

Dan Long
My PhD Story

I finished my Bachelor's degree in 1997. I'd won the university's award for the best degree of the year but I was totally fed up with academic work and university culture. I suppose I was the typical narky scholarship boy from a working-class family – I was separate from other students and bigoted about their laziness – 'dim, middle-class wasters'. I was also alienated by the literary theory which I was beginning to see that I'd been hoodwinked by – I'd spent a couple of years trying to get to the bottom of Lacan, Derrida, Baudrillard etc. and was convinced that there wasn't much there. Also, having been apart from other students I didn't have any idea that I'd been doing well with my marks. When I received my degree I was encouraged by the department to put in an application for a Master's degree by research – a couple of the academics in the department told me that I'd be wasted on teaching. I had already applied to do a PGCE and so I agreed to put in an application while I was doing that.

My PGCE was a far greater challenge than my degree had been and at the end of it I took a job in a middling comprehensive in Essex and turned down the opportunity to study (which seemed narrow and dull by comparison). I did two years full-time in teaching after my PGCE and enjoyed it immensely. However, as I was teaching GCSE and A-level, I soon got a taste for how repetitive the job could become. As I neared the end of my second year I started to rethink my career options. The teachers around me were horribly dispirited and I got the sense that if I didn't get out of the profession early on I might turn out horribly careworn and jaundiced. At this point academic interests started coming back to me. Going back to teaching English in a sane environment had reawakened my passion for my subject, perhaps in contrast with hundreds of teenagers' absolute loathing for it! Since I was living in Essex I hatched a plan to go and study at a London College. I'd always regretted not having attended a

'better' institution than Barchester as my A-level grades were good enough for Oxbridge etc. I went to London to do a Master's as a year off after which I thought perhaps I'd try and get a job in a sixth form college.

My Master's degree was a mixture of good and bad things. I enjoyed reading some hefty literature and found some of the professors at London incredibly bright and inspiring. In social terms I missed the rough-and-readiness of school as London was full of students that were even snottier than those I'd encountered at Barchester. Moreover, a number of the tutors were supercilious and unhelpful. My time at London also coincided with the rail restrictions imposed after Hatfield. This affected my commuting. On one occasion I was dying to attend a seminar on Proust so I took a train from Essex at half five in the morning and walked eight miles across London – the tube workers were on strike – to get to my seminar. I'd travelled eighty-five miles in over five hours only to be told that the tutor (who lived in London) couldn't get to the seminar. That afternoon I took a part-time job in my old school with my old classes as my replacement had buggered up. I saw out the rest of my Master's working three days a week, disillusioned with academia once again.

All this time my homesickness for the North had been steadily intensifying. I'd written an essay on northern English literature for my first piece of coursework at London and began to think about ways to get back up North. It seemed my vocation was to be working with books so I toyed with the idea of sixth form teaching up north or even doing a PhD. I'd managed to disinfect myself of the clap-trap I'd swallowed at Barchester and had an idea of how I might approach a PhD with integrity and enthusiasm.

Perhaps the biggest break came when I looked on the Barchester University website and saw that Linda Price had an interest in regional writing. When I wrote to her with

some ideas for a PhD she was encouraging and enthusiastic about the project. I'd received AHRB funding for my Master's so it seemed worthwhile to have a go at getting the funding for the PhD. Linda helped me put the proposal together. The only reason I went ahead was because the project was genuinely under-researched but down-to-earth in nature: I could actually believe in its value.

When news of the award came through in August I started some preliminary research. At this point the project felt vast, nebulous and unskewed. I read around all kinds of authors that might be useful and had a sketchy sense of how the thesis might break down into various sections.

The first supervision was a breakthrough of sorts. Linda urged me to formulate a number of research questions and to try and get the gist of the thesis into one sentence. It was this activity that turned the raw faeces into a potential thesis! Once I had a guiding question I had a yardstick by which to measure each of the sets of authors I was intending studying. I coupled this with an awareness of the word limit for the thesis. If I had a hundred thousand words to go at I felt I needed to account for the structure of the whole thing very quickly. Planning A-level courses (which last pretty much two years) helped me to clarify how I would apportion my time. I decided on ten chapters of ten thousand words. I allowed ten thousand words for the introduction and the same for the conclusion, leaving two halves of forty thousand words each. I aimed to complete the first half of the thesis by the end of June and then go on to finish the whole thing by Easter of year 2. I could not afford to faff around in my third year and risk not completing the thesis on time so I thought that I would devote a whole year to polishing and redrafting as well as using that time to run chapters by other people, attend conferences and try and get stuff published.

I completed a very rough first draft of the introductory chapter by week 4. I was convinced by Linda's advice that it was best to get writing as soon as possible and so I churned out about five thousand words using ideas cobbled together in a couple of weeks of research. It was important that I get into the habit of writing without always having to regard the product as some sort of final draft – I tried to let my work be messy and semi-realised if need be as long as I was writing. Linda's response to the first piece of writing was very positive – more positive than I had expected. Although the ideas were a bit half-baked and incoherent at this point, I had a skewer in place by which to approach the project. I keep coming back to this idea of the PhD as the effort to make a kebab out of a roast dinosaur.

Instead of going back to the introduction/hypothesis/literature review after the first draft, I thought it would be a good idea to get into the specifics of the first chapter. I wanted to go back to the premise for the thesis later – I was eager to actually test the hypothesis against some texts. I spent a couple of weeks researching the background to my first chapter, read the books, planned what I had to say and wrote the chapter in about five weeks. One aspect of the PhD of which I am convinced is that you can't work slowly or the enormity of the undertaking tugs you down and stultifies you. In terms of research I've never been one for slaving over textbooks. I think you have to adopt an SAS or smash-and-grab approach to reading other people's stuff. If you stay confident in your own ideas and intellectual orientation then you can skim over what other people have had to say and collate their ideas judiciously. I'm very much of the opinion that if an idea or analysis is good then it will stick – the rest may as well serve for a good quotation or help build up a sense of a debate and nothing more. In the first five months I must have had well over a hundred different books out of the library. I fill my ticket about every two weeks and then start a new batch. Only two of those 100+ books have stopped me and made me read them in full. I think this approach keeps you regular on intellectual fibre – I can't imagine anything worse than stupidly

engorging myself on mediocre stodge. It would constipate my thinking and stop me getting through the chapters at the proper pace.

Crucial to this process was my supervisor's enthusiasm as a reader. I'm not in contact with anyone else – apart from my girlfriend – who is particularly bothered to read my stuff so it makes a massive difference to have a discerning reader. As a teacher I was always sensitive to the knack of encouraging people through the right balance of praise and criticism. Linda has this knack but the most important thing about her approach to supervision is the way in which she will allow you to develop your own ideas without butting in or annexing them to her own take on a subject. With the comments on my writing she has pointed me in the right direction on certain writers or approaches without being prescriptive or didactic. Thus I find myself going back to her comments for pointers and find that I've taken the path suggested without really having realised it. This process is difficult to articulate and much of it hinges on the supervisor being a good or pleasant personality – it's a mixture of being positive, supportive, questioning, sceptical, appreciative, empathic, judicious, kind etc.. Often I can see that some of my ideas might be a bit inane and Linda has the knack of hoeing these ideas over in a supervision and putting oxygen and nutriment in them.

I think it has helped that we share a similar take on academia and come from broadly the same sort of class set-up. It is also vital that I feel confident in Linda's commitment to her work – I am never in any doubt that she will read my work if I give it in time. You get buoyed up by a person's reliability and professionalism and their work ethic rubs off on you. In terms of the subject matter of my PhD it has helped that Linda is interested in the premise and context for my study without being immersed in the nitty-gritty of the texts I'm studying. This allows for a good, broad focus without getting bogged down in pedantries or distracting details – it helps not to be in each other's intellectual pockets. I came into the PhD with all sorts of

suspicions about academia and if I had had a certain sort of supervisor then I would have been out by Christmas. This is the first time I've really enjoyed studying and Linda the first person I've met on equal terms and had respect for.

So by the end of the first term I'd completed a rough fragment of the introduction and a good first draft of the second chapter. Over the Christmas holiday I used the positive feedback from the previous chapter to crack on with the next chapter. I completed this by week two of the second term. Ten thousand words boils down to about 35 pages of word processing which isn't really very much. I think it's salutary to get a chapter written as quickly as possible in order to discover just how limited the whole project really is – it's like turning the telescope around and getting a practical feel for the true perspective or frame. This seems especially preferable to embarking on six months of in-depth reading that then fails to be incorporable or just plain useless when it comes to actually writing up. It seems daft to pile up your plate before you've worked out how big your stomach is.

In terms of the actual pattern of studying I have very set ideas on how to plough through the work. I am at uni to teach on two days a week. I use these days to get stuff out of the library, have some human contact and orient my research. On the other three days I get up at six and work from seven to mid-day reading or writing. I then walk to the gym and work out all my backache and claustrophobia. I find that I have to work physically very hard if I'm going to work well mentally. I read over what I've done in the morning when I get back from the gym and make corrections and amendments before finishing at five o'clock. I never work in the evenings and never work at weekends – just as I refused to do when teaching. I think you have to regard the PhD as a job and don't go along with this idea that everyone has their own patterns and rhythms – you've just got to knuckle down and get on with it in a systematic way.

I completed my fourth chapter by week 7 of term 2 – the time of writing. I will write chapter 5 by the end of April and will revise and add to the introductory chapter by the end of June. By that time I will have completed 50,000 words and will be on course to finish the draft by Easter of year 2. I've then got a year to make my arguments and research watertight and have the opportunity to put myself about a bit without messing up my thesis writing.

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I carried on in this fashion battering out chapters at a rate of about one every six to eight weeks. Yet by June I found myself flagging as the chapter headings I had set myself at the start of my project no longer seemed to hold true after the research that I'd done in the intervening time. So around June of the first year I hit my first nadir. Interestingly, this low point was compounded by the fact that I tried to lift my spirits and my work by going out and interviewing some of the authors that I am studying for my thesis. This process didn't work for me as I found myself caught up in that author's view of their work without really clarifying my own position. This was the point at which the thesis felt as if it was spiralling out of control in spite of all my attempts to keep it focussed and pragmatic. I wrote the last draft chapter on autopilot in late June and sure enough it got a bit of a slating from my supervisor. It was the first seriously flawed piece of work I'd handed in.

At this point I had a two week break from the thesis and let it all settle back into perspective. On returning from holiday I decided to re-kickstart the project by rewriting the introduction. This was a very helpful move, allowing me to realise everything that I had learnt in the interim and giving me the opportunity of reframing the project. I think you need to keep going back to this introductory chapter – on a draft basis – in order to keep your work grounded.

At the end of the summer I was offered extra teaching on a third year course in addition to the first-year teaching I had been doing the previous year. I seized on this as an opportunity to do something that was a fresh challenge for the year ahead so as to keep my spirits up.

I started my second year with the decision that not all my writing had to be a draft of a chapter. I wrote an essay on an author that I enjoyed but had difficulty shoehorning into my plan and thoroughly enjoyed the process, rediscovering some of my enjoyment in research and igniting new ideas for the PhD. I think at this point I was becoming less retentive and more capable of immersing myself in the project which, in a way, is what you have to do if you are to do justice to the complexity or elusiveness of what you are writing about.

Early on in this second year I had my MPhil upgrade meeting. This was nerve-racking of course but I was confident of having done my best and having produced a lot of work so went in with a fairly carefree mindset. I think this process is hugely beneficial in the overall PhD as it gives you the point of view of another academic at a time when you take your supervisor's intellectual position for granted. Indeed, you might even have started pandering to that position in what you write and so are unlikely to get any jolting criticism. My upgrade 'person'? was insightful and had a useful measure of distance from the whole project. He made several useful structural suggestions and was able to confirm that the writing style and the substance of the research was up to scratch. I think it also gives the supervisor a boost at this stage: it is a golden opportunity to clarify what you do and should be grasped in as positive a way as possible.

After the upgrade I went through an unproductive six or seven week period as I was moving house and winter had set in – I think there is a PhD related substrain of seasonal affective disorder that sets in on account of all the time you have to spend on your own. I would actually identify winter of year 2 as the low point of the PhD calendar. I remember being down around this time and had found the third year teaching tough to begin with. You have to take any opportunity of furthering yourself but the third year teaching was significantly more pressured than the first year. For a start there is the added responsibility of delivering material that has a direct bearing on someone's degree, not like in the first year where it's all up in the air still. And I was also reminded of the huge leaps that students make between their first and third years: it was no longer a matter of simply reading the week's material and automatically being a step ahead. Now I had to spend a good day a week doing secondary reading in order to be properly prepared. How I might have fared without this extra pressure is a moot point: would I have grown listless without the extra pressure or was it weighing me down. Perhaps a bit of both.

Anyway, January gave me serious cause for reflection. I'd had my head down and been charging at this thesis for 16 months and realised that I didn't have the energy to carry on the same cycle of research: gather material, read intensively, sift material, plan essay, write essay, redraft every six or eight weeks. And if you reach that burn out point then I think you have to do something drastic or the whole thesis will just grind to a halt. So I decided to stop accreting and just begin sorting and reworking everything I'd got into five more manageable chapters. I'd found that stuff had cross-pollinated unexpectedly and that the original chapter headings were inflexible and inadequate. Perhaps this is the turning tide that a lot of people mention with regard to PhDs where the waxing of the project has by necessity got to become its waning. I think it is instructive at this point to weigh up just how many words you've come up with and relate that to the size of the PhD as it should be. Without realising I found that I'd

accumulated about 130,000 words and so was at the right point to begin hacking it all down.

I started by overhauling two chapters, shuffling other sections and generally rewriting so that I ended up with five big chapters. My biggest breakthrough at this point was to print the whole thing out and take it to the binders. It only cost a fiver yet it gave me a huge sense of achievement to have this project in one place and with an early hint of the satisfaction of the final binding.

After smugly thumping this bound draft down on the table a few times I then read through and realised the enormity of redrafting the thesis. At this stage I decided to abandon making notes in notepads and took to carrying the draft thesis around with me and adding quotations or ideas to the body of the thesis. This was a helpful tactic and put a halt to too much displacement study – everything was now focused on the finished product alone. I spent some ten full days reorganising my work and smoothing out the creases before I was in a position to think about printing out another draft.

At this point I encountered another obstacle which was that, in spite of all my best efforts, I'd failed to keep my bibliography up to scratch and had also been remiss in keeping to the MHRA style guidelines for references and layout. So I had to spend another five days ploughing through, correcting spacing, reference layout, headings and so on. These five days were incredibly mindnumbing and I'd recommend anyone beginning a PhD to nail all the pedantic presentational points early on so that they become habit.

After another proof read I was now able to hand the second draft of the work in (this being the start of May). Reading over I felt disappointed about the fact that it read as if

written at different moments and there was no uniformity in tone and language and a few of the seams were showing. I guess this is where you have to remind yourself of that dictum about academic work only ever being abandoned, not finished. I've been amazed at how infinitely perfectible this work is but it's right to have a deadline that you must keep to whatever your relationship with your work.

After all this I had my blood up for an academic career. At numerous points over the second year I'd toyed with the idea of going back into schools as the prospect of beginning another career – with all the skills and speak and cv-building that go with that – was rather daunting. It's been a steep learning curve seeing how professional and intensive academic work is – a far cry from my original rose-tinted ideas of laidback mornings and red leather armchairs. Nevertheless, I am still intent on having a stab at becoming an academic although school work might be a fallback position if it proves impenetrable.

In terms of submission, I'm going for two years. Linda went through the thesis very carefully and it was agreed that it had reached a good endpoint so I've worked on revisions and it will go in at the end of September. This has freed me up to take a job in the English dept. next year as a teaching assistant (12 u/g seminars a week plus lectures plus M.A. module). Really pleased to get this job from the perspective of working fulltime again but I know I've been lucky in the timing and in the quality of the supervision: I've slaved over this PhD but Linda's been out of this world and the 2 year thing is largely owing to her. I await the viva in the autumn / winter!

The bugger at the moment is trying to get published. This is an intimidating stage and feels very nebulous and hit and miss. After the onslaught of the PhD it's difficult to pick yourself up for developing articles but that it is where I find myself at the moment.

I'm giving a conference paper at the weekend in London for a conference about 'Literary London' where I'll be talking about the construction of London in northern literature as 'other' to northern social codes! This has been a nice sideline and will be good experience, hopefully. In terms of publications, I've suggested an article for publication in a small journal called Manchester History Review that comes out of MMU - I found it helpful to start with a minor, friendly journal to get the knack of the process. I'll be drafting the article soon and then it will be considered / reviewed - the article is on post-war northern autobiography. Then there's another conference in October for 'Narrating the North' where I'm doing part of a plenary on 'Northernness and Authenticity' linking two readings and then doing a paper for the parallel sessions. All this extra stuff is helpful for fresh insights and new tangents.