

Penny's PhD Diary

Extract 1

The Journey so far

16/10/2015

It's not as if one day I just woke up and decided I wanted to become a Professor and work at a University for the rest of my life, nor do I currently fully know why I chose to embark on this PhD journey. It was more of a gradual thing.

As a child, my mother says I have always known the strength of my own mind, at times disobedient and mostly head strong, she also states that I have always been ambitious and possessed a strong sense of justice. That said, I never truly knew what I wanted to work as when I got older; but what I did know was my ability to handle responsibly and the joy I took (and still do take) in praise, recognition and being asked for advice. As far as I can remember, I have always been ambitious often identifying high powered jobs such as a surgeon, architect, and lawyer- yet through work experience and study none of the above have called me as a vocation.

Looking back through my childhood, I grew up in a small town with a loving family, my dad always encouraged my sister and I to stay at education and do the best we could, he constantly reminded us that education was the way to succeed in life and that it would 'stand us in good stead'. Even to this day he randomly expresses how proud he is of our achievements- my sister a Psychology Graduate and myself a Law Grad, before going on to retell the story of our journey to secondary (and in my case grammar school); how I initially refused to go to the grammar after not achieving the sought after 'A' grade in the transfer test and how he, 'laid down the law' to the school principal, insisting that as I had passed the grammar was for me- I was being given a chance I had no option but to take- one that both he and my mother missed out on.

He then goes on to remind us where we got out tertiary education and lovingly states how happy this made him and how proud our grandparents would be, had they been alive at the time. Interestingly, he never mentions my Masters qualifications and when the topic of my doctoral studies arises, he smiles, sometimes laughs puzzlingly as if in disbelief that one of his own daughters could reach such a level in education.

When I reflect on this, the real reason I chose to do a PhD arose after graduating from the University for the second time in 2012 with a Masters in Criminology. I found myself a little lost in the career world. I had achieved some pretty impressive marks throughout the year- at one stage hitting an 82, at which point one of my supervisors suggested that I consider applying for a doctoral scholarship.

In true student style, I put it off, justifying my procrastination with the tale of 'taking one year out of full time education' and submitting a proposal the following year. My aspirations of attaining high level corporate positions with ease did not come so easily.

Thus, a stream of low level jobs, four years, 3 rejections and a lot of tears later I finally got accepted on a full scholarship. Thankfully, I did not have to go through an interview to be awarded the scholarship. Not knowing where to turn throughout this phase and still slightly undecided, I have clung on to my hard-earned education in the hope of achieving a directorship or academic position post PhD qualification.

I am now three weeks in and have been truly blessed this far, in that I have 2 fantastic supervisors, both of which are described in the office as 'academic heavy weights', who are well known in the field with a long list of previous doctoral students. Both my supervisors helped me immensely with my proposal often drafting and redrafting with me late at night or very early in the mornings. Since I have enrolled they have kept in contact via email, provided me with a course of reading, and encouraged me to take time away from the books to tap into my creative side. They have met with me twice and have scheduled another meeting with me in 2 weeks' time.

Now more than ever, I am determined to succeed. I have planned to run a student led conference on alternative education, order PhD business cards to embark on academic networking, apply for various additional research bursary's and attend many CV building seminars. I have been chosen as the school representative on our postgraduate forum, applied to sit on the student-staff consultative committee, decorated my desk and read copious amounts of literature.

I have begun my study days at 8am finishing at 7pm and kept a record of what I have and have not done. Overall, I am determined to gain as much as possible from my time as a PhD student. To me, this means finishing on time with evidence of my capabilities and potential which will hopefully help me transition with ease into a position such as director or junior lecturer.

Extract 2
06/01/2016

Forming–storming–norming–performing?

Over the Christmas holidays I gave myself a thorough and well-deserved break for roughly two full weeks. I did little other than sleep, read novels, engage in a little festive frivolity, eat and be with family. Of course this will be a perfect time for my parents to boast about my PhD studies at family parties and also for my distant relatives to confusingly try to make sense of what exactly it is that I do.

Aside from this, I also used the break to reflect on my journey thus far with the aim of making some positive changes in the New Year. I was feeling pretty exasperated just before the holidays. I realised I was maybe going too hard too fast, the early morning starts and hour-long-journey I had to make before fighting for a parking space was stressful enough considering this was all before I sat down to do any work!

I began by looking through my diary where I had recorded all my meetings, training events, conferences, even coffee dates with colleagues and friends. In total, I had attended 81 events, some of which were two or three days long (i.e. training, conferences) as well as giving two presentations, one to the university and another to a health board on my proposed area of study, reading groups, special interest groups, seminars etc.

This comforted me a little as I had left some unfinished work behind in the office before the holidays and was feeling rather guilty about doing so. I would highly recommend that all first year postgraduate students record all their activities as it really does help you when having an 'off day'. Reviewing how much you have achieved and how far you've come makes the less productive day less painful.

Additionally, this also helped me to realise some of my core strengths and pleasures throughout the process thus far; mainly networking and public speaking. I thoroughly enjoyed each of my training sessions; I found them useful and inspiring. Likewise I also love meeting new people, sharing ideas and explaining my research, getting feedback and identifying new possibilities for collaboration. The presentations, although nerve racking, allowed me to showcase my ideas whilst making my face known and also helped me to attract new friends.

This hard work had also paid off as I also managed to get elected for some more positions of authority in the department including president of an academic student-led initiative and chair of a scholarly group. Both of which are fantastic CV contributors but also interesting ventures to take part in. However there was also a downside, I

quickly realised the small minor issue that was the root of my unhappiness – a lack of confidence in myself generally, but more specifically in writing.

Since I began my research I have encountered a few adversities I could never have planned for. First, I became friendly with a final year PhD student who I saw as inspirational and a role model to begin with. It quickly transpired this person was not who I thought they were; aside from making rude and borderline racist comments about international students in the department, this individual can also be very aggressive in their views, how they address people and also when things do not go to plan.

I was on the receiving end of this behaviour for a short while until I disagreed with an idea this person had. This made things slightly awkward in the office, as this person is not open to any form of discussion following disagreements and can be very rude and patronising. I would not allow this to hamper my progress, I continued to attend campus as usual and ignore any rude behaviour.

I have not had any more dealings with this individual. However, various anonymous signs, posters etc have appeared in our common area on controversial issues in what I believe is an attempt to rile others.

Around the time this disagreement occurred various items in the office have gone missing. Despite reporting this to college administrators little remedy has been offered. Various students have discussed this with me. With others I have removed myself from this environment as we cannot afford to replace necessary study materials. Some of us have chosen to work from home, others in different areas of the university often transporting the materials we need for any given day in a school bag. This has unnerved me slightly due to the lack of security and accountability in our building. Yet I remain more disappointed at the lack of support we have received from the campus administrators on this matter, they were very dismissive and it felt like they were panning us off.

Next, I became slightly disheartened in between my second and third meeting with my supervisor. I was assigned a piece of work surrounding ethical approval as well as an essay to write on top of finishing my reading course, auditing modules as well as meeting my employment requirements. I worked hard to get the first assignments completed and submitted them to both supervisors.

Much to my disappointment my first supervisor had no idea why I had sent this work to her. She stated that it was way too early to think of working on such forms and would need to discuss this with me as soon as possible. Now, I know this is bound to happen as academics and professors are busy people, and I was warned about this at

my induction day. Nevertheless, when I received that email, my heart sank; I think it was the immediate sense of loneliness I felt. I assumed that my supervisors were as involved in my work as I am. I had been working so hard completing my tasks/assignments on time, doing everything possible to please my supervisors whilst contending with difficult students, feeling slightly isolated and exhausted from the constant travelling.

On reflection, I think this was the straw that broke the camel's back. Once I explained that I was completing work assigned to me, the confusion was quickly rectified. Still, the damage was already done.

Around this time I well and truly 'hit a brick wall' in relation to work output. At this stage in life, I have come to realise that if you remain hungry for success, motivated, enjoy your work and work harder than the rest, then success surely follows. My motivation levels plummeted and I found myself staring at computer screens for long periods of time in a never-ending writer's block. I was not excited to read my books and I couldn't rely on my creativity to think of new ideas on how to showcase my work or build my academic CV.

The Friday before Xmas break I was dreading going into university. I was heading to the last part of a three-day-long module. Before this I had been asked to write a piece of work that I struggled so badly with. I made three attempts at writing it before submitting my incomplete draft.

Starting and stopping the work, feeling overwhelmed and underprepared placed immense pressure on me. I was travelling to the office at the weekends working late into the night and losing some sleep at the thought of heading back in the next day. All my enthusiasm and determination well and truly went out the door as I began to resent my tasks, sacrificing my spare time to spend it alone in an empty office and becoming increasingly worn out. I remember thinking 'why can I not get this, I cannot do this, maybe this PhD is really not for me'.

Things came to head one weekend when I burst into tears for no real reason. My partner was there to comfort me, and once I calmed down I decided it was time to 'press on' and get this burden off my shoulders. I met with my supervisor for the third time since October to discuss this work. Immediately she told me to take some pressure off myself when writing. She confirmed that she was happy with my progress and that things would be a lot easier if I was not so hard on myself. She tasked me with redrafting some forms I had submitted, yet due to my tiredness and loss of motivation I could not look at the work until after the holidays- she was more than understanding and even praised me on completing my work. However, I remain dissatisfied with the

quality of my writing and feel as though I am not capable of completing the tasks at hand.

Foolishly, I spoke to some second and third year research students looking for some positive reinforcement and encouragement - only to be met with further cynicism and negativity about the lack of job prospects post qualification and financial constraints, before going to dismiss my concerns with comments like, 'sure you are only in your first year, why are you worrying?'

Some students have gone as far to say that they really dislike their work with some wishing they never started! Some students *have* been really helpful often sharing similar experiences and feelings from the beginning of their journey and offering advice such as writing as much as possible on a regular basis to get used to the process and attending as many events as possible to make new friends and reduce feelings of isolation.

I read prior to starting the PhD that students often suffer from a condition called the 'imposter syndrome'. Namely, individual are unable to internalise their successes and attribute their achievements to luck, timing, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent and competent than they believe themselves to be.

Initially, when I read this I found it improbable and unrealistic. However, a training course specifically for female PhD candidates on this topic is has been offered for postgraduates. I have enrolled on this to get additional support.

Adding fuel to the fire, my grandmother took unwell over the Christmas break and was admitted to hospital with heart failure. Simultaneously, I contracted a viral throat infection followed by a kidney infection which I believe was by body's way of saying 'enough is enough now'.

I dedicated myself to authentic 'downtime' whilst I beginning to think myself through the past couple of months putting things into perspective. I almost feel slightly guilty that I would get into such a tizzy over writing and tell myself I am 'no good' and 'should pack it all in' when my elderly granny who is fully blind, is able to sit in a hospital bed, whilst suffering with heart failure and still remain positive, selfless and optimistic.

Before she would even discuss her health she would want to know all about my sister and me. How we are keeping and what is going on in our daily lives? Thus, aside from all the literature I have read this past three months, coupled with the copious training seminars I have attended, the main lessons I have learnt focus on gratitude, dealing

with stress and time management. I know the rest will fall into place if I can manage to control my emotions and behaviour.

Writing to me is a skill, and like any other skill it requires mastery to benefit from it and, whilst I have not mastered it just yet, I have the core values of hard work, determination, energy and enthusiasm to get there.

Now that I am well rested and had some time off I am ready to come back with a bang. I have set up a home office, which will cut out the unnecessary stress of travelling to and from campus. So I have a spacious office with a state of the art printer and all my resources around me.

I have started keeping a reflective journal on my thoughts not just related to my work but also monitoring my mood, stress levels and detailing how much I plan to do in a week and how long I have to do it. I am keeping 'to do lists' and I am about to start reading for a journal submission I plan to work on over this week and next.

I really cannot emphasize enough how important it is to make some time for reflections. Allowing myself the space and time to consider my journey so far, thinking through my problems and then offering myself solutions has been very cathartic but also practically useful! Overall, I still feel I need to focus even more on my research, whilst making time for the fun events and building my confidence remains a work in progress.

I still feel blessed to have my primary supervisor who always responds promptly and takes an interest in my life outside research and academia. The training and support on offer from the university itself is world class, it's just a matter of seeking it out. Moving forward my biggest test will be to maintain high motivation and becoming a better friend to myself!

On a more positive note, I have been encouraged by another department to apply for a part time lecturing position within a different subject area. This position will involve the design and delivery of two one-hour lectures per week for a total of twelve weeks, the creation of a module handbook, marking and assessment duties as well as providing one available office hour per week to allow students to discuss any concerns they may have. This would be a dream come true for me - premature success amongst my peers if you like, but then again this could cause some angst amongst my supervisors who are already displeased about my aspirations to work part time and study.

Glutton for Punishment

Reading through my last diary extract it is almost comical that I vowed to take the time to reflect on my research journey, make time for myself and also build my confidence. That is not to say that my good intentions were wasted as this behaviour lasted for roughly about two weeks before my anxious competitive streak took over! Thankfully I was unsuccessful in my Lectureship application as this would simply not be doable given my current work commitments.

In early January I was approached by a dear friend who is also working on his PhD who asked if I would consider submitting an abstract to a legal journal he was co-editing with a senior Professor in the School of Law. The journal was planning a special edition on my subject area and I have been pondering with the idea of securing publication since completing my master's qualification and securing my doctoral scholarship. In addition to this, my friend is at the same stage as me and has already published numerous articles in esteemed journals and was now co-editing- how could I resist!

Thinking back I thought this would be a great way for me to refresh my legal knowledge and also to kill two birds with one stone by writing a considerable part of my thesis on the legal context of my research subject. The word limit was 10,000 and I knew that due to my writing style I would reach the full limit and possibly go over. Before I knew it I was back to working 12 hour days, getting up at 6am and sometimes going to bed after 12. It didn't help that I was also managing a student initiative within my department as well as teaching two hours a week on the university open learning programme.

In addition to this, I had applied to a well-known international programme which granted its participants a unique summer work placement in the USA as well as a prestigious leadership and management qualification upon graduation. The interview process was gruelling and lasted a full day at the University. It was very competitive and I came away feeling as though I had performed well but in my view possibly not well enough to top the competition. Much to my surprise, towards the end of January I received an email from the CEO to say I had been accepted and that I would be departing on the 4th of June for the States.

I was elated, however this also came with additional work commitments which would last for a further 12 months, the first of which was a three day conference weekend which required an overnight trip! I simply would not pass on this opportunity and replied agreeing to all the terms and conditions. The conference was at the beginning

of April and I knew I would be under a lot of pressure at this stage to have at least a first draft of my article done and working on editing. I simply put the date in my wall calendar and carried on with my research.

Things became borderline unmanageable when I received an email from our PhD coordinator saying that my upgrade had been scheduled for early May and my papers were now due on the 30th of April- the same date my article was due for submission.

Up until this point I had convinced myself that my article would double up as my literature review for upgrade- I could not have been more wrong. I knew the date was drawing closer however I think I downplayed it as my supervisor was so happy with my progress and full of praise that this almost gave me a false confidence about my work; either that or I simply underestimated the level of work I had to do!

I was working at full speed, writing the article, researching new readings for my PhD, designing weekly lectures for my teaching duties, managing twenty undergrad students for my student-led initiative, working one day a week in my part time job as well as trying to conceptualise what exactly I wanted to do methodologically speaking for my PhD. In spite of this I was still keeping my head above water.

My friend who suggested writing the article was a massive support. He too was feeling the pressure as he was preparing for upgrade, had numerous work commitments and was not only co-editing the journal but also writing an article for submission. He was able to help me with referencing issues, restructuring my work and finding judgments as well as summarising them.

It is hard to explain, but for me, when in the depths of writing, regardless of how much reading, planning or preparation you do, I will always find myself second guessing what I produce, questioning if what I'm arguing is really right and in some instances convinced that I should give up. It is easy for me to say this now as the work is complete, yet at the time it was a real struggle. My excuse primarily centres on the fact that I have not looked at any legislative work since I graduated from my first degree. However, if I am honest with myself I spend a lot of time comparing myself to my friend and getting annoyed at myself that I was not at the same standard. Reflecting now I think I realise we are simply both successful just naturally gifted in different ways and my continued practice of self-criticism is the main issue.

I am proud that I got the work done. In total I wrote something like 20,000 words, which to me seems like a crazy amount in 4 months. The process of cutting and refining was particularly painful. Every day I was getting closer and closer to the end point as I knew my work was narrowing and getting more specific which was fabulous but also incredibly slow!

When I got up each morning at 6am after eating breakfast and a quick shower, I would write as much as possible for as long as possible. I tended to take a break usually around 2pm sometimes until 4 sometimes until 5. During this time I would meet my friend, eat and go for a long walk. We would usually spend the first 15mins offloading on each other before brainstorming more ideas, planning next steps and reassuring each other. It all sounds rather dramatic now, but this is honestly what it took for the both of us!

Half way through my supervisor asked if I would help her with a conference she was leading at the university. Aware that I had not yet gained any first hand academic experience in organising conferences I agreed enthusiastically and also volunteered my friend! I really needed a break from the writing at that stage and was reassured that the conference topic would fit well with my thesis.

All in all there was very little work in the conference. We simply had to escort guests, ensure they were registered and point delegates in the direction of tea and coffee as well as help to clean up at the end of the day. It proved a great opportunity to network as I met the majority of key workers in my field and got new applicable readings and resources for both my article and upgrade.

My supervisor explained towards the end of the conference that this event was part of a special conference series taking place across the country- automatically my ears perked up. She stated that she would not be able to make the next one but may be able to send my friend and I in her place.

I couldn't believe it, I remembered thinking 'result!' what she failed to mention at that stage was that we would both be required to give a presentation on our work so far- for me I thought what work? I haven't even passed upgrade yet! She reassured me that sharing information on the article I was working on and my secondary research thus far would suffice. She suggested that I amend a presentation I gave to Masters Students the week before which also saved me some time.

It was quite the novelty as I got a taste of the life of an academic- being flown to a conference to speak, discussing my work at great length and further networking- I loved it. My supervisor contacted me soon after I returned home to say I got a glowing report from her colleagues who commended us both on what I had presented. Aware that I was still snowed under and in the midst of writing she told me to contact her when I was nearing the end and we would meet to discuss upgrade and possible panel examiners.

Towards the end of April things finally came together and I submitted my article on time. I had roughly a week and a half until my upgrade papers were due and arranged to meet my supervisor for what I anticipated would be a smooth session discussing my article and how I could mould it into my necessary upgrade papers- I could not have been more wrong.

Initially she did congratulate me and told me the paper was well written however she also, very bluntly, told me she was particularly worried for my PhD progression, as she felt I had taken my eye off the end goal and was trying too much to be like an academic rather than a student.

I was completely shocked. I responded by telling her that from the beginning, until this meeting I was working as hard as I possibly could, much harder than most other students and had also built relationships with key actors in my field who would grant me immediate access. I also told her that since September I had written something like 50,000 words in total to which she responded, 'so do you think you should have your PhD already?'

I was completely taken back and feeling deflated. In spite of this we managed to make a plan where I would make an essay plan for each of the papers and submit it to her the next day and beginning working on the papers over the weekend.

As I got up to leave, I had just put my hand on the door handle when she told me she had one more thing to discuss. She then asked me not to discuss anything we had talked about with other students. Completely confused and semi shocked I asked her to elaborate. As it turned out, another member of staff wrongfully reported that I was sharing information about another student (the one I previously disagreed with) with others.

I was already sleep deprived, worried about upgrade and also upset that our meeting did not go well- needless to say when I was accused of gossiping I got very emotional. I had felt the change of mood during this supervision session, yet thought my supervisor was frustrated, annoyed and possibly disappointed in me due to my work. The shock as well as realisation that the meeting was sour due to the accusation being made upset me to the point of tears. I tried to state my piece- rather unsuccessfully at that- made my excuses and left as soon as possible.

I decided I would try reaching out to my second supervisor to get her perspective on my work. I was very conscious not to mention the disagreement as I know the likelihood that both academics and others talk to each other about students and in some cases are friends.

Much to my disappointment the response was not what I had hoped for. She instructed me that she could not even comment without speaking to my first supervisor but offered an opportunity to phone her should I need to. I immediately said yes and asked when would suit. I am still awaiting a response.

I found this even more upsetting as I know from reading the supervisor-supervisee contract that a secondary supervisor is contractually bound to meet their doctoral student and provide input at least 4 times a year. I have not met this individual regarding my work at all. At the minute trying to rectify this situation carries more hassle than is worth. I have told myself I will put this out of my head entirely until I pass upgrade, hopefully then I will have a clearer head and be able to reassess things.

Although my primary supervisor and I soon resolved the issue through email once I had calmed down, I was very anxious about doing my work and meeting the deadline. I accept full responsibility for the extra activities I have taken on and understand how the hectic work schedule I took on may be viewed as over ambitious. However, I believe that had the session be positive and productive my ability to meet the deadline would have been considerably higher.

My main complaint is that if anyone thought I was acting inappropriately or taking on too much work then why wait until the last minute to raise it and why handle the situation in such an uncondusive way? Surely this could have been resolved earlier and in a more appropriate manner? and if I was losing track of the end goal, why would I have been put forward to travel to a conference to give a presentation?

This session really set me back. What I have learned is that I am the sort of person who takes my work very seriously, much more than others and maybe too much! Generally, I seem to care a lot about what others think, more so my seniors or in this case supervisors. Had this been my friend, I feel he would have brushed it off and worked full steam ahead until his departure date (although he attests different).

The weekend that followed immediately after our meeting was extremely panicked. I emailed my supervisor countless times with plans, amended plans, and sample writing pieces. She emailed me the next week telling me to take a chill pill and basically get on with it. At the time this really irked me. I began to feel aggrieved and quite annoyed as I was confused as to whether or not she truly felt I was incapable, too off schedule to meet the deadline or was simply annoyed with me.

I worked full steam ahead for another few days until my partner said enough was enough and forced me to put the books down and take some time off. Thankfully, to cut a long story short, I wrote and submitted a 6000-word literature review which my supervisor read within an evening.

She emailed me the next day and praised me. She stated that the literature review was well written and only had small grammatical errors! She was actually pleased. Then to make matters better, she emailed me a paragraph she had written and asked me to integrate it to the paper. I was so pleased.

At our next meeting she again told me she was proud of the progress I had made and of my success of being accepted onto the international programme. We talked at great length about what I wanted to do for my methods paper. She did state that she felt I would struggle to write and submit it before the deadline. However, this time she also stated that she did not mind when I submitted the paper as long as it was before October as university regulations specified.

Unfortunately, she was right. I did manage to write an entire methodological proposal yet it was not refined enough and very complex. I was advised at this stage by my supervisor and university administrators to take the 2 months required for the international program and take a step back from my work. Both felt that I had gone too far into my studies and as a result was over complicating what I wanted to do.

It is roughly six days before I depart for America. I feel somewhat disappointed that I am unable to leave for the summer without my work being complete. My colleagues have said they think this may be a blessing in disguise as I get to leave without repercussion, can take time away from my work and return with a clear head. To some extent I agree. My main concern is that I will return and still be no further on! My friends have reassured me that by the time I get back they too will have differentiated and will be able to help out- I'm not so sure I believe them.

My supervisor and I have agreed that we will keep in contact while I am away and I have the option of doing some work while I am gone. A provisional date of the 19th of August has been agreed for submission of my papers. Yet the administrators have reassured that should I not be able to make this date I will have to give an extra presentation to a progress panel. I am still unsure what this means yet I feel that I will happily do this should I run over time if it means I submit something I am happy with.

Overall, if I am completely honest I do not regret anything extra I took on. Writing the article really helped me focus and reline my thoughts on the issues I wish to study. I know the international programme as well as my teaching endeavours and management experiences will stand me in good stead for the future. It's like my supervisor said, once I am settled and focused on what I am doing I work well, if I allow myself to worry or panic I can become impracticable - that is when my work suffers. For the meantime I will concentrate on the tasks at hand this summer, take a step back as advised and reassess the situation when I return home.

Works out for summer right? Wrong!

It has been an interesting summer, irregularly busy but interesting nonetheless. During my trip I subconsciously justified spending two full months away from my PhD work by telling myself I had over worked myself and almost sickened my mind from intellectual development or and deserved the time away- ha! I almost had myself convinced that my participation on the international programme would almost be like a holiday- I couldn't have been any more wrong.

The summer was gruelling. I loved my time away and learned a great deal but I returned home more tired than when I had set out and of course in much more need of a break now than ever.

My summer schedule consisted of mostly 6am, sometimes 7am rises as I had to be in my congressional office to begin work by 9am. I finished most days at 5 except for Tuesdays and Thursdays when I had evening debates or programme networking events to attend. The weekends were pre-occupied with set 'host family' events whilst Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were mostly taken up by assignment work or visiting monuments.

This may not sound like a lot. However contending with the heat was a major struggle for me. Travelling in rush hour traffic carrying a briefcase in a full black office suit and high heels is tiresome enough let alone doing so during an unexpected heatwave which entrapped the state for a few weeks.

Alongside this, the content of our curriculum centred on dealing with difference as well as memorialising the past, two fairly contentious subjects which pushed my classmates and I to really get to grips with adversity on an international scale as well as personally within our class. Unexpectedly, this required a lot of emotional labour which is equally, if not more draining than twelve hour long days writing a thesis.

I have a new found interest in international relations, politics and foreign exchange matters. This sounds random given my background in arts and humanities however, everything that I learned about in the states, from my programme, work placement, even host family, is relatable to education, exclusion and rights-based issues- all of which are the central focus of my thesis. For example, the Senator I was working for had a keen interest in educational equality. I watched him speak frequently at briefings about the lack of equality of opportunity for children in the USA, and regularly heard

him and others in the Senate talk about the importance of education and of quality schooling.

I don't think a day went by when I didn't mention, at least once, my PhD. Whether someone asked me where I was from, what I was doing in America or how I liked the weather somehow it always came back to my work. I quite enjoyed it when people were visibly shocked often remarking how young I looked to be studying at that level or how smart I must be to undertake such a body of work!

Of course I would laugh this off and explain the differences in the UK and USA education systems that worked in my favour to allow me to do a PhD at 26. Regardless most people tended to congratulate me and recognised this level of study as a big achievement, all the while I was thinking 'if only they knew how long it has been since I opened a book they wouldn't be that impressed!'

Roughly, three quarters of the way through the summer programme I received an email to say that peer reviewers had read my article I submitted for publication and had provided some feedback. As I read on through the comments I was pleasantly surprised. Both reviewers felt that the article was ready to be published and complimented my work stating that they found it very interesting and now regarded my topic as a main policy concern before inviting me to write suggested policy recommendations to the Department of Education before the new mandate was decided for this coming year! They also posed a lot of questions which they also invited me to answer by writing an additional article.

Although I was overjoyed with this news I was also shocked. I've heard so much at the office about older students towards the end of their studies struggling to get their work published and constantly having to resubmit after making 'suggested changes' or having to submit elsewhere in the hope of new success. This also reminded me that I needed to be aware of how I should handle this news as some may not be as happy for me as originally anticipated.

It is no secret that I have become less than popular over the past 4 months amongst the other PhD students in my department. I noticed some people's attitudes towards me gradually beginning to change as I received more praise, good news or was successful in a recent application. It all began when I got to make the presentation of my work after helping my supervisor run her conference. After this I had submitted my article for publication, been accepted onto the prestigious international summer programme and experienced a few other successes.

Slowly but surely the students in question began calling on me less and less. On the days I was in the university office they did not invite me to lunch and when I did join

them I didn't feel entirely welcome. I asked my friend who also helped the lecturer her perspective on the matter. She explained that she too had experienced a similar attitude towards her during her first year as she takes the same approach to work as I do. She pointed out that she too published more than once in her first year and that those who had behaved less friendly were now in their fourth year of study and were probably feeling under pressure and slightly aggrieved that they were in the position whereas I appeared to be having every success.

It is unfortunate that this was one of my first thoughts when I got the good news about my publication. However, it is a mistake I will not make again. I tried my hardest between January to June to work from home as much as possible, but it can get very isolated. I find it essential to travel into the office at least once a week to see everyone talk about work and generate new ideas as well as maintain motivation. This is something I will continue to do, just maybe not disclose as much information as I had done before at the risk of upsetting others.

It has been one week and one day since I arrived home. Unashamedly so, I did very little work on my thesis over the summer. I read almost every day yet wrote nothing on my research. I did write a short paper for the programme yet this was all I could manage. I kept in contact with my supervisor via email. Although she seems very relaxed again about my progression and how I am performing I will not fall into a false sense of security about what is expected of me, the difficulties I often experience when writing and the pressure I put myself under to perform. I think the difference this time is I feel I am the one who is truly in control of my research and I know I will make it work one way or another.

I returned to my regular job (one day a week) last Friday. During this time I printed and read, for the first time in 8 weeks, my literature review for upgrade. I was almost shocked at what I was reading back! New ideas sprung to mind really quickly as I returned to the same structural problems I faced before I left for the summer. I wrote a lot of notes, jotted ideas and managed to whittle it down to two options as to how I will plan my research.

My colleague walked past and asked what I was reading, I began to explain my work which she showed a real interest in. She asked me a lot of difficult questions and before I knew it we were an hour and a half into what seemed like a mini upgrade! Her last question was so what is it you are struggling with? To which I responded, 'writing the research plan or what research methods I am going to use to do the research.' Much to my frustration she bust our laughing before proceeding to tell me exactly what I now plan to do. She explained very simply what I was struggling with and gave her opinion and reasoning which helped things become a little clearer. My knack for making ideas more complicated than necessary still seems to persist!

Somewhere along the line I have managed to forget that upgrade is a process which is really designed to help me, well, unless I get irregularly difficult examiners. I'm thinking back on a frantic conversation I had with another Professor in my department before I left for the summer. She asked me how I was getting on and was I ready for my big trip. I told her of my difficulties to which she responded, 'why are you worrying so much, this is not a viva, this is more of a meet and greet where you get feedback and input from other academics who will help you work out what you plan to do, no one expects you to have it all worked out now.' For some reason this didn't really sink in at that time but I can take more comfort from this now.

My supervisor emailed me recently to ask how I was getting on and if we could arrange to meet as she is off sporadically before the new academic year begins and wants to make sure I am happy with my work before I submit. I emailed her a mini update explaining the situation to which she has not yet responded. For me I think it works better if I go on ahead and make a full draft before I meet with her as this tends to complicate things further for me.

A lot of my friends at university have already sat their upgrade, all of which have passed. All are saying the same thing, not to worry, it's really more of a conversation or 'my methods paper was really short, there as very little too it honestly don't worry'. Yet, I still am worrying! Their words of wisdom are fairly different from the promises of help and support prior to my departure.

I know the sooner I get it started the better. I have decided I will journey into the university office tomorrow to try and refocus my mind yet it hard to stay on track when I am still so aware of other pieces of work I have to start. For example, I have been given some more teaching opportunities on the open learning programme. This involves me writing two new courses which I will deliver and also provide an assessment for. This will begin in early September and end at Halloween.

I have put everything to the side until this work is done. In future I have decided that I will not put myself forward for much more teaching until I feel I am really on top of my writing.

I feel as though I am in a much better position than before I took two months off. I can't say if this is a tactic I would advise other PhD students to take as this experience has taught me that each student's work and learning style is very different. All I can say is this is what I needed. Many academics would advise writing something, at least 500 words a day. I think from now on I will try this method as opposed to writing until I can write no more.

On a more positive note what I have noticed from my unconventional style of working is that the more I put myself forward for new opportunities the more I seem to benefit from the hard work and dedication I put in. If I am being kind to myself, this is how I choose to look at upgrade. I will work extremely hard to write a great paper proposing my methods I intend to use and hopefully this should result in a positive outcome?

Extract 5

September 2017

The upgrade

Looking back, it amazes me that I was able and allowed to enter into upgrade being so dangerously under-prepared. After reading my work, listening to the comforting and reassuring advice of others and following the lead of my supervisor I truly felt prepared and ready for the challenge. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a really difficult and damaging experience. My supervisor said she felt that examiners may ask me some questions on how my theory matched my methodology but was in no doubt whatsoever that I would pass with ease. To me, this translated into, "don't worry, you will be fine and you will not fail", when in reality it meant a lot more. Rather than give me a full anticipation of the challenges I was likely to face I feel that my supervisor

- (i) did not fully prepare me for upgrade and what to expect;
- (ii) could not have anticipated what was about to unfold during the session;
- (iii) did not want to be confrontational and tell me my work was not ready;
- (iv) was not prepared to delay upgrade any longer for me to work on my submission or
- (v) did not read/understand my work and therefore sent me in ill-prepared.

Even when we were sat outside the room where upgrade was about to be held my supervisor continued to reassure me that everything would be ok and failed to prepare me for what was about to happen.

As soon as I sat down I got a bad feeling about the relational dynamic between both examiners and my supervisor and I immediately felt on edge. Once formal introductions were made it felt as though an episode of "Dragons Den" was playing out live and I was the investor pitching for the examiners confidence. Firstly, I was asked to explain why I wanted to do my research and what had inspired me. I began to answer yet half way through I was interrupted and told, "That's all very nice but what has any of this got to do with your work?" I found this largely disorientating and immediately lost my trail of thought. From then on in the questions posed were unclear, misleading and somewhat malicious. It seemed as though the real questions

being asked were concealed in a thicket of words, designed to further confuse me and set me up for failure. At one stage both examiners were speaking at the same time, both firing questions in an aggressive manner as though they were competing against one another. I was given a particularly tough time by one of the examiners who referred to my arguments as “nothing but nonsense.” Up until that point, I was answering to the best of my ability and trying maintain my composure. However, the shock and disbelief at the examiners statement left me feeling stunned and lost for words. At this point my supervisor interjected saying, ‘you do realise that Penny’s second supervisor whose expertise is in this area has been on prolonged leave?’ A few mumbled sentences passed between the supervisor and examining professors before we were asked to leave the room for a deliberation to be made.

Reflecting on my supervisor’s interjection, I still feel a sense of injustice and disappointment in myself. A sabbatical does not entitle a supervisor to negate on their duty to work with PhD students, yet no matter how many people told me this I did not push the matter further or advocate for myself but rather let it go. As a result, I found myself- on the sharp edge of upgrade trying to navigate myself through internal politics with an inadequate research proposal and insufficient supervisory input. It in the reception area I distinctly remember my supervisor asking me “was it worse than what you thought it was going to be?” to which I rather abruptly answered, “Is that a joke?” I’m sure my bemusement was evident, yet still she appeared not to be phased, as though this were nothing to worry about or perhaps a normal occurrence for her students. Either way, all I could think was what am I missing? Where have I gone wrong? What is going on? Am I going to fail?

After being called back in, the strangest and most unprofessional occurrence of my academic career to date took place. The chair of the upgrade panel turned to the other examiner and asked “Michael, who was chairing that session?” to which he responded, “you were”, she quickly retorted, “well it didn’t seem like it, now Penny.” Staring straight at me, I’m sure the Chair thought I was incredibly rude. I could not hide my shock and bemusement as jaw hung open in disbelief, I struggled to maintain eye contact and did not speak for the remainder of this session. She continued to give her perspective and I believe she was doing so in a much more compassionate way. However, I cannot say for certain as I was in shock. I remember thinking to myself, is this me or is there something else going on? Am I caught in the middle of a face-off, and could this be the reason why things are going so terribly wrong?

By the time I had tuned back in, the chair was making some closing remarks. The suggestions and input she made were helpful. Aside from explaining how my methodology didn’t match my research questions, she also suggested that I tap into

my primary supervisor's expertise and choose a methodology that would also play to her strengths. While this may seem like an obvious thing to do I was too far into my own work to consider how things may look from my supervisor's end, and to be honest I felt, and still continue to feel, that this was the responsibility of my supervisor. The original agreement made with my supervisors was that the two main aspects of my thesis- conceptual framing and methodology- would be split according to each supervisor's expertise. The primary supervisor would lead on methods and the second supervisor on theory. Yet I hadn't seen or spoken to my second supervisor in roughly a year and was advised not to contact her by my first supervisor. I wish I had mustered the courage to explain this during upgrade.

The chair indicated that I should not have been sent into upgrade without such considerations being taken into account, yet my supervisor appeared not to pick up on this. I really appreciated how the chair acknowledged my ability to write and encouraged me not to be deterred but to continue to focus on certain aspects of my research that would allow me to develop my ideas more fully and improve it. Both examiners stated that they believed I was capable of much more and that they had read and been suitably impressed with the article I published earlier in the year. Much to my surprise I was granted a pass.

Despite this good news, I left with a heavy heart, exhausted, overwhelmed and generally upset.

In the weeks that followed I struggled to dissect this experience and make sense of it. I met with my supervisor who reiterated concerns around how busy I had been with extra-curricular activities and how this was likely to be the underlying cause of not being ready for upgrade. To her credit, she also acknowledged how she could and should have paid a more active role and involved my second supervisor more but, this really was too little too late. The initial arrangement we made prior to officially beginning my work was that my primary supervisor would be the lead in all matters methodology and my second would be the expert in conceptual matters. How could they both be so irresponsible and not honour this agreement? How could they think it would be ok for one of them to take a step back and leave me stranded in this manner?

I didn't realise it at the time but the damage had already been done. My confidence and self-belief had dipped to a point where I was struggling to write or concentrate on my reading. I would leave supervision sessions feeling a sense of enthusiasm and encouragement to take the next step, only to return to the following session being told I still was not matching my literature review to methods appropriately. Things began to get much worse and I contemplated dropping out of university.

During the Christmas holidays and after much negotiation with my family, I took a break from my books for about three weeks. During this time, I got quite sick with a throat infection which I had suffered with before upgrade. I visited my doctor who told me this was my eleventh streptococcal throat infection of the year. She referred me to the consultant advising that I would need to have my tonsils removed via surgery and would face recovery time of approximately one month.

I put this to the back of my mind as I anticipated a long waiting period before getting called for operation and did not need this as an immediate concern. However, when I returned to my studies it quickly became apparent how badly the infection was beginning to affect my concentration. Some days I would struggle to get out of bed, and others I would work all day and struggle to recall what I had read or written. My eyesight deteriorated which my GP explained to be a common symptom of the infection. Antibiotics had ceased working just before Christmas and this left me with little option other than to press on until I got called for my operation.

Towards the end of January I got an email to say that my second supervisor would be resuming her supervisory duties and could we arrange to meet. Apprehensively, I agreed although I was reluctant to meet anyone as I had nothing to show for all the work I had tried to do and continued to feel aggrieved at the way upgrade had been conducted.

Thankfully, I had nothing to worry about. Having both supervisors there made life a lot easier. Straight away my second supervisor was able to explain that I had been using an inappropriate conceptual framework that was shutting down my writing and stifling my proposed work. As simple as this may sound it was revolutionary to my understanding of where I was going wrong. I left feeling pained about the amount of time I had lost relying on advice I had taken from my first supervisor and also fairly aggrieved as I felt all the blame for my lack of progress was laid at my feet.

At one point, I expressed how badly I felt upgrade went only to be asked, "Are you still badly effected by upgrade? I think you need to stop letting it annoy you." To me this was much easier said than done. There was little recognition of the fact that I had been sent into upgrade unprepared. Instead it felt like the first supervisor had made cheap digs at my commitment to extracurricular activities as if that had been the main reason why things had gone so badly.

Regrettably, I let this slide and nodded in agreement instead of saying how I really felt and challenging what I felt was bad practice. Instead I asked some questions as to how I should go about identifying a new conceptual framework. I was given generic advice about researching different schools of thought on my topic, which did little other than cause me to panic. Here I was well into second year starting from scratch again.

To make matters worse both supervisors continued to emphasise of short of time I was and how I needed to focus. All I could think was that my supervisors clearly felt I was not working hard enough or that I was not dedicating enough time to my work when in reality all I did was work. To make matters worse I also had to explain how I would be taking two weeks off in March to go on a family holiday. This was reasonably well received however both supervisors suggested that if I were to fall ill again I should consider taking some time away from my studies in order to have this time added onto my scheduled completion date.

Illness and extra-curricular work

In the weeks that followed I managed to get into a good routine with my work. I would get up most mornings around 7am, travel into the office and work until 7 or 8pm. I delved deep into different perspectives on my research subject and made a conscious effort to work as hard as I possibly could. However, my thought patterns seemed to get more twisted and tangled than before, making it impossible for me to write coherently. As advised, I spent a lot of time trying to research different perspectives/school of thought on my subject - yet with little success. I struggled to work out what perspective different articles were written from and how they related to my work. Convinced that I was doing something wrong or simply not just working hard enough I pushed myself even further. I began working weekends, giving up gym time and sacrificing time with my friends and family to try and get to grips with my research. I consistently felt lost and would wake up in the mornings filled with a sense of dread about doing my work.

When I approached my supervisors for advice and support they told me to keep going and to push myself to write more. This was not the type of guidance I was looking for, considering I had written 10,000 words so far and still could not join up the dots.

Things were getting to a stage where I contemplated dropping out again. I cared so much about my work, pleasing my supervisors and achieving my writing goals. I had tried everything to make it work and it still was not coming together. I probably was not helping matters when on one occasion I refused to forward any of my writing samples to supervisors. I was afraid of reprisal. I thought that as I couldn't explain a full conceptualisation of my work then my writing would be poor and I would be accused of not working hard enough again. At the same time my supervisors didn't push too hard for me to provide any evidence of my work. The second supervisor's contact began to dwindle again and my primary supervisor continued to travel abroad for work which appeared to take priority in her life.

Around this time I was becoming somewhat disengaged from my work. I needed to spend some time away and so decided to get a little bit more involved in extracurricular activities. Quickly, I found myself nominated for positions of relative responsibility in the voluntary sector and became involved in a lot of public relations work where I was representing organisations on the news, across social media platforms and on radio. I enjoyed the work and it gave me a real confidence boost as senior colleagues there praised me for my contribution, gave constructive criticism and put plans in place to help me develop my skills. They took a real interest in me as a person and professionally as an academic.

During this time, I had to try and explain to people on a daily basis what my research was about, why I was doing it and how it was important. I didn't realise it at the time but this was crucial in allowing me the breathing space I needed to understand my work, have challenging discussions about the topic in a safe space, defend my positioning and also take on board the perspective of other key stakeholders of my discipline who remained in the field. Admittedly I got very little written work done and also read even less! However, I felt better, I felt like I was moving forward and I was unwilling to give it up.

When my next supervision session came, I noticed how both supervisors seemed a little more apprehensive in their approach towards me. It seemed as though they were choosing their words very carefully, and were more cautious or on edge about upsetting me. Personally, I think that now because I had more of a public profile over a short period of time and because they realised that I was being endorsed by other key players in the field, both were unsure of how to handle me and my reactions.

This is not to say that they were sheepish or that there was any confrontation, but simply that the relational dynamic had changed to a degree. The primary suggested that I used my recent involvement as an opportunity to take time off or 'stop the clock' on my PhD funding to relieve some of the pressure I was under. However, at that time I was not in a financial position to do so and was unsure of whether or not I would resurface from the cognitive confusion I was dealing with. Therefore, I thought it best to push on. I think the primary also had picked up a little on my anxiety and tried to address this by explaining that if I could not find much conceptual work in the literature then this meant I had uncovered a niche for my research and that doing so would count as my original contribution.

Yet, I still was not convinced as she followed this up with explaining how she felt that I was throwing myself in to extracurricular work in order to seek alternative means of validation, when all the validation I needed would come via completing my PhD!

The Operation

Towards the end of March my health deteriorated quite badly. For two full weeks I was bed-ridden and unable to work. Just when I had recovered I got a phone call to say I would be taken in for surgery the following week and would be in bed for further two weeks with a total recovery time of approximately one month.

Both supervisors were very understanding and kept in contact throughout this time. When I returned from hospital I slept for a day and then tried to begin work. I was so worried about letting my supervisors down that I wanted to push myself to make deadlines and was also coming under some criticism from another PhD friend. S/he encouraged me to do anything it took to avoid taking time off as it would not only stall the process but also look bad to prospective employers.

What a silly mistake! All the time and energy spent worrying and working when I was unwell made things much worse. I soon found myself back in hospital with a serious enough infection in my wound. I was placed under strict instructions from the consultant to take time off and the opportunity of much needed bed rest. By the time I had fully recovered it was May and that meant one thing - holiday time!

The week away did me the world of good. I did no work and barely thought about home. On the last day I decided to formulate a plan for the next steps of my PhD journey. Essentially, this would mean taking a formalised leave of absence for 3-4 months to allow me to take stock and work out my direction.

I had this approved with relative ease and started settling into more work. As part of my training requirements for my voluntary work or PhD? I had signed up to a summer school on management that would grant me an internationally renowned qualification and allow me to meet my required training days for the entirety of my PhD course. This was also a smart move as it meant I was able to network with other PhD students and learn that many were in a similar boat. I also had the opportunity to meet, and develop professional relationships with, all key postgraduate researcher co-ordinators. This has opened so many door for me. I managed to gain the qualification and also secure mentors for my research as well as essential support from officials within the university. I got great career advice from the support staff who have helped me to get back on track with my work.

Interestingly, I haven't heard much from either supervisor all summer. I plan to officially return to university in two weeks. By that stage I will have completed my writing on how to frame my research and have begun my research strategy. If I am

being really honest I still feel a bit worried about my progress. However, I have had to come to recognise that much of what worries me is out of my control. For example, if after data collection I am struggling with identifying themes and analysing my work then I have to surrender to this process. Some things simply cannot be rushed.

What I think is key, is having a plan or a strategy to deal with this. I simply refuse to return to paralysis; therefore, I will find something else to do relative to my PhD that will help me to make progress. This could be as simple as rereading notes or talking to an academic in my field to identify new reading materials - anything that keeps me feeling as though I am in control and moving forward. Work can still be quite tough and at times. I still panic about my progress and that I am not doing enough work. But I have reached a place of relative content. I have taken ownership of my work and I feel that my PhD belongs to me and no one else therefore I have the say over what happens and how it develops. I feel optimistic about the next year-and-a-half I have left, and while the journey thus far has proven incredibly challenging, I have learnt a great deal.

Four main lessons I have learned so far are;

1. Owning your PhD

I think it is vital not to rely too heavily on others for reassurance or confidence boosting during PhD study. In other areas of my life such as work or volunteer positions, I make sure I am on top of my game. I know everything there is to know about my field. I work extremely hard to make sure I am ahead of my work and to ensure that I know the answers to any question that could be put towards me. More importantly, if I don't know the answers, I know where to go and who to ask to get them. I don't sit back and wait for them to come to me or hope, on the off-chance that things will turn out ok.

Thinking back on my first half of second year, I did not apply this type of approach to my research. I took things at face value and relied on my supervisor's validation instead of working on my own judgement. While I do not fully blame my supervisors for issues arising so far, I do feel that they could have been avoided. The time I lost due to poor supervision and lack of clear communication has, in many ways, set me back. I know I will now have to work twice as hard to make sure I finish on time, and I am keen not to repeat the same mistakes. Thus, in order to avoid doing so I am taking full responsibility for the remainder of the journey and do not plan to rely too heavily on my supervisors to get me through.

2. Have a plan and agreed sets of goals.

This was a piece of advice I was given at the beginning of my program. However, instead of following it I decided that having a PhD project plan was too much hassle

for one and also not the best use of my time. Looking back, I realise that had I had a document which stated my goals, an agreed schedule of supervisory meetings and contact I would not be at the stage I currently find myself in. Upon returning to university I plan to present both supervisors with a project plan for the remainder of my time left (1 year 4 months) detailing what counts as a key milestone, when I plan to reach it, what I want from my supervisors and how often I want to meet. I will ask all parties to agree on the document and to sign it. Throughout my study I will continue to use this document as a point of reference should I feel I am drifting off course or that others are not meeting agreed expectations.

3. Stand your ground

I remember reading some books on how to get your PhD all of which had a section on 'holding your own' or 'standing your ground'. At the time I remember thinking how this was a strange subject to cover and couldn't see how this would be an issue or how it would be relevant to me. All resources I read talked about how supervisors may subconsciously try to align your PhD to their research interests or take the student off on tangents away from the core of their PhD topic and how to guard against this. Yet what was not mentioned was how the inherent power imbalance that exists between the supervisor and student can impact upon your work and ability to advocate for yourself. For example, while I have always considered myself to be a self-confident individual and never really found much difficulty in speaking my mind or raising concerns, I have held back during supervisory meetings and have not felt confident enough to stand my ground in relation to what I know I am entitled to. While the supervisor/supervisee relationship is difficult to navigate it is important to feel as though you can speak freely and to be able to seek out the support that you need. Sometimes there is no easy way to do so, other than to be politely direct and tell the supervisor what you need.

4. Drown out the noise.

When it's time to get serious about your work- and I mean really serious- this is the time to limit interactions with other PhD students and in some cases researchers/professors. On a daily basis, social interactions are key to our mental health. Being around other PhD candidates can also be a great support, but, at the same time it can also be highly distracting.

Take for example my friend who keeps telling me how wrong I am doing for taking time off. I allowed his opinion to penetrate my thinking space to such a point that I 1) took his advice and 2) beat myself up when I finally took the rest I needed. Without knowing it, other students can cause you anxiety by almost competing with you and your progress, which makes not sense considering the PhD journey is unique to every person who endures it. It is never a good idea to let these feelings build up as then something is likely to break. In many cases this can be long-standing relationships, as

some students I know have had some bad fall outs and confrontations. And while I am not saying become a recluse, I would say choose your time, work space and interactions wisely.

Most days I now work from home. I contact university friends via phone, if I get cabin fever I pop into the office for a cuppa and if I am struggling to concentrate I take myself off to the library or our graduate school. When I do meet with my PhD buddies we talk research, theory not strategy, timelines and not milestones of success and this has been vital to getting my confidence back up and me back on track.

Moving forward, I will do my best to bear these lessons in mind and have a more thorough and detailed plan of how to hit my research goals.

On a final note, I think it is important to emphasise how individual each PhD journey is. There is little that can prepare one for this experience. From someone who is in the thick of it, the biggest challenge is learning to accept how things can change on a daily basis. Developments and break-throughs can take you off on a tangent and at times it is hard to remain anchored. However, at the end of the day a PhD is about the process and not the outcome. Every day I learn something new and take a step closer to completion. Intuitively, I feel that if I can get past this bump in the road then I know I will get through the next. It is only when my work becomes more of a chore than a choice that I start to pull back. I am sure there will be plenty more challenges ahead but at least this time I am better placed to take ownership of them and devise a way through.

Extract 6
January 2018

Progress at last?

It is with great joy that I begin this extract by recalling what I have achieved since my last entry 4 months ago. I wrote and submitted a 25,000 word chapter on the conceptual underpinnings of my thesis, followed by another 20,000 word chapter on my methodology, I have completed my ethics application with all corresponding forms and I successfully passed my yearly progress panel. This all sounds quite impressive when I see my work progress written down in front of me. The biggest achievement I congratulate myself with is not dropping out of the thesis and contending with an extremely difficult supervisory relationship.

The past few months have been extremely challenging yet equally rewarding. I found my writing flow again and quickly learned the power of self-belief when I wrote my 20,000 research strategy within 2 weeks. However, I cannot take all the credit for

getting myself back on track. If I am very honest the reason why I managed to continue with the PhD process let alone submit so much work, is due to my second supervisor arriving back on the scene. During her absence my primary supervisor would dip in and out of my PhD providing confusing and misleading advice. It is only upon reflection that I realise every time I met for supervision I was set off on yet another tangent, either this or I was being told that my writing, ideas and thoughts did not make sense. This reinforced feelings of unworthiness and led me to believe I was not working hard enough. This was the problem, I was working too much. I did not have a good work balance and would frantically read, write and research more and more after every supervision, all the while tying myself up in knots.

I made a conscious decision to motor on with my work without any interference from my supervision until I was finished. I figured that waiting until I had submitted a full chapter before I sought my supervisors input would give me some breathing space but also would mean that any feedback would have to come in writing meaning I could have a record of it and perhaps understand her perspective a little more. This strategy began to work, I had a good structure and I was making some progress. I can't say I felt confident, far from it. I still didn't have a concrete research strategy in place and had a lot of work to do. Yet when I explained my plan to my supervisor she felt this was a good idea and encouraged me not to stress or worry too much until I had completed my conceptual chapter.

I was nearing completion when I received a derailing phone call from my supervisor demanding that submit my proposed research strategy and corresponding documents for a progress review assessment. Slightly confused and taken back I reiterated our previous agreement- that I would finish my conceptual piece before focusing on anything else. This was not satisfactory and I was advised to leave my current task and begin working on progress review documents. Again I explained that I could not pass progress review assessment as the chapter I was working on would be the evidence of progress made. Finally, after some time, roughly 3 day my supervisor agreed. Apparently she had simply forgotten about our agreement. This ordeal set me back significantly in more ways than one. Not only was my confidence broken once more, I was mentally exhausted and petrified at the thought of appearing in front of an assessment panel underprepared- again.

I took the decision to reach out to my second supervisor soon after this incident. She agreed to meet with me in confidence. This to me was an extremely risky action as I was well aware of how close both supervisors were and I feared the likelihood of reprisal should word get back.

We discussed work that needed to be submitted to the progress panel and my relationship with my other supervisor. She helped me to fashion my research strategy and reassured me that everything would work out. I expressed my desire to change

supervisors and even asked if she would consider taking on a lead role. Unfortunately due to budget cuts and number of different changes across the department there was a shortage of supervisors within the school and should I ask for a change to be made I might find myself without a lead supervisor for a good length of time.

While I found this disappointing and unfair I did have a plan in place and my second supervisor had unofficially agreed to continue working with me without making my lead supervisor aware of this arrangement. Again things started looking up as I was feeling more prepared for progress review and I was able to send off my documents and meet the deadline for doing so.

Late into the afternoon before I was due to be assessed by the progress panel I received a text from my lead supervisor asking if I wanted to meet up to discuss any concerns I might have. I explained that as I was not at campus a phone call might help as this would allow me to clarify a few questions. We conversed over a few points that needed to be changed in my presentation before my lead supervisor proceeded to tell me that I what I had written in the 'challenges' section of my presentation had caused great offence to both her and my second supervisor. I was truly stunned by this remark and very upset.

Progress Panel

I am sure my PhD colleagues thought I had lost the plot. I was very upset and emotional the morning of my progress assessment. I could not sleep and was reeling from my supervisor's phone call the night before, so I ventured into campus very early. My friend came to my office to offer support and listened to me rehearse my presentation. She repeated reassured me that my supervisor was in the wrong and that I needed to try and find a way to share my negative experiences with those on the panel. I managed to settle myself before the meeting and had made a decision to try and share my concerns should the opportunity arise.

Throughout my presentation both assessors were very warm, friendly and engaging. They both complimented me on my writing style and stated that they felt my project was very worthwhile. When my supervisor left the room I tried to share my concerns in the most professional way. I feel as though I did not explain myself properly as I was nervous and acutely aware of my supervisor standing outside the meeting room.

I too was asked to leave the room at a later stage so that the assessors could ask my supervisor how she felt I was progressing and how we interacted. Interestingly, when I returned to the room it felt as though the dynamic had changed. I now found myself on the receiving end of some 'constructive criticism.' I was encouraged to drop any extracurricular work in order to concentrate on my studies and to focus more on completing my work to set deadlines. I believe at ones stage an assessor said that it

would appear as though my PhD had not been the centre of my universe and should I find myself the position where I will need to request extra time for completion I may not be granted it. This deeply upset me. I made the decision two days afterwards to arrange a meeting with the assessors who coincidentally deal with student requests to change supervisors.

When we met I was able to relay my experiences and share my concerns. Thankfully both assessors were very understanding and have since made an official agreement to make a change to my supervision arrangement once my lead supervisor leaves the university in the next couple of months. I also spoke to my second supervisor and told her about the phone call I had received the night before my progress assessment. She apologised and stated that this was unprofessional and should not have happened. When she relayed her side of the story things made much more sense. We agreed to move past this and to concentrate on making progress past the next few hurdles I was due to face.

Research Methods

After my second supervisors intervention things really took off for me again. I was so excited to hit the library, gather my resources and submerge myself intellectually in something- anything- other than conceptual work. Within days I was writing substantial amounts and really grappling with methodological considerations and I found this truly enjoyable. At times I would hit a bit of a road block, yet this was short lived as my second supervisor was always on hand to talk things over, share ideas and most importantly help me figure a way through. The way my second supervisor explained complex ideas and helped me to disentangle my thoughts left me in awe. I am so grateful to her and all the support she has given me. I would repeatedly thank her for taking a phone call or checking in on me, on many occasions late into the evening and also at weekends. Her response, as always, would be 'this is what a supervisor is for.' Such choice of words has led me to believe that my second supervisor sympathises with the position I have been in with my first supervisor of late. I found this deeply reassuring as I no longer carried guilt, resentment and animosity for my lack of progress. However, I still worry that this has put us both in a difficult position should my lead supervisor learn of our interactions.

Round the garden path again

What I find most frustrating at this moment in time is the unreliability of my primary supervisor. I submitted a piece of writing, the success of which was vital in allowing me to progress onto field work. I worked on this piece over Christmas break only really stopping on Christmas and Boxing day. I felt confident and proud when it came to submission time, as I had dedicated so much time and effort to this piece. This feeling quickly subsided when I received feedback from the primary supervisor. A technical

issue, one which we had debated for some time now raised it head. This came as quite a shock as we had agreed to let this element of my thesis go and instead employed a different strategy. Low and behold, now that my work was in and I was feeling confident my supervisor decided to change this decision and now wants me to add this element into my work. This will set me back at least one or two months. To accommodate this request I have also had to redraft ethics in accordance with university protocols.

To make matters worse, my second supervisor whom I have relied on so heavily has recently absent from work due to illness. I feel strongly that she would disagree with this decision and would ensure that I could make progress as originally anticipated yet without her support this is not an option. I tried to contest this decision immediately after I received feedback only to be told that I would not be entering the field unless I met this requirement. Eager to make it into field work and keep to schedule I have honoured the request and I am awaiting feedback or at least confirmation that a series of steps have been completed by my supervisor that will enable me to make progress.

The hardest part of this ordeal is that my supervisor is a lovely women. I have every confidence that she has my best intentions at heart yet her actions are causing me such distress and anxiety. Time is of the essence. I very gently expressed this concern to her in an email only to receive a snippy and short response. I wonder if my supervisor realises the gravity of her actions/decisions time wise. Should I run over my scheduled completion date I will struggle to finish the thesis at all as I simply cannot afford to live without some form of income. If she does realise this then perhaps she simply does not care? Either way I am holding out hope for the supervisor transfer arrangements later in this year. I remain fully committed to this process and feel slightly comforted at the thought that I may catch up on time during data collection and transcription.