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## Making Time (and Space) for the Journey

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### Introduction

Completing the doctoral journey takes a considerable amount of fortitude and self-discipline. It also requires that the student undertaking doctoral studies re-examine, and perhaps abandon, previously held hypotheses if their data shows anomalies or unexpected, contrary results. Recognising the new is difficult, for if it is truly new knowledge, there will not be any pre-existing way of expressing what has been discovered or created. How to recognise and then textualise and/or visualise this new knowledge in a thesis is the challenge. To allow such a poetic revealing (Heidegger 1996), the researcher has to create space: to suspend time, schedules, books, writing and all of the usual 'procrastination by being busy' that inevitably follows the doctoral student, and especially those who are perpetually burdened by a cloud of guilt and thinking, 'I really should be writing'.

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The doctoral journey necessitates a revision of previously held paradigms—ontological, epistemological, methodological, axiological and rhetorical—as new knowledge is created by new thought. In my case, the PhD (which is, after all, a Doctor of Philosophy) required deep sustained cogitation (and lots of it) to contribute to knowledge. The importance of contributing to knowledge, across all disciplines, is inherent as a key criterion for excellence in a doctoral examination (Bourke and Holbrook 2013). Such deep thinking requires dedicated time; the ancient Greek philosophers knew this and valued it accordingly. Think Archimedes, and the epiphany he (allegedly) had while bathing, which resulted in a principle of how to determine the volume of an object with an irregular shape. Further, some of the most revolutionary theories of our time, such as Darwin's Theory of Evolution, were born not only from periods of sustained observation but also from periods of sustained thinking about that observation. Making time to think is a very individual process: for Darwin, taking regular walks around his property was how he made the time to think about, and to ruminate on, what he had observed and studied. In such relaxed synaptic meanderings, new thoughts had space to evolve. These breaks from concentrated observation, experimentation and recording allowed the 'new' knowledge to reveal itself to him (Stone 1980).

I found that *poiesis*, or the generation of new knowledge, was a process of 'revealing' (Milroy 2017). It required sustained quiet sitting in a peaceful place and allowing my mind to wander freely, to follow whatever synaptic meanderings it wanted, and free of needing to achieve 'something'. It also compelled me to avoid the distraction of people, books, writing, digital technologies and the constant 'doing' associated with my course of doctoral study. I was surprised at how effective and essential this practice became, although initially it was a struggle to justify not 'doing' something thesis specific. Scientific studies confirm this strategy of unconscious processing. Doidge (2007) highlights that even when thoughts are consciously—not actively—accessed in reality, the neuroplasticity of the human mind means it never actually stops or shuts down, but rather keeps changing with each new stimuli and the constant processing that takes place in the unconscious.

‘Mind-wandering’, or the study of spontaneous task-unrelated thoughts, is a recent research field in neuroscience and experimental science. According to Metzinger (2018), its results have radical implications for many fields. He uses the metaphor of ‘porpoising’ or a ‘dolphin model of cognition’ to describe how our conscious thoughts are like dolphins jumping briefly out of the ‘ocean of our unconscious’ for short periods before they submerge again. But as he points out, the control we have over our cognition is at best tenuous, thus how to harness these brief flashes is not yet understood. However, providing an environment with as few external stimulants as possible—that is, one that avoids competing with our subconscious thoughts—and allowing an activity such as mind-wandering, appears to be a way of encouraging these cognitive ‘jumps’ from unconscious to conscious thought to occur.

*I often find these ‘porpoising’ events occur at unexpected times, however, I notice that many arise while driving (my epic car journeys provide a wonderful place to allow these to emerge, no telephone, no computers, no ability to write, just the open road, and my body on almost-automatic pilot that comes with a lifetime of driving long distances). Long walks in nature also provide a similar atmosphere, as does sitting outside on the couch in the morning sun, waking slowly with my morning tea or coffee. Occasionally these flashes occur in the middle of the night. And as my phone is often near, I can scribble or record a note, or even send an email to myself as a means of capturing these. In other circumstances (such as driving), I relate the thought to something else and write it into my journal/diary when I am physically able to do so.*

## Time

If the doctoral journey requires students to embrace mind-wandering and high levels of cogitation, it is imperative that we give ourselves time and space to do so. Elizabeth Grosz, in her book, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely* (2004), challenges us to think of time as an ontological element. What exactly is time? Is it knowable or real? In her introduction to the book, she states: “Time is neither fully ‘present’, a thing in itself, nor is it a pure abstraction, a metaphysical assumption

that can be ignored in everyday practice” (Grosz 2004, p. 5). She further refines this definition and states:

Time is real, its characteristics are unique, and its effects cannot be explained in other terms. It distinguishes itself from space, from objects, from its multiplicitous representations in mathematical, formulaic or geometrical terms, or in the images and representations provided in the visual arts, through effects that are not spatial, objective, measurable or quantifiable, although it has no language of its own, no models on which to base itself except those provided by the impulse to spatialisation. (2004, p. 249)

Physicist Carlo Rovelli, on the other hand, has a very different ontological viewpoint. He writes:

Fundamentally time does not exist. Time exists for us. Up and down exists for us but there’s no up and down in the universe. The idea that time is not integral to the structure of reality is not something everybody agrees with, but many people are working on it. It might be true, and this would mean that the universe is something very different from what we think. (2016, p. 45)

These two opposing views on the nature and reality of time are a great example of how one’s research paradigm, or worldview, may change during the doctoral journey. In my own experience, I examined both positivism and constructivism as the major paradigms for the production of new knowledge in science and art. However, neither fully encapsulated a useful methodology for my art-science hybrid research. As a result, I found myself drawn to quantum studies and Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of an ethico-onto-epistemology. Barad furthers the work of Donna Haraway (1997), and both challenge binary-type thinking. As Barad notes, it is the measuring apparatus that determines the characteristics of what is being measured. Hence photons (of light) may have the characteristics of a particle under one measuring apparatus and a wave under another, despite these characteristics being considered mutually exclusive. I was excited by the possibility of quantum physics being able to define a research paradigm that could be applied to any discipline, and have been investigating its potential. I have tentatively described this research para-

digm as Quantum | ivism (Milroy 2017). Under this paradigm, time can simultaneously exist and not exist, its state depending on how the individual chooses to measure it. For the doctoral journey, however, it is Grosz's definition that the thesis (as an apparatus) measures, and time is a 'real' entity.

As time in any of its measurements is inextricably linked with space, we also need to consider where we are and how this affects our doctoral journey.

## A Room of One's Own

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* ([1929] 1989) empowered many female writers to further careers with a private space in which to work. She advocated "a room of one's own" for maintaining a clear head—advice that arguably applies across disciplines and gender. Making a place for solitude and creative work (research) is a resonating comment throughout the ages:

The mind is sharper and keener in seclusion and uninterrupted solitude. No big laboratory is needed in which to think. Originality thrives in seclusion free of outside influences beating upon us to cripple the creative mind. Be alone, that is the secret of invention; be alone, that is when ideas are born. (Tesla quoted in Dunlap 1934, p. 9)

Here, Tesla is promoting solitude as a way of stopping the relentless march of time by removing oneself from the things that are constantly reminding us of its advance. To complete a doctorate, students need to acknowledge that most of their daily life is entangled with the thought of time as a 'real' thing, in this case, a countdown towards a completed thesis. However, paradoxically, this sustained focus on getting things done according to a schedule competes with the mind's equally important need to 'un-plug', to allow the gestation and birth of new ideas, new thoughts, new knowledge. As Grosz proposes, "this space and time for invention, for the creation of the new, can come about only through a dislocation of and dissociation with the present" (2004, p. 261).

## Making Space for Time

The typical doctoral journey is structured for the student to complete in some three to four years of full-time study, and this necessitates considerable planning to make space for time. The strategy I developed during my course of study was to analyse and break down the complicated doctoral journey into a manageable, achievable process with clear tasks and an imaginable destination. I have summarised these tasks into a checklist and present this as a Doctoral Journey Planner, which can be modified and used to incorporate other university requirements, timelines and planning tools.

The Doctoral Journey Planner (see Appendix 1) is also provided as a template for student and supervisors to develop an effective way of planning the research—with agreed destinations and milestones. Kearns and Gardiner observe that highly successful research students treat their doctoral journey as a job, complete with holidays and breaks (2012, pp. 30–31), and this may require the student to establish such factors as a dedicated space in which to work, and the appropriate equipment required, alongside an evaluation of other time demands and external expectations.

*Towards the latter half of the doctoral journey, I devised a useful personal strategy when I purchased two whiteboards and divided them into days as a planning calendar. I chose to put the smaller one up in my kitchen and the larger one in my office. Not only did this motivate me and remind me of how many days were left to complete each task, but it also provided a visual cue for friends and family, so they had some idea of the amount of work involved, and were understanding when I had to excuse myself from social events. Learning “not to say yes” (Kearns and Gardiner 2013) became a key strategic response to ensure I gave doctoral priorities the attention they deserved.*

*The countdown calendar also provided a visual check of goals versus time available, and assisted with culling less important tasks to make room for more important tasks. The kitchen planner also serves (yes, I still use the system) as a discussion point at meal times, when I can confer with other members of the household and pencil in events that they need me to attend. In this way, I am able to respect their needs as well as my own.*

*I still struggle with scheduling down time, however, my aim is to have at least one day of proper rest every week. Scheduling downtime is crucial to re-energising and topping the tank up. Working a constant seven days soon becomes a false economy and any progress erodes as fatigue sets in.*

There are digital time counters available online, and students may like to set one for their doctorate. A perpetual calendar can also be sourced online, and annotated with significant milestones, as per the Doctoral Journey Planner. Similarly, there are apps available that can be programmed for certain key events and milestones. These can be used on a smartphone as a daily reminder. A number of online support mechanisms exist to support students in their research journey. Twitter users can follow hashtag conversations such as #phdchat and #acwri (short for academic writing). Initiatives like ‘Shut Up & Write’, which encourages writers to meet (in person or virtually) and write for an hour or so in collegial silence (Mewburn et al. 2014), are also growing and are available in settings such as cafes and co-working spaces. Some further online material is generic and not specific to discipline; see, for instance, *The Thesis Whisperer* (Mewburn 2018) or ‘iThinkWell’ (Gardiner and Kearns 2018). Discipline-specific support is also available, such as the creative writing resources available through the journal *TEXT: Writing and Writing Courses* and, in particular, the exegesis structure suggested in Brien et al., “Exegetical essentials” (2017), in Batty and Brien’s *TEXT* special issue, titled *The Exegesis Now* (2017).

## Strategic Side-Trips

All doctoral programs allow the student to take leave, and it is important to schedule time off. In addition to honouring commitments for family and friends (an essential support team), time should also be used for rest and regeneration. This may differ from institution to institution. Typically, up to twelve months is available across candidature, however, it can be beneficial to schedule time off after every significant research milestone, or once every year. The doctoral journey can be intense; it requires endurance and it is important to build a supportive home base that involves the key people in the student’s life. In the planning stage, it

is paramount to ensure these people understand the work that lies ahead, and also that they too are being respected by being included in the planning process.

Some students also produce research outputs along their journey, such as journal articles, book chapters, papers in refereed conference proceedings, and ‘non-traditional’ research outputs such as creative writing, performances and exhibitions. While still clearly part of the research journey, sometimes a side-trip like this can freshen the mind and give a new perspective to the PhD being undertaken. It is useful to discuss the requirements of the doctoral program and career ambitions with the supervisory team, and schedule side-trips carefully and strategically. Attending conferences is often a great way of networking and finding out what is happening in a specific field of research. Presenting research at conferences allows students to gain valuable feedback from peers, and to clarify what is needed to answer their research question(s). It is, therefore, important to consider scheduling at least one international conference into the doctoral journey, to gain exposure to a broader pool of academics from the field, and access to their recent research. Taking on commentary and feedback from such conferences can help strengthen a student’s work greatly.

## **An Apple a Day**

Last, and by no means least, is planning for a healthy mind and body. Proper self-care through exercise and food is also paramount. Where and what to eat, and the type and duration of exercise on a daily basis, should be a key consideration in maintaining the physical health required to complete a doctoral course of study. As the writing stage can be quite sedentary, strategies like standing while typing, or setting a timer to ensure a ten-minute walk after every hour or so, or a series of yoga stretches during a particularly long session in front of the computer, can be productive. I also found that regular therapeutic/remedial massage helped me both physically and mentally. It is up to each student to find and manage the healthcare regime that suits them as an individual. It may be helpful to think of the doctoral journey as one’s own personal Olympic Games, and the conferral of the award as the gold medal. Thus, like an



Olympic athlete, the student has to be focused, dedicated and take the utmost care of their award-winning assets—the mind and the body.

## Conclusion

The doctoral journey takes time, in a structured and planned way, to ensure the student arrives at their destination. It also requires periods of unstructured mind-wandering and solitary explorations, as a means of discovering something truly new. It is a challenging, albeit rewarding, personal and public journey, as the student forges into unknown territories and adds discoveries to the map of human knowledge. It is important to consider the best strategies for mind-wandering and generating new knowledge, and also for the practicalities of achieving results within the appropriate deadlines. Plenty of resources and strategies exist, and I have presented the Doctoral Journey Planner as a template for use here. However, even the best tools cannot increase the number of hours in the day. Knowing the importance of time, how to make time, how to stop time, and identifying when to take strategic side-trips, are all key skills to learn and engage with during the doctoral journey.

In many ways, the doctoral journey is an apprenticeship into a career as a researcher. The notes suggested on planning for time and space are important and significant skills to develop during candidature, and will not only enhance the doctoral journey but will also continue to serve graduates as they progress to the next step in their careers as researchers. The final step in the Doctoral Journey Planner, “Post-doctoral opportunities”, is highlighted to encourage students and their supervisory team to think about life *after* the doctoral journey, and to plant the seeds for employment opportunities along the way, ready to sprout upon graduation.

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