

Abi Phd Diary 2- September 2018

One week before the PhD - what should I expect?

It's one week before my PhD begins and I'm feeling a mix of excited and anxious. I've got three things on my mind: preparing for the course to start, abuse of power in academia, and mental health.

Right now, I'm on the bus on my way to an interview for a part-time role at an academic journal. Reading back on my last entry I said I was excited about focusing on one thing at a time for now, but I guess I can't help myself from taking more on. (I got this job in the end. The role is mostly administrative work, and will be less than 1 day a week. I'm happy because it gives a good insight into academic publishing processes. I've also realised I need to save money for the end of my PhD (more on funding in a later entry) so I need the extra income.)

Back on the bus, I'm wondering if I've done enough to prepare for the PhD before it starts. In terms of my life and well-being I feel prepared. I've been on one holiday since leaving my job and I've got another one tomorrow. My last job feels a million years ago. I've moved into a new flat with my boyfriend, and we've unpacked and organised everything. I've spent three weeks eating, sleeping, seeing friends, and not reading! It's the last chance I'll get to not read for a while I think...

But should I have read a bit more?? I've got a mounting anxiety that I'll turn up on the first day and be the only one with nothing to say. With no properly defined research topic and no memory of the knowledge that helped me get in in the first place... I'm worried about turning up at the first meeting with my supervisor and regurgitating the same ideas as during my Masters.

I feel more relaxed about it after writing my worries down. I'm sure everyone will feel like this. I've got in for a reason. And no one expects me to turn up with all the answers. Actually, I think one thing I've learned this year is to pipe down and listen to others more. All the same, I've decided to pack one academic book this weekend.

The other thing I'm wondering is, what the hell have I gotten in to?

The [Avital Ronell story](#) (click the hyperlink for the full New York Times story) has really disturbed me this week. Ronell is an NYU academic who has been accused of sexual harassment by a former PhD student who she was an adviser for. I am less shocked by the accusations, and more by a letter written and signed by academics to defend Ronell. It's signed by some of my all time heroes and it reflects so shockingly on a hierarchical structure of power in critical academia, that is ripe for abuse. I scanned the signatures afraid of spotting someone I know, but luckily only recognised people whose work I've read, and no-one I've worked with.

My experience has been that I've had help and guidance from a few academics. I suspect it's because they like me, as well as because of interest in my work. Last year I went for a 'coffee' which turned out to be a beer with a professor from my undergraduate degree who quizzed me on my love life more than my research interests. I'm sure it wouldn't have crossed any lines into harassment or abuse of power, but I felt uncomfortable. And it didn't surprise me, because academia does look like a culture of favours and nepotism. There are good reasons why professional relationships matter but there can also be negatives to this dynamic.

I'm expecting doing a PhD to be a specific working environment with its own challenges and benefits. I bumped into a friend of a friend whose boyfriend is in the final year of his PhD. 'Good luck' she said raising her eyebrow, and recommended that every PhD come with 3+ years' supply of therapy.

I spent the last year going to therapy once a week. Unlike a lot of people, I luckily wasn't suffering with debilitating depression or mental health issues. For me, it was helpful to make sense of the bread and butter of my life: relationships, self-esteem, friendships, family. After 12 months I wrapped up the sessions for the time-being. I can definitely say that I learnt so much through therapy about myself and relationships with others, and it changed my values. In the past, I valued intelligence over kindness, and that's changed now. I feel more kind to myself and others than ever, more stable and more able to listen to and respect myself and others. I wonder whether doing a PhD will challenge my new values system, and whether it will be a challenge to separate out a sense of self-worth from academic achievement.

Two weeks later: 3 weeks into the PhD- time flew!

Wow- I feel like I just came out of the other side of a tumble dryer.

Induction week felt like it happened back to front. For the first 3 days we had meetings every day. This was great for meeting and getting to know the other students in my cohort, but I felt like I got all the information I needed backwards. The other students are great- more about them later!

The first meeting was a general meeting for all new PhD students to the university, with general information about the library, funding, rules, and resources available. That was followed by a social where I met the other students on my programme.

The next day we had an introduction to our department, and information about methodology courses on offer if we needed them. The PhD convener talked us through a four-year timeline for completing a PhD - confusing for me as I had thought this was a three year programme, and have funding for only three years! And I still didn't know what the next month or two was meant to look like, whether I needed to be taking methodology courses, auditing lectures, or if any of this was relevant for me.

After that we had pizza lunch with our supervisors. It was good to see my PhD supervisor! I'd emailed him already to book in an intro meeting the next week. We had a quick chat and he told me that, if I just? pick a topic and write 30 pages this year, that's a success. It was reassuring.

That afternoon we had an introduction to 'buddying' in the department from current PhD students, which turned into a general ad hoc advice session. I can hardly remember anything about it, except becoming more and more disoriented as the talk jumped from one topic ('go to summer school') to a completely different one ('remember, academics are people too, try to establish a good relationship with your supervisor by not contradicting them'). I left with my head spinning, spent an hour unsuccessfully trying to access my institutional email, the wifi and the printers - then went home with a headache.

But I still had no idea about what doing a PhD will actually look like! What was expected from me? What should I be producing? Should I be auditing lectures? Did I need to learn a methodology? Will it take three years, or four years, or longer? Is there more money for me? What is a paper? How do I speak at a conference? Who is a discussant and who is a chair? How do you convene a panel? What is everyone talking about?

First meeting with supervisor

It got a lot clearer at my first meeting with my supervisor the next week. To clarify, last time I wrote about working with two supervisors, but now it looks like I'll only be working with one for the moment. This is because my primary supervisor advised I define my research topic before I identify other academics to work with, especially because it is an administrative nightmare to work with academics across two departments. The other academic I am hoping to work with in the future is also on sabbatical at the moment, but I checked in with them and will meet when they get back.

In the meeting, my supervisor told me this is a four year, minimum, programme, although the department and funding body will try to make you finish quicker. They said that you won't get hired in academia in the end from your PhD, but on what you publish and on being known by others in your field. So, to focus on publishing an article, and building up a network by participating in conferences and making friends. They said not to take on any extra courses that will distract from my research or these aims. They advised me to forget about the topic I'd applied with for now, but to go away and read for 2 weeks, and meet again then. They said to talk to the funding office to find out about final year funding. They put me in touch with a final year PhD student and told me to copy their behaviours.

It would have been really helpful to have this information at the beginning of the week, so I guess if I was doing this again I'd have booked in a meeting with my supervisor before all the other stuff. The impression I got was that the key decisions are made between me and my supervisor, and everything else was just guidelines.

Phew. That's it for now, but I'll update on the other students in my programme and how interesting and helpful they've been, my new job, building a new routine, and everything else, next time!