenting from Esther**

Kylie posted something a little while back about comments that kept her going [and] that anyone can get a PhD but not everyone can get a good PhD. At the time I was a bit affronted by the statement but given a little time and exposure to both my own learning and the comments arising from this blog, I can see what was meant by it now. This is a process and a good PhD candidate is the one who grows through and from the work, not just produces the final document.
Project participants as this thesis is being submitted

Grainne
Despite her high level of commitment and success with journal publication, Grainne abandoned her PhD about nine months into the project, after a personal tragedy. She returned to her professional work, and completed a Masters degree by research in 2010 at another institution. She said, in a personal email dated 7 September 2008, “Hope the blog thing ended up well. I'm sure I would have participated more had I not had a breakdown and left.”

Kylie
Kylie had not submitted her thesis by the end of the project; she deferred her degree and returned to her professional work after her partner withdrew from his PhD and was unable to get a job. After some years she re-entered academia at another university. She eventually submitted her thesis and was awarded her PhD at the end of 2011.

Debra
Debra completed her thesis and was awarded her degree at the end of 2008. She continues to work casually at a university (because no full-time work has been offered to her), to teach in her creative areas, and also to work on her own creative projects.

Esther
Esther completed her thesis and was awarded her degree at the end of 2009. She has now achieved an Early Career Researcher position at another university.

Jules
I am unable to find any information about Jules’ current situation.

Marg
Marg dropped out of the project soon after it started and the present status of her thesis is unknown. In May of 2010 she presented at a professional conference in her field.

Dawn
If you haven’t already guessed, Dawn is the pseudonym for the writer of this thesis. Having negotiated her exit from the liminal space, she is now able to call herself Dr Ward.
References

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DETYA. (1999a). *Knowledge and innovation: A policy statement on research and research training*. Canberra: AGPS.

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Mewburn, I., & Sinclair, J. (2012). 'These are issues that shouldn’t be raised in black and white': the culture of progress reporting and the doctorate. Paper presented at Quality in Postgraduate Research 10: Narratives of transition: Perspectives of research leaders, educators & postgraduates, Adelaide.

Mewburn, I., Tokareva, E., Cuthbert, D., Sinclair, J., & Barnacle, R. (forthcoming). 'These are issues that shouldn’t be written in black and white': Progress reporting and audit cultures. *Higher Education Research and Development.*


# Appendices

## List of Appendices

- **Appendix 1**: Prideaux’s curriculum diagram
- **Appendix 2**: Ethics approval for this project
- **Appendix 3**: Recruitment Flyer
- **Appendix 4**: Nodes used in coding data in INVIVO
- **Appendix 5**: Supervisor Training at the University of Sydney
- **Appendix 6**: Michael Noonan’s Tale
- **Appendix 7**: Works published from this thesis
Appendix 1: Prideaux’s curriculum diagram based on constructive alignment

Downloaded from http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_development
Appendix 2: Ethics approval for this project

15 December 2005

Professor J Sachs
Pro-Vice Chancellor
Teaching and Learning
Main Quadrangle – A14
The University of Sydney

Dear Professor Sachs

I am pleased to inform you that the Human Research Ethics Committee at its meeting on 13 December 2005 approved your protocol entitled "Negotiating the Faultlines: A study of PhD development"

Details of the approval are as follows:

Ref No.: 12-2005/4/8729
Completion Date of Project: 31 December 2009
No. of Participants: 20
Authorised Personnel: Professor J Sachs
Ms M H Ward

To comply with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans, and in line with the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements this approval is for a 12-month period. At the end of the approval period, the HREC will approve extensions for a further 12-month, subject to a satisfactory annual report. The HREC will forward to you an Annual Progress Report form, at the end of each 12-month period. Your report will be due on 31 December 2006.

Conditions of Approval Applicable to all Projects

(1) Modifications to the protocol cannot proceed until such approval is obtained in writing. (Refer to the website www.usyd.edu.au.ethics.human under ‘Forms and Guides’ for a Modification Form).
(2) The confidentiality and anonymity of all research subjects is maintained at all times, except as required by law.

(3) All research subjects are provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee.

(4) The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form are to be on University of Sydney letterhead and include the full title of the research project and telephone contacts for the researchers, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee.

(5) The following statement must appear on the bottom of the Participant Information Sheet. *Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney, on (02) 9351 4811.*

(6) The standard University policy concerning storage of data and tapes should be followed. While temporary storage of data or tapes at the researcher's home or an off-campus site is acceptable during the active transcription phase of the project, permanent storage should be at a secure, University controlled site for a minimum of seven years.

(7) A report and a copy of any published material should be provided at the completion of the Project.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Associate Professor J D Watson
Chairman
Human Research Ethics Committee

Encl. Advertisement
Student Consent Form
Candidate Information Sheet

Cc: Ms Mary-Helen Ward, 7 Loftus Street, Leichhardt NSW 2040
Advetisement

Could be placed on a notice board, in student newspapers or on student websites.

Are you less than half-way through your PhD?

Would you be interested in keeping a blog (web-based diary) about your PhD experience?

My PhD is about a doing a PhD, and I am forming a group of candidates to keep a web log about the joys, frustrations, pain and pleasure of candidature.

Interested? Send an email to mwarboell@ayd.edu.au and I'll send you more details and a questionnaire.

Letter to Deans of Graduate Studies

If necessary for recruitment

Dear......

I am a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education, and the subject of my study is the process of doing a PhD. I am presently recruiting a group of PhD candidates who are interested in keeping a web-based diary about their experience for a period of two years.

If you have any candidates in your faculty whom you think might be interested in taking part in this project I would be grateful if you could provide them with my email address. I will sending out a short questionnaire to any candidates who express an interest in order to select participants from a broad epistemological framework as possible.

If you have any enquiries or would like more details, please reply to this email.

Thanks for your help with this.
The University of Sydney

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Research project title:
Faultlines: a study of PhD development

Privacy information:
No information obtained during this study will be made available to your supervisor or to any
person involved in the assessment of your PhD. A PhD thesis to be written by Mary-Helen Ward
may contain material from your blog, and she may write articles, conference presentations and
other publications from that material, but no information that is made available would make it
possible for you to be identified.

Consent forms will be stored separately from all project data in the home of Mary-Helen Ward

Consent:
As a participant in this project I give permission for Mary-Helen Ward to archive and store the
contents of the blog that I will create and maintain, along with any comments I may make on
other blogs in the study.

I understand my responsibilities to the study:
• That I will own and maintain my own blog
• That I will always be free to remove any comments left on my blog
• That anonymous commenting will not be allowed, and that repeat offenders can be
identified and will be removed from the group
• That I should not disclose anything that is written in any blog in the study to anyone who
is not a part of the study

I understand that all information I provide in my blog or my comments will remain confidential to
members of the study.

I am aware that my participation is entirely voluntary for the duration of the project and
that I may withdraw from the project without penalty or prejudice at any time; however, I
also understand that the researcher reserves the right to negotiate with me over the
contents of my blog and comments that I have made on other blogs that have already
been archived.

Participant Name: ____________________________

Signature: __________________________________

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can
contact the Manager for Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811.

If you would like to discuss the project further, or have any problems, please feel free to contact
Mary-Helen Ward: mhward@bigpond.net.au

APPROVED

DATE: 13/12/05

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

APPROVED
Research Project Title
Negotiating the Boundaries: A study of PhD development by creating a blogging community of PhD candidates

This is a study being undertaken at The University of Sydney to investigate the development of PhD candidates through the keeping of weblogs, or blogs. The focus of these blogs will be used by the researcher when writing the PhD. The subject of which is: ‘To what extent can PhD candidates be sustained in their development as researchers through the use of blogging?’

As a participant in this study you would be asked to:
- maintain and regularly update a weblog over a period of about two years
- regularly read and comment on the blogs created by others in the study (up to 20)

No special IT skills will be required, other than the ability to use a web browser and basic word processing. Full support will be provided by the researcher.

Each participant will own their own weblog, and will be free to write whatever they wish, providing they do not use racist, sexist or abusive language. Participants will also be free to remove any comments that they object to from their weblog, although no commenting will be tolerated if it transgresses university policy or social convention. Anonymous commenting will not be allowed, and repeat offenders may be removed from the study.

The weblogs will be held on a secure server at the University of Sydney. No one will be able to read them or comment on them unless they are a member of the community that forms this study.

The weblogs will be archived periodically by the researcher for purposes of security.

Participation is voluntary. Participants will be able to withdraw from the project at any time and remove their blog postings from the body of data. The researcher may contact them to negotiate use of any previously archived blog entries and comments.

Data from the study will be reported in the PhD thesis of the researcher and may also be presented in journal articles, conference presentations and professional literature.

If you would like to discuss the project further, or have any problems, please feel free to contact Mary-Helen Ward email mhw@usyd.edu.au

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager for Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811.
Faultlines: A study of PhD development

My PhD is about a doing a PhD, and I am forming a group of candidates enrolled at the University of Sydney to keep web-based diaries (weblogs or blogs) about the joys, frustrations, pain and pleasure of candidature. My plan is to have candidates keep their own blog, and also to read and comment on each other’s entries from time to time. You wouldn’t need to be a computer whiz - all the technology is provided and supported within the university.

Possible benefits for candidates include membership of an online peer-based support system, increased practice in reflective writing, and a chance to understand more about what getting a PhD means – especially what it might mean for you.

Would you be interested in keeping a blog (web-based diary) about your PhD experience?

If you send an email to mhward@usyd.edu.au I’ll send you more details.
Appendix 4: Raw nodes used in coding data in NVIVO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Node Description</th>
<th>No. of Sources</th>
<th>No. of References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allotting of RTS funding</td>
<td>Who gets scholarships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloneness_Loneliness</td>
<td>This is related to liminality and identity. Aloneness is part of the journey, and related to my idea that we develop knowledge in the silence. Loneliness is another thing; they are often confused. I may need to pull these apart to discuss this, but I'm leaving them together so I can do it. It doesn't include mentions of loneliness from distant family &amp; friends; these are recorded under 'personal problems'.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARC linkage</td>
<td>This is about what the administrators thought about ARC-linked projects and how the linkage affects candidature. No blog participants were in ARC-linked projects.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs_anonymity</td>
<td>This is about how confident people were to write in their blogs. The closed circle was both a plus and a minus here.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs_being in project</td>
<td>This is about participants and their feelings about being in the project.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakthrough</td>
<td>This node is for times when participants experience a breakthrough or 'aha' moment with their project in their blog.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>This is about good news as it was reported on the blogs.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing examiner</td>
<td>Here is for everything to do with choosing examiners</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion_finishing</td>
<td>This is related to liminality (the end of the liminal state) and their new identity as a doctor.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>This is related to the 'communitas' idea in liminality literature. I can use this node for anything to do with 'fellow-feeling', such as PhD comics discussion etc.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping_with_critique</td>
<td>This is related to supervision. It will record how people felt when their sups gave them feedback that wasn't as good as they'd expected.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deferring_Deffering program</td>
<td>At this node I'll code anything to do with deferring or leaving the PhD unfinished.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Code Count 1</td>
<td>Code Count 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties with own project</td>
<td>This node is for people to talk about problems they are having with their project. It is related to several other modes, eg supervision, presenting, publishing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinarity</td>
<td>This node is for coding issues to do with differences between disciplines</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>At this node I'll record everything to do with paid employment, whether during or after PhD study</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination</td>
<td>This node is for reports of how examination went for the participants.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faculty_reviews</td>
<td>In this node I will collect all the discussions of annual faculty reviews.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty_structures_policies</td>
<td>This node is about how faculties at Sydney organise PhD.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government_structures_policies</td>
<td>This node will report how the participants were affected by conditions of scholarships, enrolments etc.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of PhD funding in Aus</td>
<td>At this node I will code anything about PhD funding</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liminality</td>
<td>There are several other nodes for specific aspects of liminality, but this node is for more general reporting of feelings that seem to indicate that students are in 'no-man's-land. Also for instances of 'communitas' - the mutual support node records this as well.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness_aloneness</td>
<td>This node ois for describing feelings of isolation experienced during candidature</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership_research_community</td>
<td>This node is for recording an data about membership of a research community during candidature</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor of supervision</td>
<td>This is the node where I will mark any metaphors of supervision that reported in the blogs and the interviews.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods_writing_publishing</td>
<td>This node comes under the pedagogy heading. It will record things about writing in relation to PhD, also discussions about methods (eg use of software)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>This is specifically to report discussion of being an overseas (fee-paying) student in Australia. This may not be relevant to my thesis in the end, but one participant did discuss it as an added anxiety for her.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money_sacrifice</td>
<td>This related to identity, and perhaps to liminality. People have made choices to do a PhD, to entre the identity of PhD student, and sometimes they reflect on those choices which have practical implications</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Help_support</td>
<td>This node is to report support between the blog project participants. Also idle chat as this is often closely related to directly supportive comments.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of Academia</td>
<td>This node is for general discussions about academic life that is not directly PhD related</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of PhD_changes during candidate</td>
<td>In this node I will record things people said about how they developed during candidature.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
<td>This node is for discussions about originality and how it is understood.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace_time_progress</td>
<td>In this node I will put things to do with time limits, pressure, and about progress on the thesis, including procrastination. Issues about life balance and tiredness etc will be reported in the Tiredness_balance-coping thread.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathways to PhD</td>
<td>Material to do with how people come to the degree.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pedagogies</td>
<td>I kept this node for general comment about PhD pedagogies from the data.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>This where I coded anything that could have answered the question &quot;What did you learn from that?&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal_problems</td>
<td>This where I noted problems that people were having that were not a direct result of their undertaking a PhD, eg family problems, health issues.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD by confusion</td>
<td>Anything relating to PhD by publication, or other confusions about what constitutes a PhD.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD_skills</td>
<td>In this node I recorded mentions of the skills that PhD develops.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD_viewed_outside</td>
<td>Here I recorded discussion of what people outside the Uni think about doing a PhD.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precompletion seminars</td>
<td>Anything to do with faculty approval being necessary before submission</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting_conferences</td>
<td>This node comes under the pedagogy heading. It's to do with what people learned from presenting or attending conferences</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project_successes</td>
<td>This node if for mentions of how well something has gone; not a great as celebration, but smaller achievements.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Node Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Count 1</td>
<td>Count 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishing</td>
<td>This node is to be used for discussions about publishing during candidature.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>At this node I put all the discussions and revelations that people had about their projects. It proved fruitful, because some participants talked a lot about their projects, and inevitably some had (or reported having) AHA! moments while writing. This node will relate in some ways to the blogs being in the project node.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Training terminology</td>
<td>Anything related to words used around the PhD: Research training, doctoral education etc.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-doubt</td>
<td>This node is linked to dealing with criticism.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills training</td>
<td>Anything to do with the Uni's plans to establish skills-based training</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight through vs professional first</td>
<td>This is where I placed discussion of whether it was better to do a PhD straight after honours or to work for a while first. As several participants were in practice-based disciplines, this was an important issue for them.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUUp Training @ Sydney</td>
<td>Any quotes related to the supervisor training at Sydney</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision (personal)</td>
<td>Under the pedagogy heading, this node will cover student experience of supervision, and supervisor's comments about supervision.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision (general)</td>
<td>Anything to do with supervision in general</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiredness_balance_coping</td>
<td>The node is related to the Pace_time node. It will report on participant's discussions of tiredness and how they fit the PhD into their lives. Progress on tasks (eg the thesis) will be reported in the Pace_time_progress node.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University_structures_policies</td>
<td>This node covers institution-level things about PhD at Sydney.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of PhD</td>
<td>Here I tagged discussion of the value of doing a PhD which was more conceptual than just skills. These discussions often interlocked with discussions about whether it was better to work in the profession before undertaking a PhD.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5: Supervisor training at the University of Sydney

Even while matters affecting PhD students, under the heading of ‘research training’, were being dealt with in the Research Portfolio (until 2011), the preparation of supervisors has always been in the Education Portfolio at Sydney, being part of the responsibility of the Institute of Teaching and Learning. This training program has recently been reformed, but the experience of the University with the program as it was between about 2000 and 2008 is worth examining. I have quoted the abstract of Brew and Peseta (2004) in full, as it summarises the pedagogical intent behind the program.

New research training agendas necessarily bring with them renewed attention on the professional development of research supervisors. This paper charts specific aspects of the University of Sydney’s Postgraduate Supervision Development Programme, particularly the development of a new innovation called the Recognition Module. The Recognition Module invites research supervisors to develop an online case study of their supervision practice as a form of professional academic development. To this end, we showcase the work of two supervisors who have engaged with the Recognition Module, and note the qualitative changes in their thinking about supervision. Further, we argue that the Recognition Module works to develop three sorts of processes—first, it provides institutions with a way of recognizing and rewarding those who partake in ongoing development activities; second, it provides evidence that development and change has taken place; and third, it provides individual research supervisors themselves with initial information about how best to structure their supervision in order to guide students toward timely completion. (p5)

However, the Recognition Module, for all its worthy intent, proved to be too much commitment for the academic staff at the university. Five hundred and twenty-seven people entered the program (which was a compulsory prerequisite to supervising research students’ thesis work) and completed at least one of the 6 self-learning modules, but only 97 ever completed the final Recognition Module (Peseta & Brew, 2009). Twenty of those people chose to make their final Case Study available on the ITL website, being available to download until early 2012.

Ross (, 2008 #6260) deconstructs humanist discourse to discuss the notion of the production of an ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ self through reflective writing in terms of assessment practices. She suggests that the “increasingly invasive character of educational practices which demand confession and self surveillance as evidence of progress and learning” (p.1) might in fact lead to evasion and even lying as students attempt to match the fruits of their reflection to the learning outcome – an ‘improved character’ – that the course of study was supposed to produce. Brew and Peseta state the ideal workings of their pedagogical tool thus:

Throughout, supervisors are referred to the criteria for good supervision practice so that they have some expectation of what their case studies ought to achieve and also so that they can position their thinking in the literature. (p. 11; emphasis mine)
The Recognition Module was, in Ross’s framing, a “High Stakes” assessment (p. 4) – it fulfilled a gatekeeping role, in that was necessary for academics to complete it in order to be permitted to supervise students, and it “involved judgments of critical thought, the application of theory, evidence of growth and development, and the impact of institutional learning on individual practice.” (p.5). Perhaps the intended outcome of the Recognition Module – which “was designed for supervisors to consolidate, reflect on and demonstrate shifts in their thinking about postgraduate supervision” (Brew & Peseta, 2004, p. 9) was the victim of the particularly resistant culture at Sydney, with its obstinate disciplinarity (see Marginson & Considine 2000). Or, perhaps, academics instinctively felt its requirement for “confession-as-performance” (Ross, 2008, p. 12) to be invasive, driving them to be evasive and non-compliant.

Several key informants in my study reported that the reflexive nature of this final module was too taxing for busy academics, not suited to all disciplinary epistemologies, and not widely understood by staff as helpful to their individual practice of supervision. Although based in a sound pedagogical theory of learning by creating one’s own case study (Brew & Peseta, 2004), and driven by an understandable desire to create a culture of reflective supervision within the University, it was perhaps introduced in too didactic a fashion, creating a backlash of resentment from staff. I can imagine many academics being quite confronted by being asked to write an autobiographical account of their own experience of being supervised and supervising, especially as that document was to be submitted for “feedback, critical questioning and guided support” – however well-meaning those responses might be.

One of the issues that was created with the ending of the ‘old program’ was the large number of staff (nearly four hundred) who had completed all of the self-learning modules of the ‘old program’ but not the final Recognition Module. A solution to the dilemma of the staff who had done the mandated training to supervise PhDs but were unable to be certified as competent to supervise because they hadn’t completed the Recognition Module in the ‘old program’ (despite the fact that some of them were already experienced supervisors) was eventually achieved in 2009 by a series of discipline-based workshops, attended by the supervisor-trainees who were ‘in limbo’, Associate Deans of Graduate Studies and ITL staff. All those who attended were issued with certificates of completion of supervisor training.

References


Appendix 6: Michael Noonan’s tale

The dangers of mandating public defence of a work-in-progress are demonstrated by the story of Michael Noonan, who was in the early stages of his PhD work when he presented his work to the Creative industries Faculty at QUT early in 2007, following faculty guidelines for confirmation of his thesis proposal. Noonan was thrust from the shadows of his liminal existence into the national spotlight because of the controversial nature of his project.

Having obtaining ethics approval from the university, Noonan had completed the filming (although not the editing, therefore not the final framing) of his project, which was titled Laughing at the Disabled: Creating comedy that Confronts, Offends and Entertains. The subject of the film is the travels of a pair of intellectually disabled men, and Noonan now proposed the completion of the editing and the writing of an exegesis to place the film as “an exploration of authorship and exploitation in disability comedy, the culmination of which will be the creation and production (for sale) of a six-part comedy series featuring two intellectually disabled personalities”.

Unedited scenes from the film were shown at his presentation, and two of the academics present, John Hookham and Gary MacLennan, were extremely offended by what they saw. The article that Hookham and McLennan wrote in the Higher Education Supplement of The Australian on 11 April 2007, “Philistines of relativism at the gates”, was widely discussed and reproduced on internet forums. They also garnered support from others on campus (including undergraduate students in the faculty) and from some – although by no means all – in the disability community, for their view that the film was “misanthropic and amoral trash produced under the rubric of postmodernist, post-structuralist thought.” (Hookham & McLennan, 2007, p 1).

The University, standing by its decision to grant ethics approval for the project and conscious of its duty of care to the student and his supervisors, charged that the academics had, in their article, “misrepresented Noonan’s work presented to the candidature confirmation hearing” (quoted by "Stanislav", commenting on Curr, 2007), and disciplined the academics by suspending them from their posts for six months without pay – effectively fining each of them around $40,000. It cited the men’s airing of their criticisms of a student’s work in the public domain as a breach of the university’s code of conduct (Gardiner, 2007). Discussion on internet forums included headings such as “QUT to discipline academics for advocating humanity”.

Their pay was reinstated following a High Court Order in July. However, claiming they were being victimised because they disagreed with the university’s neoliberal agenda, the men approached the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission in August 2007 with a complaint of "discrimination on the basis of political opinion”. (Dibben, 2007). In October The Australian reported that the university and the lecturers had reached a settlement and all claims had been withdrawn (Meade, 2007). The final word from the participants in this debate came from McLennan, writing at

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70 This quote from the abstract was reproduced in The Australian newspaper. (Hookham & McLennan, 2007, p. 1)
WritersBushTelegraph in November (McLennan, 2007). There he discloses the terms of the settlement, and claims that, although there was no mention of their continuing employment in the settlement, he and Hookham had been effectively forced to resign by being refused access to their workplace. Ironically, he claims that he was ultimately preventing from entering his office by the actions of a graduate student. (The graduate students in the faculty, as might be expected, were incensed by Hookham and McLennan’s actions, and discussed them on blogs and online forums. Noonan tried several times to defend himself on online forums and at The Australian (for example Noonan, 2007a, 2007b).

Despite the discussion generated by the case in 2007 (chiefly in Brisbane), once the settlement was reached it disappeared from view. Even while it progressed there was very little commentary on it, apart from claims and counter-claims of truth from people representing various individuals involved. The issues were variously presented in the print and online media as a stand against the meaningless of postmodernism, as a cowardly attack on the rights of the defenceless disabled, as the university punishing two men unhappy that a Humanities and Human Services Faculty was at the time being wound down and absorbed into the Creative Industries Faculty, and as a closing down of academic debate in a university.

Hookham and McLennan were, in a very real sense, attacking the personal and professional integrity of both the student and his supervisors. Although the media treatment reveals how little is generally understood about the role of an ethics committee or the responsibility of supervisors in a PhD candidature, it illustrates also the pitfalls for students who take on controversial work. The basis for the university’s actions was that the student had gained ethics approval and thus they were bound to defend his work. However, as far as the general commentary in the mainstream media (chiefly The Australian and the Brisbane Courier Mail) was concerned the ethics committee and supervisor responsibility appeared to be irrelevant: the student alone was responsible for his work and Hookham and McLennan were heroes for exposing him.

This whole story made for some strange bedfellows, as pointed out by Andrew Bartlett (Bartlett, 2007) in his blog entry. The Australian’s right-wing commentators used the avowedly Socialist McLennan’s plight to bolster their ongoing attack on post-modernism, while McLennan himself, in his final word on WritersBushTelegraph, offers his “deepest thanks” to talk-back host Alan Jones (another outspoken critic of post-modernism and a famously right-wing commentator) for his “decency” and for not hesitating “to put my case to his audience”. (McLennan, 2007)

While writing these pages I wrote a blog entry about the story, finishing thus:

May 19 2010

From my public PhD blog

…I'd love to know what Noonan learned from this event. He seems to have left the Uni in the last year but I don't know if he ever graduated or not. He
gained a judgment for defamation, but that was appealed and I don't know the outcome of that appeal yet.

Three months after this I had an email from Michael Noonan himself, assuring me that although the experience had “ruined” his teaching (I knew from the University website that he had in fact gained a teaching award in 2008), he had eventually gained his PhD. He told me that the film in question was about to be released, and that he was “living in a remote part of the world, trying really hard to like people again.” He gave me no further details about the various court cases, but asked me not to put the contents of his email on my blog – and advised me not to show my work to academics! It seems clear that what he learned from the events that followed on his confirmation presentation included an extreme lack of trust that now makes it difficult or impossible for him to function in academia, or even live in a city where he is known – where people “threw drinks on me in bars even though they hadn’t seen a single frame of footage”(Noonan, 2010, n.p.)

References


Noonan, M. (2010, 16 August). [Hello there].
Appendix 7: Works published from this thesis


