

Teresa's diary

Starting October 2015

The Road to Doctor Determined

Background

Ever since I was a child I wanted to dress different. Possibly being a middle child and not wanting to receive my sisters hand me downs, or maybe it was just in my genes. My first memory of sewing was watching my mum make me a red velvet dress when I was 5 years old. I was enamoured with what she could do with a piece of fabric. The red velvet dress had a cream lace yoke and was my treasured party dress, the older I got the shorter it became, but I still wore it with pride.

At 12 years old my grandmother gave me her mother's hand singer sewing machine. It was my pride and joy. A hand wheel operated machine where I created to my heart's content. By inspecting and cutting up old clothes, adding in pleats and trims, and teaching myself pattern cutting using old newspapers to reproduce my clothes in new fabrics. By my young teenage years I had my own electric sewing machine and over locker and was making clothes for friends as well as myself. At 19 I was hosting clothes parties for my work colleagues and friends, travelling to London to purchase new fabrics and making a range of oversized 1980's blouses. The parties were a huge success, everything always sold and I was in demand to host them more frequently.

It was around this age when I was working in a bank, with a captive audience of women wanting my clothes, but doing a job that wasn't me. Making clothes was my hobby, but I wanted to make it my career. I began a City and Guilds in fashion one day a week in Brighton, a 2-year course, which secured me a place on a HND course in a top university in London. Two years later I continued to BA Hons level.

After university I worked in London as a designer for a few years then relocated to Hong Kong. With the temptation of treble salary and living in Asia I welcomed the experience. Although leaving my boyfriend, friends and family behind wasn't easy. It was during my time in Hong Kong that I set up my own fashion label. Working in industry with a selection of high end labels, selling my designs through my company, and seeing them on international catwalks spurred me on to develop my own label and range.

Trying to establish my label and continue my full time job became increasingly hard on my mind and body. Relocating myself and my label, my 'baby' back to Brighton after 4 years in Hong Kong I worked around the clock in trying to get my business off the ground. Selling globally, exhibiting at trade shows in London, New York, Paris and Berlin.

My business was relatively successful for a few years before economic changes meant my outlets were delaying payments, production costs were increasing and I was finding myself pulled in so many directions I was desperate for help and financial support. With a heavy heart, in 2006 I decided to put my business on hold and move back to Asia to begin a career in education. This was not a career I saw myself in when I was younger, but at this point in my life it felt like a rest bite, time to share my knowledge with others, without the constant pressure of running my own business. I had visited Shanghai while I lived in Hong Kong and felt comfortable with this move to China.

Starting work as a teacher, where English is the delivery language, yet the students' level of English was at a beginners level wasn't easy. The technical knowledge required for the subjects was far beyond their comprehension. This hurdle of understanding I decided to overcome with pictures. The phrase 'a picture speaks 1000 words' was definitely true in this case for me. I started to draw technical pictures of creation, showing the students in pictures and fewer words how to complete the assignments and develop their technical skills. After 5 years working in Shanghai I had developed 100s of such pictures, ranging from technical creation of pattern cutting, sewing through to design education by picture!

In 2012 I found myself with one weeks holiday and no flight ticket out of the country. My passport was full so going anywhere that required a visa was a no go. Going back to the UK for one week was also out of the question with the elevated flights costs. It was in this time I decided to format my 100s of pictures into the beginning of my first book.

Putting together my pictures was easy, adding text around them, and then formatting my book into a cohesive and progressive publication for beginners. I cross-compared other published works to ensure my book was of a level of understanding that a layman could pick it up and work through the art of creation. I wanted my pattern cutting methods to be the most simplistic technical development, where creating step by step methods would be easy for anyone to understand without a teacher by their side. Securing a publisher back in the UK was relatively easy and at the end of 2012 I published my first book! My passion to share my knowledge with a wider audience inspired me to develop my second publication in design, and a third publication followed in 2014.

The PhD Road

Episode 1

'But you don't have a PhD?'

In August 2014 I secured a position in a Hong Kong University. My previous educational establishments had been private run companies where my progress to management level was welcomed. Now, I wanted to continue my educational career in a prestigious university, even if it meant me beginning my time at the instructors level. The University has a team of 60 staff, 50 being professor level. I knew I would be working alongside a team of dedicated researchers and educators.

What I didn't realise is that they would not understand 'little me'. I only have a BA, not even the minimum requirement of an MA to secure a position. However with the strength of my three publications I was accepted into the faculty. On my first day I was taken to my building and shown my office. The campus is huge, 26 buildings and over 20,000 students. Let alone the academic and administrative teams! I was taken to a cream coloured long corridor with cream floor tiles wall and ceiling, with 'daylight' lighting. My office is a windowless box, containing a table with computer and an empty filing cabinet. All other doors were closed with Prof and Dr. names on the outside. The general office was an open plan area where the administrative team works. I was shown to my office by the dean's secretary and left there at 10am.

To say this was a daunting experience is an understatement of the emotions I went through. After a short while in my 'box' I decided to explore beyond the walls. Seeing a colleague walking towards me was a welcome sight, after a short introduction he asked me 'How can you have published work when you do not have a PhD?'

My reaction was of shock then defence. I replied that I had 20 plus years of apparel creation and my books had come from my teaching style and hands on experience in the field. This didn't seem to satisfy the professor, who repeated, 'But you don't have a PhD'. This is a conversation I will take to my grave. It was clear from this interaction I would not be understood in my current state of affairs. Holding only a BA 3 books would not aid my progression within this establishment. It was also clear to me that everyone had seen my CV ahead of meeting me.

My first two weeks were tough. My peers were not very friendly, doors always closed and no invitations for lunch, and certainly no after work relaxing drink. After this initial period classes began. I was relieved and elated to be back in the classroom. Students spoke perfect English and I quickly adapted into the teaching environment.

Having 6 classes kept me busy with delivery, preparation and grading. However there was this nagging in my mind, 'But you don't have a PhD'. It was within my first month I realized I needed to address my own education to move forward with my career. Now it was to decide what exactly would I do a PhD in. The answer came so quickly it felt like it had been hiding inside me for many years. My 6-class timetable also included teaching intimate apparel students, so some of my time was spent developing the technical creation of bras and other intimate garments.

Initially my thoughts were to develop a 4th book in intimate apparel creation, but with the PhD thoughts in my mind also, one day I realised, why do women have so many bra sizes to choose from, yet their clothing is all made to a B Cup bra. I knew this from working in industry before and quickly reached out via Linked In to garment technologists who confirmed that this practice is still relevant today. This gave me the light. I needed to develop a sizing system where bra sizing is amalgamated with clothing sizes. My PhD topic was now confirmed. My hurdle to overcome was now the application process and securing a position as a part time student.

The University has a clear application process and the deadline of December was looming. With very little assistance I completed the forms and spoke to two professors within the department. Mrs A first said she would welcome me to be her PhD student but then quickly changed her mind. Reasons unknown. Mr B also said yes, although his field of research was alien to mine, he has guided many PhD students to fruition so I was confident he could help me on formatting and content, and I would be left to develop the technical side which is my strength. Life seemed to be moving forward smoothly. I would be a Dr. and was prepared to put in the dedication, motivation and financial commitment to expanding my own education.

As life can be, straight paths are few and far between. My application for my PhD in PolyU was 'halted' with no explanation. One day in early March Mr B. informed me that he was not allowed to be my supervisor. He had been given no explanation, but clear instructions that were not to be questioned.

As disappointed as I was, I wasn't completely surprised. I am the only European in the department; I am confident in my teaching abilities and have 3 published books. To my co-workers I may as well be from Jupiter! Of course there were tears, frustration and a lack of hope for my own future. But one thing no one can ever take from me is my drive and motivation to make things work. After a restless weekend of considerations of how to proceed I decided to reach out to home, and not question my rejection at PolyU. I contacted many different universities in the UK with my abstract to see what kind of supervision they had, and indeed if I could be accepted distance learning with only a BA.

London seemed my ideal route. Having studied there many years ago I have fond memories of amazing teachers, a great life and high grades. My application was submitted by the April 8th deadline. My interview came around one month later, and confirmation of a place arrived in July. I was elated. Even more so that my co-workers had no idea what I had done! Speaking to the Dean to request permission for me to study in London at PhD level was welcomed. He praised me for taking the initiative to further my own education and was pleased it was not within our school where many of the current faculty have received their PhDs. It was now becoming clear to me the Dean supports me, even if some of my peers don't understand me.

My summer holiday was postponed with PhD research to do. Needing to use my own annual leave to attend college compulsory research weeks. I understand there are three in my first year where all research students get together, over a week of different seminars and presentations to guide us on our PhD path.

I called my summer 'Fit and Focus'. I got onto the database of journals and started researching into different areas of my PhD. Reading expanded my direction, and then narrowing it back down into what I felt was a solid foundation. Getting off the computer and out of my box office I developed technical experiments to see how, and if my idea of amalgamating bra cup sizing into women's clothes would work. By the end of August I had checked 200 journals, cited from 86 and mapped out a 200-page document containing experiments, flow charts, sizing charts and a great direction of how to proceed.

September arrived quickly and meeting my supervisory team was arranged for the 16th. I had printed and bound my 200-page summer research document; and when I presented this to my team their faces were a picture! No one had ever done this amount of research ahead of starting before. I'm not sure if they were impressed, shocked or even disappointed!

I am now going to give names to my supervisors for future episodes of my journey. My director of studies, the man in charge will be named Mr Pluto. The second supervisor will be Cinderella and my third supervisor who is new to this type of guidance will be Snow White. Pluto and Cinderella were in my first meeting. Pluto was more of an observer with Cinderella taking control of the meeting. Some very valid comments were made, even saying I would need to patent my idea, great news! However she felt I was aiming too high and needed to reduce and refine my direction. All good, afterwards I felt positive but somewhat wary over Cinderella and her style of direction. Having worked in education for over 9 years my style is to guide and nurture. Never criticise without constructive comments for moving forward. Quite clearly teachers are not all the same.

The introductory week came around quickly; commuting up from my hometown and straight into school on Monday was an exciting moment in time. My fellow PhD students all seemed nice, around 50 of us. I was glad I didn't feel too old! The week flew by, with some amazing speakers whose guidance I will work with. Unfortunately other seminars were less relevant to me at this stage. Some interesting to sit through, like meeting the BBC Media, even if it's too early for us to want to publish our works. Others were tedious to sit through but relevant to other students. I appreciate working out a schedule like this isn't easy, but then I want and need to learn how to complete a PhD, living in Hong Kong restricts my availability to attend workshops. Overall my feedback on this compulsory week was OK. But definitely it could be improved for the future with more relevant content. I'm not the only distance learner.

Once back in Hong Kong I edited and perfected my application into 1000 words which I had worked on over the summer. Feeling content that I was heading in a good direction I mailed it to my supervisory team on 30th September (called Version 2). My supervisors confirmed feedback would be received on Friday 9th October. I was so disappointed that it did not appear in my inbox on that Friday. However, after a chase up email on Saturday, I did receive feedback from Pluto, and an additional document from Snow White. (With of course the obligatory "we're too busy" comment that likes to come my way!) Snow White's field has a strong crossover with my topic so her comments were welcomed. Some valid, some needed me to justify my direction.

Cinderella gave feedback on Monday, somewhat derogatory comments over my alleged 'lack of respect' for supervisor's workload. Additionally, feedback from her was generic over format and content and more critical than any constructive comments noted. Disappointment at this early stage is actually an understatement of how this made me feel. I have now been told 3 times my supervisors are busy important people. What they don't seem to understand is my desire to proceed with my PhD, and that I have been working alone on this project since the summer, and am now at a crucial stage for direction, confirmation and to know I am on the right path to move forward.

In my usual style, I 'chewed' on their comments for a day or so. But sleepless nights churning it over only prompted my review and edit of my first document. Snow White's feedback I responded to with comments and received more back by return. Some comments would lead me in a different direction and others I took on board. When editing my document my focus was Pluto's feedback that had tracked changes within my original word document, so it was easy to respond to comments, adding in where required and removing non-essential content. It wasn't so bad to do, as my original investigations had a lot of the information they were asking for, I just didn't include it! 1000 word limits are horrible, I would prefer 10,000 words where I am able

to explain and justify my direction thoroughly. Being able of saying 'more' with 'less' is actually an art that needs perfecting.

Thursday 15th October I mailed back to my supervisory team V3 of my registration document. And that is where the current story ends. It's now the 16th and I did not receive any acknowledgement of receipt, or indeed the feedback deadline that I had requested from them.

Rewinding just slightly, after three times being told supervisors are busy people I did send a humble but direct mail to them all:

"Firstly I would like to state that I do appreciate busy work schedules and things not always running to plan as I also am also in HE, with an overloaded class semester and final thesis students to guide. Time management is key for me to proceed with my PhD.

By no stretch of the imagination did I think my initial 1000 words were acceptable. But that's why I need constructive feedback, and not a reminder that you are all busy. I do know and appreciate that, but every mail is reminding me you're busy. I sent my document on 30th Sept with a request for feedback on 9th October. If this was not enough time then please do tell me so we can proceed on the right foot. Time frames and deadlines I appreciate are a mutual agreement. When I send to you my revised 1000 words maybe you could state the timeframe for giving me feedback to proceed, and please, not a reminder that you're busy. I need support and to know you are there to help me in this journey. Instead of feeling guilty that I am mailing asking for help".

Well now lets see what the future holds. I appreciate I need their help, but they must also understand my situation – distance learner paying international student fees as I don't live in the UK anymore. I am very keen to meet the paperwork deadline of 16th November and know I need them on my side to achieve this. I may be very proactive but sometimes I do need a little more in response speed time. This is only a 1000 words, what might happen when I'm mailing 10,000 words, I dread to think at this stage! I am hoping that, once this is done, things will smooth out somewhat as the next deadline I want to hit is November next year.

It's a very sunny Friday morning here in Hong Kong. I see my whiteboard on my wall with questions over surveys, ethics forms and quantities staring at me. An area I need to investigate is direction, but who? Now to go back to my first statement, it's a beautiful sunny morning. 'Slowly slowly catch the monkey.' Now its time to put my teacher's hat on and head off to school for my last class of the working week.

Episode 2

The roller coaster

It's now approaching the end of October. I did eventually receive some feedback on my draft registration proposal. After 7 days of waiting I received 'it's coming' and the following day it arrived. There were a couple of key points highlighted from the supervisors, connected with industry practice. I was advised to analyse their procedures for sizing, and, instead of data collecting myself, obtain recent survey results and analyse these instead.

Regarding their first point, this is not an easy task. The fashion industry is highly secretive on how they choose to size their clothing, which is possibly why the industry at large is having many problems, across the board, of fitting clothes for the modern woman.

The second piece of advice referred to sizing surveys. The last British survey was Size UK in which 11,000 women were measured from 1999 to 2003. It is somewhat out of date now, but also a confidential document with only small parts ever published. Mission impossible it feels like!

So putting my 'Tom Cruise' hat on, I contacted my widest network asking for sizing data. When in need, people really do help. Within a few hours I had received three confidential documents on sizing of women's clothing. Great I thought.

It is however a shame my high moment popped like a balloon. Working on Saturday I bumped into a work colleague, professor and author. I asked her for contacts on sizing, knowing the company where she used to work, and explained what my UK supervisors had asked of me. Her response:

'The examination board would not accept industry documents that could not be included in the appendices and cited within the thesis – for confidentiality reasons'. (She also said I) 'Would be breaching ethical standards if I used confidential documents'.

Not deterred, and determined to move forward regardless, I edited my registration document to include 'industry case studies', without specifying what data I would collect and how I might analyse it. My game plan is to purchase products and work from the finished goods backwards. This will give me the information I need, and won't be caught up in the confidential issues; it is an option, which eases my mind.

My version 4 (version 1 being my initial application) was mailed off on 28th October. Now back to my supervisor's deadlines, they said they would reply to me within a period of 14 days, maximum.

After sending off my version 4, I felt somewhat relieved, yet also with nervous apprehension that it may not be approved. Almost one week flew by, busy with my own teaching schedule, but always quick to check my emails every morning, although not moving forward on anything PhD related. I finally found my focus a few days later and started ploughing through data collection, finalising my online survey and planning my route forward. I can see why some PhDs can take years. Its not just about the internal drive and motivation, let alone the time and money to reach the finale, its also about collaborative guidance from your supervisors.

9th November

12 days and no acknowledgement or feedback has been received as yet. The deadline of paperwork submission I wanted to meet is 16th November. Lets see. Somehow I want and need to make this work. This initial stage confirms my direction so it's essential my supervisory team approve it.

11th November, day 14, I chased – and received the first feedback from my supervisor later that day. Now the roller coaster began in earnest! The response suggested edits and some re-arrangements contained within of my registration document. The negative feeling of now not being able to meet the 16th November deadline was overwhelming. Somewhat in haste I mailed my supervisory team, expressing my disappointment over their feedback, some of which I did not agree with, and the timing where I could now not meet the deadline they all knew I was aiming for. It felt like they waited until the last second, knowing my ideal deadline, and now with more feedback to act upon!

Sometimes... and I say maybe only sometimes, it does help to 'scream'. My frustration was let out in the form of a hasty email back, which was heard loud and clear. This actually prompted their initial feedback to be edited (much clearer) and sent to me again, before I even had the chance to review and act upon it. But it was not limited to a single set of suggestions. I have a team of three on my supervisory team. So more comments followed.

It was a crazy few days of editing, sending, receiving back and editing again. Completing the registration paperwork over the weekend I finally emailed it to my team, in time for Monday 16th November.

But, after work that day I rushed home to check emails and, yes, more suggestions for further edits. At 9pm I was still incorporating minor amendments and inserting the additional required information - including a consent form for my data collection. The roller coaster of completing this stage didn't end on the 16th. It was followed by some requests from the research committee asking for additional paperwork from my supervisors. By mid week it was all in place. Phew! 😊

Now it's waiting until the 25th November when my registration documents are put before the Board. I was advised I would hear two weeks later. Now time for some selfreflection before this 'Episode 2' will end with a Yes or No to registration being approved:

Induction and the beginning of my PhD road had been the week 21-25th September. The registration deadline I wanted to meet was 16th November. That's only 8 weeks! I work full time and have a loading of 7 classes this semester, I am also a gym obsessive going every morning to clear my thoughts and set me up for an active day. Registration isn't hard, but it isn't easy either. How can you say what you want in the shortest most coherent way? Adding in historical, theoretical and contemporary contexts? With so many sub sections to the document it doesn't allow any extra room for even one word. Having a team of supervisors who may not be knowledgeable in your specific field doesn't aid the process either. You know what you want to do, but being able to do it under the terms of a PhD may not be compatible with this. You can also be given direction you don't agree with. It was only after my 'scream' that I was told that I do not have to agree with my supervisors' feedback. Nice to know, as long as I can justify my road to be acceptable. However, my way may not be the PhD way, and that's what is a difficult road to learn.

I know this isn't going to be easy but sometimes, and like I said, just sometimes, you do need to stand up for yourself in your path and what you need from your team. It is collaborative work, but yet it's all yours. My PhD will be all consuming for the next 3 years at least. I need a team of guidance and support, yet it is all mine. I think the phrase, "its not what you say, its how you say it" will stand for the duration of my study. I have learnt so much already, and not always the easiest way, on how to work with supervision and guidance, where there is not necessarily a right and a wrong for what you want to do. Justification, passion and knowledge, combined with the desire to expand and learn, taking on board comments but knowing what to reject if it doesn't suit you. I am now concluding Episode 2 of my PhD road. It's the 17th of December and in 8 days I will be lying on a beach knowing I have worked so hard these last three months.

So, over to Registration.... I didn't succeed I am sad to say. I was given feedback and direction from the examining team to work on. I've done this, but have not sent anything off yet. It's now time for me to sit and think a bit more, and to stop acting in haste. I believe the examiners' comments are compulsory to act upon. One comment suggests that I reduce my scope. I'm not quite sure how to react. I like my direction and do not see removing anything would actually get the results I need. It is definitely reflection time.

My deadline set by the examiners is 17th January to resubmit my version 2 for registration. With the end of year celebrations and break my aim is to send the new version to my supervisors early in January. A New Year, with an edited and perfected PhD direction. The beach break will give me some essential time to reflect on what I want to do and how to say it right.

Now before I end this episode I have some great news to share. I applied for a conference in my field of pattern cutting with a paper called 'Stretch to Fit, Made to Fit'. It's an angle of my PhD, which shows how easy it is to prove the differences in how stretch clothing and non-stretch clothing fits the body. Well, I have been accepted and will be presenting in February in the UK. Additionally I will also have my first journal article published. I have managed to write 5300 words for the conference. With some minor edits from their very helpful feedback I received, my journal article will be published just after the conference. I understand by publishing on my PhD topic it will copyright my work.

It is here I say farewell to 2015 and will welcome in 2016 on a beach, relaxed in a way that I hope to free my mind and begin to understand the road to becoming Dr. ...

Episode 3
March 2016

It's now the eve of my first reward for 2016 and a flight to Shanghai for a long weekend to visit my best friend. Wow what a month it has been! In actuality fact my 'wow' didn't stop when I finished writing my previous episode. I took my PhD registration document with me (WHY?!) to review while away in the hope of a brainstorm or two with my best friend.

Unfortunately the brainstorming was rushed; he just wasn't in the mood to think, so tears and frustration followed. I really did feel a writer's block. Failing this stage did really throw me off my tracks more than I actually gave it credit for. I have since found out around 90% of people fail this stage. Is this merely a tactic for examiners to have 'their say' within each new PhD student's work I wonder?

Arriving back home on the 2nd January I still didn't feel like working on my revision. I was scared to do it wrong, had no guidance, or indeed had not asked for any, on how to do it right. When my supervisors tell me they have 10 hours a year for part time students, this I felt was not an issue I could request clarification and direction for.

A few days passed and on the 6th January I suddenly felt the light. The words just flowed. A few revisions and edits and my version 2 was sent off on the same day. I am pleased to say; actually I am over the moon happy to say, feedback from my supervisors was first received on the 9th, merely 3 days later! Well, this was my first of three feedbacks over a few days, and my most qualified supervisor changed what my lead supervisor had advised (she came last)..... hmmm a potential problem for the future, lets hope not.

Their feedback was minor amendments overall and I was happy to revise under their instruction. Version 2 was sent to the examiners ahead of schedule on 14th January, the deadline being the 18th. Now this is my style. I am always early, from waking in the morning to achieving my own deadlines. I was happy. I felt it was a great improvement on the previous version, more direct, less fluff, no quotes, just me.

This gave me renewed energy for my PhD to revise all the work I had previously done. Review, edit, revise and perfect. I have given myself a calendar; a boring looking one with just space for wording, but it is my PhD calendar and has pride of place in my kitchen. January says, "GET ORGANISED" and that's exactly what I have done. I have deadlines set, milestones I have met, some even ahead of schedule. And of course, rewards have been written on my new calendar to motivate me to meet said deadlines. So far, it's working well.

Another possible motivational comment to make is that I have spoken to other PhD students within the same university. A few are not happy with their supervisor's lack of qualifications, length of feedback or indeed general help and support for new students. It's nice to know I am not alone in these feelings. Teaching and learning is definitely not a PhD agenda. Self-direction, might I say frustration, and hurdles to overcome all seem to fit the PhD road.

I have thus far developed a 313-page document for printing in my favourite printers in Shanghai. Nice and cheap and beautifully bound. This will give me a hard copy to review and something to edit and perfect as the road commences. After my long weekend away, I have deadlines set up until the point of leaving for the UK on the 18th February to present at a conference. I also found out one of my supervisors will attend, nice to know from the organiser!

I've managed to also extend my time in the UK so reached out to family and close friends to measure them while I'm home. My sister has kindly agreed to host a "fitting party" and my user manual is prepared to print ahead of this in Shanghai. My support system is in place I am so pleased to say, and my two trips within 20 days; well I'm so excited and happy to have these in place!

My Version 2 feedback is due in on the 10th February; I will be one year and 6 days older then (if it arrives on time) and just 8 days before I get on the plane. If by chance I am rejected, I don't think it will bother me as much this time around. With all the planning I have done this last month I am quite sure of my direction. This document, being only 1000 words, is more about how you say it, not what you want to do, or how you will do it. There's always more than one way to cook an egg ☺ I might just need a new way, or maybe not. Fingers crossed! My favourite is scrambled and boiled. I don't need to explore all eggs to get this document approved!!

Its now 20th March and I did find a third way to boil eggs! Unfortunately I failed Version 2 of my document. The examiners said I had not adhered to version 1 comments and had not had guidance from my supervisors. Very strange as I did get their feedback and I felt it was far clearer and better written. From this, my lead supervisor called a meeting while I was over in the UK. I prepared a document, showing changed from V1 to V2 and asked them to meet and go through before our meeting so I would receive one concise feedback to move forward to V3.

Well, fast tracking life, this obviously didn't happen! Neither did we address the ethics side of my document as my supervisors in the meeting told me there was a standard form to complete – well, there isn't! Only yesterday my V3 was sent to my supervisory team to review. With Easter looming I now have to wait until Mid April for submission, not finding out until early May if I get through. This process has been 'on the go' since September last year, coming up for 7 months just to get a small 1000 words directional document approved. I believe I have written, edited, perfected at least 50 times thus far. Its far from over, I am sure at some point in the not too distant future I will receive multiple feedbacks to edit.

Now not to be despondent, my 313 document has not yet been expanded or indeed reviewed, but my "fitting party" was great! I measured 14 friends and family and now have data to work with and move forward. Possibly not the right way to go about things, but waiting 7 months for a directional document to be approved, well its just not acceptable to me. Things can and need to move quicker.

On this note I sign off. Hopefully my next episode will be full of the joys of success and not a despondent version 4! Just a little PS, my conference was amazing! My PhD angle is now being published in a great academic journal. I was well received by professors in my field and congratulated on my field of research 😊 .

Episode 4 January 2017

It's taken me some time to write the final version of episode 4 of my PhD journey. It has been quite a road! Now, it's January 2017, 16 months since I started my PhD; and I am going to try and put pen to paper to recall my journey from where I left off. It wasn't easy. In fact it was possibly one of the worst experiences of my life, and definitely of my education.

At the start of 2016 I purchased a calendar just for my PhD and at the beginning of each month I wrote a key word or two to motivate me through the month, April in fact was Motivation. My registration deadline was the 25th and I needed to make it through this 3rd round of the same document. My energy level for re-writing the same words in a different way was wavering, so it appeared was my supervisor's feedback. By this time, things that had previously been removed were being added back in, word play was a vital part of the back and forth communication and I believe the whole process was tiring for everyone involved.

May - Review, Improve and Deliver

And yes, I failed version 3, being notified on the 18th of the month. This was worse than before; I was also notified that if I failed the 4th registration the university would recommend that I discontinue my studies. This is not in the handbook and came as a very big shock. From the middle of March I had started to express dissatisfaction with my supervisory team to the research office, asking for the procedure to change supervisors, as I felt mine did not have the knowledge in my field to even help me get through this first hurdle. Due to version 3 being with the examiners from the beginning of April, I decided to hold off until the result was known and request officially afterwards.

June – Determination

Version 4 of registration was emailed to the committee, with very little assistance from my supervisors, and on the 9th I filed a change of supervisor request. In the meantime, waiting for the results of my change of supervisors request, and indeed my version 4 registration result, I was expected to go to the UK for the final compulsory research degrees week, and meet with my current supervisory team.

I had found out that my supervisors were aware of my change of request, and the content, all the reasons I expressed in the way things had been up until now... they knew it all. I expressed to management that I would like to meet potential new supervisors while at the compulsory week, and not my current team who I felt I was not working smoothly with. This was denied, stating I had to wait for version 4 registration document to be approved, before they would consider a new supervisory team for me. At this stage I also recommended an external supervisor whose field of research is the same as my own, yet this request was ignored at this stage with the same reason, wait until you pass your registration.

While in London in June, my first meeting with my supervisors was fraught. At the beginning of the meeting, my chief supervisor told me that the university dean had told him "if she wishes to change supervisors she will be dropped from the course", she being me! I felt very much between a rock and a hard place. Before this meeting my supervisors had been made aware of my change of request, and all the reasons stated, and began to question every comment that I had made in our meeting, stating comments like "we never said that, we never did this", almost reciting a defence against my change of request reasons.

My second, the most experienced supervisor, seemed very confrontational with me during our meeting, denying having given specific advice, things of which I had email evidence that were said. She spent a long time looking on her laptop for the email evidence of the conversation and things told, a very disruptive activity when we are sitting having a face to face meeting. She also needed repeated clarification for an experiment I had conducted, not believing my own word that it was possible. She did not accept or acknowledge my opinion and seemed more intent on arguing back. After repeating herself, and me trying to explain in the most simplistic way, my 3rd supervisor was asked to clarify, (she is my team member in a similar field), what I was saying was indeed correct. Luckily for me my 3rd supervisor indeed confirmed what I had done and was doing was indeed possible.

Unfortunately in this type of situation I tend to defend myself instead of being quiet, so the meeting was indeed fraught. In hindsight, I should of just accepted, and then mailed to confirm my side of events at a later date. Although that's easier said than done. A lot of the conversation revolved around the comments I had made on my change of supervisor request, where the supervisors wanted clarification of what/why I had said things, and then they wanted to defend their side.

One of the key reasons the supervisors wanted the meeting was to complete an annual report on my progression. They presented this report to me during our meeting, saying that they felt a lot of our 'issues' were due to my lack of understanding of the PhD progress, the fact it was self initiated learning and they were there to guide only. This I felt was very harsh, when in an email one supervisor said to do one thing, then the following day the other supervisor retracted that comment and advised something different. Somehow I was meant to get through their incoherent feedback to make my own decision on moving forward.

The meeting couldn't of been over quicker before I rushed to get the train to my parents, past a pub for an essential large glass of wine! I was furious and really didn't know where I needed to turn. A few days later I returned home, then flew back out again the next day to present at a conference in Vietnam.

It was while I was at the conference, an urgent email came through from my supervisor for me to complete my part of the annual report and mail it back the next day, all while on location without my computer. Many other students had received this annual report ahead of the compulsory week. As somewhat expected, the report was very derogatory towards my approach over the last year, reading much like a defence for themselves and their actions/advice against my change of supervisory request comments. With a little guidance from a colleague who was also at the conference with me, my reply was non emotional and factual. Not the easiest thing to write when your full of so much emotion over a situation that just feels like its getting worse and worse by the day.

July - Ambition doesn't give up easily

On the 21st July I found out that version 4 had failed, so on the 28th July I emailed a stage 1 complaint to the dean of research saying I was unhappy with the supervision I had received. I referred to the handbook and found other things my supervisors had not done, for example a reading list. I tried to collate some evidence against them from the handbook in my defence of the situation.

At the same time, I filed a dispute for version 4 registration document result, which meant my document would be reviewed by a higher university body to see if indeed it failed criteria. I felt so strongly that had I of had different guidance I would not have been in this negative situation. So now, I had two documents going to the university body to be reviewed - my failed registration, where I was allowed to dispute the decision, and my complaint against the supervisors' guidance.

My supervisors did not email me upon my failing, in fact since the annual report email I never heard from them again. I spoke a lot to fellow classmates in our compulsory week, some were experiencing difficulties but none quite to the extent of myself, others had successfully changed supervisors, and others had external experts to guide them also, all the things I wish I had of been allowed.

August - find a balance, if you don't change things, things wont change
With summer holidays many things were on hold. Life moved forward slowly as this was now affecting my social side, my mood and indeed my life. I thought I had made a wonderful decision to continue my own education, and to return to study where I had studied at undergraduate level. In hindsight, school reputation and the rose tinted glasses of things being the same as before were to my disadvantage. I should of applied to a university where there were professors in my field and then maybe I wouldn't be in this situation.

This whole situation had been going on for the whole year, trying to pass a document through a committee, the same format of which was my initial application to complete a research degree. The process seemed so wrong, how could I of been accepted for a PhD program with a certain field of research to continuously have the same idea rejected at committee?

September - strength is a state of mind

I was determined to overturn this negativity and make it work, somehow.... On the 6th of September my first complaint (stage 1 complaint) against my supervisors was rejected. In fact the word they used is 'dismissed'. Oh I cried. How could this be so unfair? It was about this time that a provost professor from another UK university came to visit my university. So I requested an audience. He accepted, and my 30 minutes turned quickly into two hours. I explain my situation and asked for his advice. He told me to continue with a stage 2 complaint, the highest level I am able to do myself, and if this was not satisfactory I was advised to go to the Independent Adjudicator for advice.

I also contacted the student union and befriended a lovely lady who seemed to just catch me before I fell. Now I was determined to make this work, and turn over this decision. With the student union's help I formatted a 12-page document in my defence against my supervisors, showing email evidence where there was confusion, contradiction and lack of guidance. My complaint was registered on the 17th with a one-month to receive a committee decision under their rules.

Some luck comes in small bite sizes, and on the 22nd of September the university committee overturned my university's decision to fail my version 4, and I was accepted to continue on my research path, I received this news on the 4th October. This was amazing good news and gave me new hope. It made me feel that even if my university did not see my research, the higher committee full of professors and PhD candidates did.

However, the recommendation was for me to continue with my current university and team. I would have been able to submit a second change of supervisor form at this stage, but due to the stage 2 complaint also in the pipeline, I decided to wait to hear the outcome.

October - keep the faith

I moved forward with a conference call to the university committee on the 26th of October, to justify my complaint. A member of the student union was in the meeting, as were two student representatives as impartial members of the committee. One week later the result was in, 'dismissed!' However, the committee brought up many points where they felt my university could do things so much better. I was now able to continue, but only with my current team. So... determined not to just quit, I submitted a second change of supervisor form. This was rejected, stating the university did not have anyone suitable, and they advised me to continue my studies elsewhere. It was at this stage that the head of the academic board contacted me. I needed to sign to continue studies, or sign to not..... how could I continue in this negative space with people who have not supported me. How could I even contact them to 'start afresh'? My second supervisor made it very clear she would be confrontational towards me and any ideas I had, this shows a clash of personalities where the 'teacher' was willing to argue and debate in a negative capacity and not be the bigger person.

November - Determination

It was easier to walk away, well it wasn't! Not a decision I made lightly, but to stay in a situation, which was just unhealthy, well, why do we do it, so I walked away, somehow determined to continue my research path in one way or another. However, November was 'Determination' so I contacted a professor at another UK university that I had visited in February when I was presenting a paper at a conference. This lady I had networked for being in my field and even at the beginning of my research journey she kindly emailed me a few pages full of journals and books, which would guide me in my research. I wanted to go and say hello to her for being so kind at the beginning of my journey. My email towards the end of November was as brief as 'will you accept me as a year two student?' an email came back the next day saying, 'yes, complete the official application!'

December - Balance and Plan

My mother came to visit on the 2nd, to celebrate her birthday on the 8th, just the day I was invited for an interview with this second UK University via Skype. Two days after the interview I received an offer letter of a place on their PhD research program, to start from January 2017. I am now very pleased to say I am a year two student at another university, with a supervisor in my field, and a co-supervisor who just seems wonderful, friendly, knowledgeable and approachable.

I wonder if I wasn't so determined to succeed and make this work if I would now be in this situation. For anyone reading, doing a PhD and going through a hard time, I have the following advice; admittedly only one year in, but don't we all need advice sometimes, and guidance. I got mine from the provost professor.

1. It doesn't matter the university reputation, what matters, is your supervisors being qualified in your field.
2. Do read the student handbook. Its there to protect us. There were things in there that I was able to quote in my complaint that I was unaware of.
3. The student union is GREAT! I didn't realise before, I had never dealt with them, but they are impartial and so supportive.
4. Don't every give up. Find a way, support yourself mentally, don't think its you. The key words monthly help me, just seeing the words later in the month made me smile, sometimes cry, but reminded me I am strong. Just keep strong, and keep the faith in your own research and abilities.

I hope my road forward is smooth, for sure I don't need any more rough terrain, I think I had enough last year to last me a lifetime! Additional and to end, I did take my focus off my PhD for a while, just long enough to write a conference paper which I will be presenting in Los Angeles in July, hopefully being selected for an academic journal too. I also have my first academic publication going through for review, and in my field of education teaching I have other projects to raise my profile, all connected to my research and my passion of making clothes.

Well the end of my first academic year, and the start of a new year. Episode 5 I hope will be full of light and joy with a peaceful path forward. Fingers crossed!

Episode 5

September 2017

I decided from 2017 I did not need my monthly key words for inspiration and motivation. I just needed a good plan of action! My first Skype call to my supervisory team was at the beginning of February once all the enrolment documents had been completed. I am very pleased to report I have a team of four not two! This may have made me cautious, too many cooks in the kitchen type feeling, but it seems my director of studies has recruited three experienced lecturers at the same university to co supervise me, and they are all my field! I prepared a document ahead of the meeting, an agenda of where I am with my research to move forward.

And then.... The news I was dreading, I had to go through their registration process of a 1000-word document before I can begin. It is not with dread I write this, as their process seems a little more organised, with specific forms for ethics, insurance, consent forms etc. The actual 1000 words also does not have to be broken down into specific sections, which enables me to be clearer in my subject area. I also have just 6 months to pass this stage. When I questioned my team their response was that they interviewed me and accepted my research as being PhD worthy, it needed this process for the university at large to accept it is also PhD worthy. They said I was likely to receive comments back as very rarely a student goes through from the first proposal. However, if I experienced difficulty to pass this stage it was indeed their guidance in helping me. Now I am relieved and have moved forward, my documents are currently being reviewed by my team, (it's now the 19th February) and we have another Skype call planned for a week's time when my team will give me feedback on my documents. We have a plan – 'we' being my supervisory team and me.

After the first call I received many emails and body scanning data information, which I will be using in my research, connections to other staff members to aid me, and links to documents to help my research. Wow! I was overwhelmed at their proactive response and their help. I do so hope this continues throughout my studies. It certainly is a good start. At the end of February I received three feedbacks from my new supervisors team. Exactly what I was dreading, three different directions. However, this time I'm stronger, I know this is my research and I just need to come across in the right way to get through the committee. I'm taking time to digest the different directions and aim to fulfil version 2, and then give valid reasons to the team why I didn't act on different feedback. Justification might help I think.

It's now the beginning of September and I am going to recall my journey from where I left off. One thing I feel about supervisors is they each have their own area of expertise, and for me as the student I need to digest their comments, not get frustrated, and use what suits me, and what I believe will enhance my direction. That's exactly what I did moving forward. A couple more edits arrived before I flew over to the UK in June to meet my team.

While I was there two things happened, firstly one of my supervisors resigned from my team. This was actually good news for me, less cooks in my kitchen! The second was an amazing experience, one of my team, a researcher very experienced in body measurements and pattern cutting, debated with me on certain published methodologies of construction. My knowledge on this was, or is, sound, so it was a very interesting conversation between us. It was just what I needed, justification that my team are my field and conversations like this make me realise I know my field and I am sure of what I'm doing.

At the beginning of July my 1000-word proposal was sent off to the reviewers. I found out there are only two, and these two people will remain my reviewers throughout my PhD road. They will also scrutinize the next step, which is actually only 6000 words. With the UK summer holiday's feedback was somewhat delayed but I am very pleased to say I passed, confirming my research is PhD worthy. There were minor comments on improving my methodology but overall an excellent result. I have to stick to the universities time frame to complete their stage 2, but then I am allowed to zoom ahead and finish earlier, or as soon as my research is worthy and complete. I am now moving forward, a little slowly for the next few months as my own university teaching term has started. But with a mission ahead of me, I completed a lot of research over the summer and am now in a reviewing and editing stage. I plan to go back to my university in the UK in February, then again in June, to conduct experiments and measuring of a selection of women by 3D scanner. My supervisors are very supportive; we have a nice monthly Skype meeting set up which enables me to move forward, knowing I have the support of my team. They also have a database of women's body measurements I am allowed to use for my research.

Compared to this time a year ago, I am immensely happy with my research thus far. I feel I am in a university that supports me, with a supervisory team who are knowledgeable in my field and are therefore able to guide me in the right direction. On a side note, I presented at a conference in Los Angeles in July, and have a published in a book from the proceedings. I am on track for one research paper or book chapter and one conference per academic year. My goal is still to have a research record by the time I graduate with my PhD. Presenting at conferences and publishing work in my research field makes me feel like an academic. I am being recognised for what I speak, the research I do, and am hopefully building a reputation in my niche community for having something valid to say

Episode 6

September 2018

It has been a year since I put pen to paper to document my PhD studies and I can say possibly the best year yet! Even better than last year. It really does make a difference being at a university that supports you, with their knowledge and their time. However, all said and done it is also me. A PhD is mine, my research, my path. Supervisors are guides only. It is far from the usual mode of education, they do not tell me what to do, merely give suggestions. Now this was possibly an uphill battle in the beginning. Isn't it human nature to want confirmation that you're on the right track? Well, a PhD doesn't really provide that, sure if you go 'off track' the supervisors should tell you, but it really is a path of self-discovery in the research.

I am now heading towards confirmation stage, being part time, in January, and its full steam ahead to get within word count. This year I have been very privileged with my job which has allowed me ample time to get stuck into the library, head in books to find out more scientific proof that my research is unique and most definitely a contribution to new knowledge. A good library is a must, so is the time to search for things that you didn't know existed. I think in reflection to the beginning I knew my research could make a difference and was indeed new, however proving that to PhD level is another thing. I particularly found a book I did not know existed and this has done just that for me. Never stop searching for new things, even when you think you have all you need, there could be a little surprise waiting somewhere for you.

So in fact at this stage, September 2018 I am around half way through to completing in word count, with about half the work left to do. Confirmation requires only a quarter of what I have written, which will possibly be harder than completing my research! How to say what you need in the least amount of words is truly an art form I am still learning. Having completed more than required has however, given me the direction and content to know how my path will finish. I not only can now prove beyond a shadow of doubt the beginning, I have the data to show the end, from the body measurements made available to me. With so much analysis of data I can see the problems in my research field and have a solution. The next step will be commercializing my research and getting it adopted into industry.

I only made it to my University once last year, but have monthly skype meetings, or email communication, sending documents and receiving feedback. This gives me the target to know every month I need to have progressed sufficiently to move forward. Even with whatever life throws at me, the regular contact enables me to always give some time to my research. I have passion for my subject and I am eager to find out more information, develop more experiments and read more books.

So lastly, my reflection back to the beginning. Well first I didn't know enough, I knew they end, but I needed to find out more about the beginning, and the road forward. It is my path, my research, my findings, and my future doctorate. My passion for my topic and finding new knowledge keeps me going, motivates me to find out more, write more and work towards the final. Also the drive to commercialize my research motivates me to get it finished. Having this future goal, what I can do with this, its not just a research project that goes to the library once completed and forgotten, it really does have a future, a new passion, to make my research commercial. This drives me to finish, to make sure no stone is unturned with my findings