

Sylvia's story

1. Preamble

I am the first woman in my family to go to university. The generation before mine are cotton weavers who all went to work in the mills age 14. I graduated in 1996 with a first in English Studies from the University of Barchester after returning to full time education in 1991, age 26, via an access course. I did well throughout my courses but the main criticism I always faced in my university reports from tutors was consistent and always related to an inherent shyness and lack of confidence – great work and ideas but I should talk more in class.

My degree course was a hard financial struggle and, because I could not always pay the rent on time, I lived with the very real threat of eviction from my council flat for most of the four years. On one occasion council workmen turned up with steel doors to put over my front door and lock me out of my flat but my neighbours chased them away. Quite early on in my degree course I decided that I wanted to follow a career in academia and teaching mature students especially appealed to me. I figured, somewhat naively, that academia needed bright female staff from working class backgrounds who understood the difficulties faced by poor students as well as being engaged with cultural criticism.

Just before the start of my final year I broke up with my long-term partner. I applied for a hardship grant and was given a few hundred pounds that enabled me to concentrate on writing my final year dissertation without too much worry. I put my relationship and money worries behind me and concentrated on getting the best degree I could.

I was awarded a First Class degree and then the funding to study for a PhD for four years. I wanted desperately to continue as a postgraduate at the Barchester University English Studies Department with my BA dissertation supervisor Bill Rogers. Bill told me he would be very pleased to supervise my thesis but he advised me to spread my wings and try somewhere new – it would be good for me. I had an excellent working relationship with Bill so I took his advice, albeit reluctantly.

The Centre for Culture, Media and Critical Theory in Middlemarch (CMCT) was often referred to in the context of our undergraduate studies by various academic staff. One tutor in particular, for whom I had a great deal of respect, had links with the CMCT department in Middlemarch and I discussed the issue with him. My decision to apply for a place at Middlemarch was clinched when I heard that Maggie O'Leary whose

work I admired was also moving to the CMCT department to take up a chair. I would approach Maggie and ask her to be my supervisor.

Oddly, I was warned off Middlemarch's CMCT department by the postgraduate student advisor at Barchester who told me of a student predecessor who had had a very bad time in the department and who had 'arrived back at Barchester with his tail between his legs'. I did not put too much store in his advice as there was no love lost between me and this particular member of staff. I found his academic perspective dull, deeply conservative and lazily traditional and his attitude patronising and paternalistic. He had previously marked an extended final year paper down, while still advising me it was a First, because I ignored the rubric he had set down. I had been engaging with critical theory and writing my own essay titles for some time encouraged by interested members of staff and I did not feel that pointless authoritarian rubrics were appropriate for final year students.

This dismissal of his paternalistic authority almost cost me my First. Another member of staff I talked to about the CMCT department in Middlemarch warned me that the Head of Department liked to groom acolytes and have them surround her. I took all this advice with a pinch of salt. I replied that I had thick skin and could handle what anyone might have to throw at me. I was confident. I had a First.

I couldn't afford to travel the 400 miles for an interview at Middlemarch University and instead discussed my research place by telephone with the Head of Department. At the end of my undergraduate degree course I worked full time in a museum between leaving Barchester and starting Middlemarch to clear my most pressing debts. I requested a £100 advance on my award and borrowed £100 from a friend to enable me to move to Middlemarch. I finished work on the Friday and on the Saturday I uprooted myself and upped sticks in a hired transit van to pursue my new career. I left my council flat in arrears, not planning on coming back. That was the reality.

Q1 Discuss Sylvia's decisions so far.

Q2 What advice would you give her at this stage?

2. My first year

The first two semesters at Middlemarch were great. A group of about twenty other postgraduate colleagues meant there was no sense of isolation and always someone to bounce ideas around with. I also found a group of ready-made friends to socialise with – something that I had worried about before moving to Middlemarch. I had been accepted onto the PhD programme on the understanding that I should sit the taught MA courses for the first year and that, if my four course papers were up to scratch then, because I had come from Barchester where I had already written a 15,000 word final year dissertation, I could skip the MA dissertation and begin my research.

At the end of the courses my papers were fine and I moved onto the PhD programme. This was a relief because I was 31 by now and wanted to graduate by the time I was 35. Nine years of financial struggle and mounting debts were more than enough, I did not want to run over any longer than necessary. During this period I was still struggling to make ends meet. I had pressing debts to pay from my undergraduate years and I found myself living from hand to mouth, the paltry grant not stretching very far once the rent was paid on my student accommodation. I took a casual job in a theatre but it did not pay enough and I continually worried about money and paying the rent. However, I was prepared to accept eight or nine years of stress and worry about money and many years of paying back massive debts once I graduated because I was single-minded about what I had chosen to do. Soon after moving to Middlemarch I met my current partner.

I approached Maggie O’Leary and after reading my undergraduate dissertation she agreed to supervise my paper. We met and discussed my provisional proposal and I went away to draw up a revised outline of the PhD. All was going well. On the whole I enjoyed the taught courses, loved the academic milieu, knew where I was heading and was getting a lot of reading done. As a bonus, working in the theatre offered me a social life outside the University.

During the summer months all my student colleagues were busy writing their MA dissertations, all with a common goal and a common point of reference. I was given office space in the postgraduate study building but I couldn’t concentrate there – too much noisy traffic and too many distractions. I made the decision to work at home – it had served me well enough during my BA. The flat I now lived in was damp so I moved in with my partner. We were a bit cramped but it was more homely than a student flat. I got through more reading and began to write the introduction and first chapter of my thesis.

Q1 Discuss Sylvia’s first year.

Q2 Have you any advice for her or her supervisor at this stage?

3. My second year – and the opportunity to do some tutoring

My colleagues all finished their MA dissertations. I was still Sylvia Carter BA. They had the ceremony with friends and family. I felt a bit out on a limb, but it had been my choice not to write the MA dissertation. Yet I now regretted my decision. The dissertation could have been one of the chapters from my thesis after all. But, it was too late for regrets.

Most of the students from the MA group moved away after the summer with only about four of the original group staying on to study in Middlemarch. I had become friends with Larry and Jeff. Jeff moved to a funded PhD place in Leicester while Larry stayed in Middlemarch and, although he didn't have formal funding, he had enough money to fund himself for a year and meanwhile would try other avenues.

I applied to teach because it seemed to be the done thing and how could I be an academic otherwise? I would have loved to teach English Studies, but I was not in the English Department. The courses that I would be required to teach were Postmodernity I&II, the first two modules in the brand new Cultural Criticism degree offered by Middlemarch University. I was placed on the reserve teaching list

I was eventually offered a seminar to teach when more students than were initially anticipated enrolled on the course. Maggie was a course convenor. The course content was difficult. Teaching Lyotard's Postmodern Condition and other equally advanced texts for two hours every Friday morning to first year students was scary. I wasn't confident with much of the course material myself never mind teaching it.

Due to an administrative error all the 'borderline' students were inadvertently placed in my seminar group. These were students whom the department had reservations about – their relatively low grade 'A' level results meant their place on the course was not automatic. Subsequently, these students were to be integrated with the rest of the year, but they were all erroneously placed in the same seminar group - mine. The least confident students had been landed all together with the least confident tutor.

Because I am shy and lack confidence in group situations I can sometimes come across as aloof and arrogant. It was a bad start. I began to lose sleep, worrying most of the week about the Friday class. I felt like a fraud. I knew nothing. I was grumpy and stressed at home. Many of the 15 or so students were motivated and interested and I enjoyed working with them, but most were deeply sceptical about the course material - which was fine, healthy, making for interesting discussions. But a minority of the students was overtly hostile and antagonistic. I found this really hard to deal with. I hadn't anticipated such a set of problems.

Two of the students in my group knew one another from back home and talked through much of the seminar, giggled and had a hostile attitude that generally made me feel quite uncomfortable. I was out of my depth and, with no training, it was literally sink or swim and I was sinking fast. Half way through the first seminar one of these two students formally complained to the course convenors about a tense atmosphere in my class and I was called in to the office to explain myself which I tried to do.

Q1 Discuss the department's policy of engaging postgraduates to take on undergraduate teaching.

Q2 What advice would you give Sylvia at this stage?

4. Dented confidence

I contacted my older brother, a physics teacher, for advice on teaching and dealing with difficult situations. And on the advice of the Course Convenor I rearranged the layout of the room and tried to alter my teaching style to make the group more relaxed and to encourage more active participation and open discussion in the seminars. Also I talked to Maggie and asked for training, but was told that the best way to learn was by doing.

I was in pieces. My confidence was crushed I felt like a fraud who was letting the students down. I wanted to give up teaching at the end of the first semester but I stuck it out because I don't like giving in to defeat.

Maggie apologised profusely for the administrative error and tried to encourage me by telling me that I would probably become a better teacher because of this experience. All my colleagues were enjoying their teaching experience and getting along swimmingly with their students. In a meeting of fellow tutors I was asked to tell the rest of the (successful) group about my experience and how I had turned my seminar around after the complaint. It was awful and, if it was supposed to make me feel better in some cathartic way, it failed. It had the opposite effect. I felt humiliated and a failure.

For two long semesters I worried constantly, lost a great deal of sleep and cried a lot – once, embarrassingly, at length in Maggie's office. I was distressed and depressed. Most of my time was spent reading up on the course material. I did not get a great deal of my own work done. At the end of the year Maggie told me 'well done for turning the class around' but I vowed I would never put myself through that sort of ordeal again. And this threw my career plans into disarray.

My interest in studying was beginning to wane. My confidence was dented and no one seemed too interested in helping me out or giving me any guidance, support or advice about how to turn this rotten experience into a positive outcome. I had wanted training but it was refused.

About halfway through the course I had given up my theatre job and, a financial imperative, took a job as a Hostel Officer working in a direct access Hostel for homeless people. The job was demanding and the long shifts time-consuming but it kept me grounded in many ways and introduced me to of people other than just academics – always important for me. Maggie was supportive of students having a life outside academia, and she wrote me a reference. At this stage I planned to work very limited hours in order that I could get on with my research. The job would pay the

bills and the mountain of debts that I needed to clear from my undergraduate days and that continued to accumulate.

Q1 Has a supervisor the responsibility to act as a personal tutor?

Q2 What advice would you now give Sylvia?

5. My third year - and some disengagement

Most of year three was spent working in the Hostel. I worked shifts, often nights, and it was difficult to concentrate on academic work as well, but I read a lot and wrote a substantial amount during this year. I submitted a chunk to Maggie and she liked my work a great deal. She said it was timely and most definitely publishable. Most theses aren't publishable but this one certainly was. I was pleased but my heart wasn't exactly in my PhD anymore. What was the point? Who ever heard of an academic who couldn't even cut-it teaching as a research student? I didn't ask to teach on any first year courses again and nor was I invited to do so.

During this year I completely stopped attending the requisite monthly Monday Night Critical Theory seminars followed by the ritual schmoozing in the pub. This was another link to university life severed for me. I was particularly repelled by the disrespect consistently shown visiting speakers whose papers were often trashed by smug and supercilious members of my department.

I hardly met up with Maggie. In fact, as far as I can recall I had only had five or six informal hour-long meetings about my research with her during my whole period of registration. She took the 'hands off' approach to supervision, characteristic of the department, as she thought I was doing ok under my own steam. No other monitoring of my progress seemed to be taking place. Maggie signed and returned the annual report for my funding body to say I was progressing satisfactorily and I assume did the same if the University checked on my performance.

Now I was lying low and she was taking a laissez faire approach presumably in the belief that all was well with me. But at one point during this year I wrote to Maggie and poured out how I was feeling. She rang me and I cried like an idiot down the phone. I couldn't understand the point of doing a PhD – it felt like a trivial indulgence. Certainly the people in the department appeared to be pointlessly indulging themselves in theoretical red herrings and mutually massaging egos rather than engaging in the cutting-edge critical theory I had anticipated, naively, before I had arrived in Middlemarch.

Maggie said she was unaware that I was struggling, she said she assumed I was doing OK. She advised me not to be so hard on myself over the teaching debacle, and that it would make me a better teacher in the long run. Maggie was herself jaded with academia and the department by this stage and wasn't in much of a position to encourage me to be positive. There were ongoing departmental politics and a clash of personalities between her and the Head of Department that had culminated in the Head undermining Maggie publicly at a meeting where two postgraduate student representatives were in attendance.

Maggie did not discuss this issue directly with me because of her professional obligations, but her disaffection was apparent and some oblique observations made her position clear. She had also stopped attending the Monday seminars after a colleague/friend suffered a mauling by members of the department. I sunk a bit lower. At the end of this year my friend Larry was forced to give up his own PhD research due to a lack of funding. Larry's supervisor was the Head of Department. When he left she did not bother to get in touch with him to wish him good luck in the future. I was appalled. Larry was disillusioned.

By now I didn't see anyone from the University. No-one was asking about my feelings or progress and it seemed surreal to technically inhabit the role of a student while never going anywhere near the University and working virtually full time in the Hostel. I continued to read a lot and was encouraged to find that my ideas and arguments had not so far been published anywhere. I was definitely onto something here. So when I was motivated I felt quite high and euphoric. When I was down I was very down. Retrospectively, I think I displayed the classic symptoms of depression.

Q1 Comment on the supervisory system as experienced by Sylvia and her reaction to it.

Q2 What advice would you give her at this stage?

6. My fourth year

By this time, I was tied to working in the Hostel. We had moved to a bigger house so I had a mortgage to pay and I needed also to keep pace with a non-student mature adult partner who wanted holidays and the trappings of an employed lifestyle. There were no enquiries from the department or my supervisor about my job or the hours I worked or how my thesis was going, and I didn't bother to enlighten anyone.

The PhD played constantly on my mind and I felt constantly guilty and anxious. My job was increasingly stressful. I was working long hours and often I worked nights. I avoided the University completely and nobody seemed to notice. I assume Maggie had been informing the University and my funding body of my progress, but no-one else took any notice. So I carried on working. Truthfully, I had probably decided back in year three that PhD study and an academic career was not for me and that I should cut my losses. But the thought of failure and of throwing it in after coming so far seemed a waste and too much to sacrifice.

However, sporadically, I wrote more. The thesis was coming together. I sent the new chapters to Maggie. In the summer we met to discuss the thesis so far. She had written positive comments on my work – she loved it, it was good stuff – timely and eminently publishable. I was pleased, re-motivated. We discussed the viva. There was light at the end of the tunnel.

I applied for a professional studies loan in order enable me to leave my job and finish off my PhD without worrying about money, at least temporarily. I had also applied for a job with the Open University teaching mature students on their new Introduction to The Humanities course. I relished the idea of teaching mature students and nothing could be as difficult as teaching undiluted Lyotard to 18 year olds. I had the interview and was soon advised by letter that they had enjoyed meeting me and that I was suitable for employment. They said they would be in touch soon with positive news. Brilliant – a job outside the Department, applied for and secured under my own steam.

But the job did not materialise as there weren't enough students enrolled to merit a class. I was gutted. Now I was definitely ready to throw the towel in. My funding had run out. I had a three quarters finished thesis and no hope of teaching in academia, and no one appeared to be at all concerned.

Q1 Discuss the department's arrangements for monitoring student progress..

Q2 What advice would you give Sylvia at this stage?



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7. A fifth year

At the end of my fourth year I emailed Maggie to enquire about the options at this stage – could I get an MPhil or at the very least an MA if I left at this stage? Yes, she was sure that the Head of Department would be amenable to that. Then I chatted to a non-student friend who said I should take a year out before being rash and throwing everything away. I asked Maggie if I could have a year out – yes, she emailed me and informed me that the head of department agreed to this. The grounds on which I was granted a year out were that I was ‘fragile’.

After about six or seven months’ break I decided to get on with the PhD and have a last stab at it. I had given up my hostel job so did not have that distraction. I emailed Maggie and told her that I wanted to get on with the thesis. Great she replied – a good solid six months and it should be finished. I planned to apply for a grant to go and study in pleasant residential surroundings for a spell – this should kick-start my stalled thesis.

At this point Maggie advised me that she was leaving academia for a year to look at other career options and that I would have to find another supervisor. I asked about the possibility of approaching Bill, my Barchester BA supervisor, who had now moved to Brighton. I was advised that there was no chance of having an external supervisor. The Department did not allow it. The thought of upping sticks again and enrolling in a new university was out of the question – I wasn’t prepared to move away from my partner and besides it would be financially impossible with no funding or job. I was given two options for supervision. I was not too keen on the first option, Sue, who worked in the department, so the other it would have to be – even though I did not know him or his work.

I tried to go to the office each day from nine to five, meeting with a couple of other PhD students for lunch, to break down the isolation, and to give what I was doing some sense of routine: ‘normality’.

The new supervisor arranged to meet me. I showed up on the agreed date but he was in Germany and had forgotten to let me know. The following week he met with me but, while he was pleasant and affable enough, he professed to know nothing about my subject or critical theory. Maggie had certainly communicated with him, but he still didn’t seem to know a great deal about me or my work. Besides, he saw his role, probably quite understandably at this juncture, as the final ‘brushing and combing’ stage.

I simply could not be bothered to try to get to know a new supervisor and to familiarise him with my work and ideas at this point. In the weeks since I had decided to pick up the PhD I had begun to brood and worry again and had become preoccupied and distracted.

Q1 Discuss what responsibilities the University has for providing supervision, and for making arrangements when a supervisor is on leave or leaves the university.

Q2 What advice would you give Sylvia at this stage?

8. Epilogue

I eventually decided to jettison my PhD, a decision I had really made at least two years earlier but not followed through. I emailed the new supervisor and told him not to go to the bother of reading the thesis as I was not planning to continue with it. 'OK. You're the boss' he replied. I wrote to the Department and informed them of my decision to leave. Four months on and they still have not replied or acknowledged me leaving their Department.

I came to Middlemarch University with big plans on a confident high and five years later I feel like an abject failure. I am still plain Sylvia Carter BA (hons) and I am left with nothing other than a bad taste in my mouth and huge debts.

On the acetate provided please list the main guidelines for

1. postgraduate research students
2. supervisors
3. institutions