

Unfinished business: Maureen's doctorate

In retrospect, the whole PhD was ill-advised from the start.

I started in 1986 and was an ESRC award holder. As a promising undergraduate, I had been persuaded by the Anthropology Department to apply for an ESRC grant to do an MPhil/PhD. Perhaps flattered by this, I had agreed, and with the help of a member of staff concocted a proposal in a subject which he thought would be likely to get a grant. I wasn't especially interested in the subject and in fact there was little expertise within the department either in the subject area or ethnographic area.

I chose my own supervisor, with some advice, because he was someone who seemed to get his students through their PhDs and had a vague link with the subject.

The first year went well. I produced a fieldwork proposal and research report which was very well received within the department.

Preparation for the year in the field was appalling however. I think the most advice I got was: 'Follow your nose and see where it leads you'. We did have a little training in methodology but were provided with no idea what to expect from conditions in the field. Once overseas, I had only sporadic contact with my College. My supervisor was on sabbatical and so my periodic fieldwork reports were approved by a replacement who read these reports and commented that it looked good and to keep on doing what I was doing.

Coming back to the department from the field was an enormous shock. Not only was I suffering badly from relocation shock, but I was thrust immediately back into the cut and thrust of an academic environment. At the time, the ESRC had just started to be concerned about completion levels and had told university departments that if they didn't get a certain % through within four years, then the university would be blacklisted. So the pressure was on.

I had to produce two papers - which were then thoroughly torn apart by department staff. I was then told to try to 'get it all down' - 'why not try a chapter a week?' I completely froze and suffered from terrible blocks. I couldn't see the wood for the trees, had no real theory to help make sense of my data and was totally out of my depth. I felt that my supervisor didn't really know what to do with me. He told me to just try to get something down and saw me whenever I produced work.

To get it going, I wrote in a style I felt comfortable with which was not very academic and rather non-traditional. I don't think he really knew what to say. So feedback on chapters focused mainly on grammar and spelling. I think he was hoping I would suddenly get some kind of thread to it all, but it ended up a mess. He could give no advice on what to read – being worried that I might get too distracted by reading too much, but this didn't really help in my search for a relevant theory. Inevitably, I didn't finish.

I remember speaking of my problems to the individual who helped me write the research proposal for the ESRC. He told me 'I knew you would come into problems'. I wish he'd told me at the time.

The non-completion of the thesis has haunted me for all these years and I don't think I've ever got over it. It's affected my employment prospects, personal relationships and most of all my self-esteem.

For 17 years I have dragged my incomplete thesis with me wherever I go – the piles of notes, books and drafts – in the vain hope that I might finally finish. I have since resuscitated it at different points in my life and have managed to write a draft. It is written on my CV: 'PhD (pending submission)'. I have approached my Department at the College several times hoping to see if I could re-register to continue. On reading the draft they all thought it still viable, but the timing was never right and there was never a supervisor suitable.

Recently I have finally searched and found someone with expertise in my academic and ethnographic area working nearby at Barchester and I hope to meet her some time soon to see how I can use all the data I collected. But today, my thesis remains in limbo in a filing cabinet upstairs. I am plagued by the feeling of waste – of time, of money, of effort.

On reflection, I was immature; I chose too broad a topic, my research was poorly designed and I identified too closely with the people I was studying – I 'went native' as they say. I found it very difficult to distance myself from the whole experience and write objectively. Hence I could only do something once several years had passed. But, perhaps most important of all, I did not grasp what was required of me and lost my way during writing up.

Before turning the page, discuss the points that are raised in this account and list the issues raised on the acetate provided

Update

"Don't take this the wrong way," says my new young PhD supervisor, hand resting on my draft thesis. "I think you should attend some undergraduate lectures. Theory has moved on since your day."

A mid-life crisis and floundering career in social research have taken me back to university to resurrect my long-lost doctorate. Unlike Brian May, who recently completed his PhD after a 30-year gap, I haven't had a globally successful rock band to occupy me in the meantime, just work, children and a gnawing feeling of regret that I didn't complete my thesis the first time round. My friends think that I'm brave, but there's a fine line between courage and idiocy.

My supervisor is worried I might be insulted by having to brush up on the basics. But all I care about is what it will cost to travel at peak hour every week to attend. How your priorities change in 23 years.

Enrolment day is not an auspicious start. The registrar has trouble finding my file, but eventually realises the problem: "Ah! I remember. You're the special one."

I've thrown the system off-balance, confusing everyone. My enrolment form isn't typed out and ready for me, so the relevant information has to be looked up while the queue grows behind me.

Then my student number has to be found. "Start date," mutters the hassled registrar, searching for my details. "Ah here we are: 1984?"

Yes, I've been out of the academic loop that long. Whatever made me think I could just walk straight back in? The whole enterprise suddenly seems absurd.

Now back home with my books, files and field notes, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed. I'm looking up at the mountain that I still have to climb and remembering the graft, the pain and the agony of it all first time around.

My friends tell me I'll regret it if I don't do it. I can't help worrying I'll regret it if I do.

Task

On the acetate provided please indicate the main lessons here for

1. research degree applicants and candidates
 2. postgraduate supervisors
 3. departments/schools/institutions
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But what happened in the end? See

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/aug/18/finished-phd-30-years-after-began-doctorate>

... and follow the responses