

Samuel's PhD Diary

Episode 1: October 12

I Background

I decided in late 2003 that I wanted to undertake postgraduate research into a subject area in which I have a great deal of experience and on which very little research has been lavished, namely performing arts in a corporate environment. I wanted to do the research because as a writer and director I had worked with a number of companies which provide such services to business and was often left feeling that these services were offered without any real sense of their benefit to either party. At the same time I was also working for theatres and as a producer in TV. I felt that I had some credibility in both areas and also had access to people and information vital to the research.

The main reasons for undertaking a PhD were:

1. to speak with authority on a subject which interests me greatly
2. to devise if possible a system of evaluation of this type of work and give it some credibility.
3. to make myself more attractive to potential clients
4. to establish a field of work based on this research
5. the joy of academic rigour! (missing it has to be said from my undergraduate degree in drama and theatre arts)

I approached the School of English and Media Studies at Barchester University in December 2003 with my proposal.

I chose Barchester for two reasons:

1. I live in Wessex and with a young family I didn't want to be away too much.
2. They have a reputation for a creative approach to MAs and PhDs (Creative Writing in particular)

Q1 Discuss Samuel's reasons for applying to do a doctorate and the basis of his choice of Barchester

Q2 What should he find out before pursuing his application?

2 Admission

An initial meeting with Professor Young, the head of performing arts and a potential supervisor indicated that they would indeed be interested in hosting this research and I made a formal application. This was accepted within a month of the application and I was notified by letter from the PG Admissions office. The letter indicated that I was to have two supervisors, Prof. Young and Prof. Smith the Dean.

I had no real idea of what the criteria were for selection or indeed whether one is actually applying for a place or offering the university the chance to have you there. I suppose the latter occurred to me because I was sure that postgraduate research brought with it financial benefit for a department as I had already received an unsolicited offer from another university to take the research there. I was nonetheless surprised and very happy to be accepted. The provisional title of my PhD research was to be

‘Evaluating the benefits of performing arts based interventions in a corporate environment for both providers and the clients’

I was advised to make an application to AHRB encouraged by my supervisor and the Admissions office that my mature student status, my experience and the interesting nature of my research stood me in good stead for a grant. Having gone through the time consuming and complex process of application I failed to secure funding on the grounds, it was intimated (by the AHRB themselves) that I didn’t have an MA. This was a bit frustrating as if I’d known this was going to be an issue I wouldn’t have bothered.

The AHRB grant is around £10,000. Very useful and particularly so if I were a single early 20’s postgraduate. As a mature student with a family I was always going to have to secure other funds and part of the approach would be action based research for which I was to be paid.

Q1 Discuss this turn of events

Q2 What should Samuel do now?

3 Initial experience

I regarded the failure to secure an AHRB grant a setback but decided to press ahead full time.

I was aware that as my subject area covered two very different fields it was unlikely that my supervisors from Barchester would be able to help me with everything, particularly the business side. With that in mind I approached a number of people to act as informal 'surrogate' supervisors from Cranfield Business School, Ashridge Consulting and Arts and Business East with whom I could correspond and seek advice. I brought this up again in my first meeting with my supervisors and it was suggested that I approach somebody in Economics or Business within Barchester to act as a third supervisor which I intend to do,

One thing very much reminded me of my undergraduate days which is that the life and work of a university seems to go on despite the presence of students not because of them. Another retrospectively worrying observation was that undergraduates, of which there seem to be a lot more these days, are, despite the lager, kebabs and casual sex, really just children. I say this because when I started my BA after a gap year I felt very grown up, in fact rather similar to how I feel now as a worldly 41 year old Postgraduate. Something to reflect on later maybe...

There was an initial induction seminar which I was not able to attend. I had a few days overlap with a previous job which meant I did not start until 7 days after the start date of Oct. 1st. We all received a pack which contained among other things a PG handbook which was quite useful and a form with which to identify training needs, also pretty useful. During the first few days of my 'course' 'research' (not quite sure what to call it just now) my main pre occupation has been discovering exactly what a PhD is and familiarising myself with conventions and terminology.

We had a research methodology seminar yesterday and surrounded as I was by people undertaking literature PhDs with easily identifiable primary and secondary sources I realised how different my approach may have to be. Daunting but exciting. Have looked at some existing theses in my subject area and they are all worryingly fat. Certainly not economics. I noticed that terminology was being used that everyone seemed to know but myself. Whether this was ignorance on my part or nobody was admitting it, I've yet to discover.

After attending an introductory seminar put on by the Graduate Students Association I have felt more focused on what the role of my supervisors should be and how I can use them and the resources of the department and the university to facilitate the research. I'm also becoming aware of my responsibilities in return. I'm sure the GSA planned this seminar after identifying a common gap in the market of information.

Q1 Was this induction adequate?

Q2 What should the induction of new research students include?

4 Supervision – first encounter

The nature of my research is necessarily practice based and outward facing and I feel it is inevitable in my case that I will never fully be able to immerse myself in an academic cocoon (I say this with some regret). Then again my ambitions for the research are not entirely academic. Two weeks in I feel my knowledge and experience have already broadened and I'm genuinely excited and of course daunted about what will follow. The induction process such that it is, I'm sure has to be a model for the PhD itself, mostly self inflicted.

In my second week I had a very interesting meeting with supervisors. I am so glad I was at that GSA seminar. Lovely and erudite as they both are there is a certain vagueness in relation to my research. At first this worried me but on reflection the whole point is that I am researching an area closer to me than to them. Also the particular nature of my research requires that I look outside accepted norms. I did press on and discussed issues such as IPR and working in collaboration with the University to consider commercial exploitation of the findings (rather like a bio tech researcher might). As my work is partly practice based this will be one way of contacting potential research subjects.

They also suggested that I think about 9 or ten chapters as opposed to 4 or 5 with a view to publication. All very practical.

Q1 Comment on Samuel's first supervision

Q2 Have you any suggestions for Samuel at this stage?

Episode 2: Christmas

5 Explorations

The last two weeks of October first two weeks of November were characterised by a flurry of activity; making contacts with potential sources of information and help, looking at available literature on the subject area, and rather surprisingly being regarded at least in some quarters as *already* an expert in my field. Heady and rather dangerous stuff. It wasn't to last!

The main diary points were:

18th Oct. Meeting with lecturer in music (and conductor). Discussed my research, her interest in the area and the possibility of using the orchestra as a resource of business interventions.

21st Oct. Attended workshop at Ashridge which I was invited to attend by my TV contacts. Main aim was to suggest to faculty of Ashridge School of Management that arts based interventions could be used by them for third party clients and as part of their teaching practice. Workshop very unsatisfactory in many ways (although fun). It did however suggest to me that what these types of interventions required was some sound intellectual backup.

27th Oct. Meeting Terry Bruce from Research and Business Services (RBS). This was on the suggestion of my supervisors in response to an idea that, given the dearth of literature on my subject area and the action based nature of it, I should try and get my research out in the field and maybe utilise my existing experience and contacts to set up a parallel commercial venture with a research basis.

[The Research & Business Services Division' supports research funding applications, collaborative research arrangements (including Knowledge Transfer Partnerships and student places in industry), the licensing of inventions and technologies to established and spin-out companies, and the provision of consultancy services to commercial and public sector organisations'.]

In advance of this meeting he had sent me a proposal for 'Creative Impact', a pilot for a creativity based module which he hoped would develop into a practical MA / Creative MBA for experienced arts professionals, academics and business managers. He was extremely interested in my research project and background and asked if I would help him design the course and maybe run some of the sessions.

Invited by a contact, a concert violinist and arts/business practitioner, to a meeting in Copenhagen to discuss the forthcoming series of events in Slovenia in 2005 which will look at both the practical application of such work and its wider implications in the development of civil society. I had worked with him some years before and re-

established contact with a view to using him as a case study. Decided not to go to Copenhagen at this stage (three hour meeting with at least 15 people didn't strike me as a good use of time) but used the invite as an opportunity to contact the hosts of this meeting, Learning Lab Denmark.

[LLD was established by the Danish Government in 2001 and is a laboratory for research on learning affiliated to the Danish University of Education. 'We aim to solve current societal problems related to learning through practice-oriented research and development activities. We do this together with dedicated partners from different sectors of society, and we place communication at the centre of everything we do'.]

There is a subsidiary partner, a research consortium looking at Arts and Business with a Director who has written one of the few books on the subject "Artful Creation: Tales of Arts in Business".

Invited to further conference "Why Business Needs The Arts" on 7th December

4th November. Met Charles Handy, a business writer with highly respected views on creativity in business and education. Again, he thought research very interesting and agreed to more formal interview at later date.

9th November. Attended Team Act Business Theatre 'Open day' in London and met the directors who agreed to be a case study of arts in business. Further meeting arranged for December.

Q1 Comment on Samuel's use of his first term

Q2 Have you any suggestions for him at this stage?

6 Training programme

There are two strands to the training programme. Weekly seminars with members of the department and a four day AHRB sponsored transitions programme. The latter I believe is compulsory the former I believe is optional but attendance preferred.

15-18th November. 'Transitions'.

This is a compulsory 4 day event for PGs from many disciplines. I had assumed that this would be focused very much on methodology. The first day was a series of team building exercises. While the social aspects were very good I found this day to be largely irrelevant as did many of my peers especially those not in science (for whom it seemed designed). As the next day was to Time Management I decided my time would be better managed by doing some real work. I did not attend the following 3 days and sent an email to the administrator and my supervisor to explain my reasons, which were mainly to do with relevance and my existing experience/knowledge of much of what was being expressed.

The PG seminars in the Department, while at times a source of useful titbits, are in the main rather vague, and seem more for the benefit of the lecturers to develop a pet theme. The majority of students attending seem to be from overseas, and language is an issue. There is great deal of drop out despite the fact that they are supposed to be compulsory.

Q1 Discuss Barchester's postgraduate training programme and Samuel's reaction to it

Q2 What should Samuel do now?

7 Supervisory options

I had realized fairly early on that the cross disciplinary nature of my research would mean I had to look elsewhere for supervision on the business side. A departmental research seminar on Interdisciplinarity confirmed this and on Nov 19 I met Prof Buchanan of the School of Management. I had contacted him because of his interest in Human Resources and was delighted to discover he was an artist himself and had used painting and sculpture in the teaching of management and was in the process of publishing a paper on role-play teaching. He told me that he would be interested in formal supervision, but only if he were to be the primary supervisor. We had a very constructive talk during which he pointed out (rightly) that my original research proposal - on which I had gained entry to the University and on which I had based my AHRB application - was not only not a true research proposal but had it been up to him I would not have gained acceptance on the basis of it. Even allowing for the fact that it was written almost a year before starting the research and that I had no research background I was rather shocked as I had assumed that it had at least some merit or why was I here?

This left me with a real crisis of confidence and a desire to redress the inadequacies in my knowledge. To be fair to myself (and why not?) I had anticipated quite large gaps in my knowledge on research methodology and had assumed they would be addressed in the research seminars and Transitions sessions. I felt rather frustrated and let down, an instinctive response I suppose which I have to admit may have been due to transference. On Nov 30th I have a meeting arranged with my secondary supervisor (my main supervisor is on Study Leave and has been since I arrived) and will address these concerns.

Q1 Discuss Barchester's supervisory arrangements

Q2 What should Samuel discuss at his meeting with his secondary supervisor?

8 Meetings...

I had also arranged a meeting with Suzie Andrew, a tutor from a department which arranges courses for PG s and Staff. We had met in the Library and after explaining what her department did she said if ever I had any problems with research I should contact her. Also discussed these issues with Terry Bruce of the Research and Business Service. What I discovered was that the issues and problems I was dealing with were by no means uncommon which I suppose was to some extent encouraging. My question therefore is what is being done to address them?

I was then contacted by the Head of Graduate Studies saying that it would be inappropriate to speak to Suzie Andrew on academic matters as her job meant she had to deal with supervisors. He said that advising me could compromise her work and that I should speak to him. We arranged a meeting for Thursday 9th December.

30th November. My meeting with my secondary supervisor was good in the sense that he indicated progress had been made in defining the research question but time was against us and we didn't get to discuss other matters including supervision by Prof Buchanan.

Dec 2nd. I went to another mildly stimulating but largely irrelevant seminar (we discussed how the contents and jacket and sleeve notes also constitute part of the text, very useful...)

Dec 3rd. Another Graduate Students Association event which was presented by GRAD UK and concerned the implementation of a 'Personal Development Plan' which will become compulsory in the next academic year. I and my fellow students were somewhat sceptical of the benefits of this - particularly when we learnt it might be an on-line form and therefore possibly another exercise in box ticking. I met the president of the GSA afterwards and expressed some of my concerns. She assured me that I was not alone and that the GSA is working to address these but that it has been an uphill struggle.

Now I am left with the following thought:

After a very productive day in the British Library and future appointments in specialist libraries researching documents and publications not available at Barchester and given the fact that the support expected is not entirely forthcoming what is to stop me withdrawing from Barchester saving myself at least £3010 per year and returning in 2007 with a printed and bound thesis ready for examination? Answers on a postcard.

Q1 What issues should Samuel raise with the Head of Graduate Studies?

Q2 How would you expect the Head of GS to respond?

9 Proposals

December 9th. Meeting with Head of Graduate Studies. This was both shocking and rather encouraging. First he told me that the absence of my primary supervisor meant that the School was in breach of contract, and I could - if I so chose - take formal proceedings against them! He was also aware that my particular needs were not being addressed. He agreed that the Transitions programme really wasn't for people like me. Among his suggestions were:

- He would look into some form of practical methodology training maybe one of the MA modules.
- He would approach the School and try to resolve the supervision issue.
- Further to this he felt that, given the subject area, primary supervision could be taken over by the School of Management and secondary supervision given within the School of English and Media Studies (SEMS).
- He said I should think over the possibility of a formal complaint but he assumed that what I wanted to do was just get everything sorted and get on with my research. He was right.
- He told me in passing about EndNote. Oh joy!

January 5th. I met with my secondary supervisor (who is also the Dean of School) who had spoken to the Head of Grad Studies and the following was suggested:

- a. I would remain within SEMS and see how things developed with the return of my primary supervisor, Professor Young.
- b. SEMS would formally approach Prof Buchanan to undertake secondary supervision.
- c. Issues relating to resources/methodology etc would be addressed.

Q1 Comment on the suggestions of the Head of Graduate Studies and the secondary supervisor

Q2 What should Samuel do now?

10 Resolution?

I am happy to pursue this. My primary objective is the continuation of my PhD within a supportive environment not to just rock the boat.

I feel to some extent vindicated and the feeling that I was just being a bolshy student who needed to knuckle down has, happily subsided. On the other hand I feel a whole term has been wasted in chasing after what should have been readily available and what is at least in the prospectus offered. I have suggested to the Head of Graduate School that one option might be that we forget the last three months and start again in January and that my fees will give me an extra 3 months' supervision at the other end. I don't know if this is possible.

The Head of Grad Studies has not yet responded to this suggestion and I need to get back to him to give feedback on the last meeting with my secondary supervisor. Personally I am going to give everybody the benefit of the doubt. If all goes well, fine; if not then I will consider asking for a re-start or I will consider transferring my research elsewhere. I'm hopeful that neither will be necessary.

It was half by accident and half by persistence that I have come close to some resolution. The fact that others will be in the same boat but may not have been lucky enough to bump into the same people or may not have the confidence and bloody mindedness borne of 20 years of work in the real world does trouble me. I meet other PG s from my department and our main subject of conversation is our dissatisfaction with the support and methodology programme. I know academics have real constraints on their time and resources but this is no excuse for hollow promises made to attract PG s.

Episode 3: June

11 Research strategy

Having spent so much time trying to sort out a framework for my research things rather slowed down in January because of an unexpected work commitment, which for reasons of future career prospects and money I couldn't turn down.

I finally gave up on attending the departmental seminars as they seemed to have no relevance to my subject area or indeed the general research environment.

I had been talking to the Research and Business Service (RBS) about the possibility of setting up an entity within the University, which could be both a home for my research, a point of access for interested parties and a creative consultancy using the resources of the university both physical and intellectual to develop an income stream. During these discussions I was sent information about a Business Plan Competition that they were running and in early February I entered my idea and got myself to the Semi final stage which meant I got some free time with an accountant's help and advice on creating a professional business plan. I entered the business plan and although I didn't get to the final (bio tech and IT ideas were the inevitable victors) it was commended and the RBS became very interested in the idea and we are at the moment talking about the practicalities of setting it up and what my position would be within it given my other commitments. As someone with a great deal of experience in the field I would be the main point of contact and consultant. I would also use the work as the basis for action research. Three things have pointed me in the direction of action research:

1. A sense of the pointlessness of much academic writing (particularly in poetics and philosophy). I know this attitude is born partly of frustration with my own work, but not entirely.
2. My supervisor on his return from study leave gave me a list of contacts one of which included a leading figure in PARIP (Practice As Research In Performance) an AHRB funded programme at Bristol.
3. I was invited to present at a arts/business conference in Slovenia where among my fellow speakers was an eminent professor from MIT who heads an action research programme at the Sloan School of Management there and who convinced me that this approach would be the best use of my particular experience.

I was also contacted by the organisation Arts and Business who are very interested in my research and its practical application and I am meeting them in June to discuss funding. I have once again applied to AHRB for funding and I trust that this time round my application resembles a research outline.

In March I had a brief meeting with my supervisor and he advised, given my work commitments of the previous 2 months that I should go part time from April 1st. He said that this would give me a couple of months grace for my upgrade panel and if my funding

applications were successful I could switch back to full time. I have to say I was much relieved and felt a great weight off my shoulders both financially and academically.

Q1 Discuss Samuel's progress and his supervisor's strategy

Q2 What should he do next?

12 Prospects

In April I undertook the Transitions B programme. After the debacle of Transitions A, I could be forgiven for being sceptical of the benefits of this undertaking. However I had spoken at great length to the tutor from CDED (centre for departmental and educational development) and she assured me it would be very useful. It was. So much so that I commented at the time and later to CDED that this should be Transitions A and that to wait 6 months before providing any useful practical advice for PGs was daft.

During a peer review of our writing I was struck by the circular self referencing and seemingly wilful obfuscation of much of the writing in the field. I mentioned this to the tutor afterwards and she said that's just the way it was and not to worry about it. She gave me some CDED papers by way of reassuring me that clarity, practicality and sense of purpose were also options for academic writing..

At the end of May I find myself in the following position.

1. The programme I made in October has now won a number of major TV awards and I am pressed to attend conferences and do more work for them. Not a bad situation to be in but rather distracting.
2. I remain convinced that I should continue my studies but still feel a sense of inadequacy not least because I haven't done a great deal of actual writing.
3. Despite this I have continued to make valuable connections with institutions and individuals in this country and abroad.
4. I am leaning more towards action research
5. I feel that if I don't get the funding I have applied for then maybe I should throw in the towel, I would hate this.
6. I like my supervisors and respect their academic experience but there are elements of my research are which are way beyond them and I wonder indeed whether I should consider moving to another institution.

I feel a lot more confident in the necessity of my research and the direction I am taking with it but still in some doubt as to whether this School and Barchester are the best place for it and me. The connection with RBS may be the decider.

Q1 Comment on Barchester's training programme and how you feel that it could have served Samuel better

Q2 Discuss Samuel's position at this stage

13 The end of Summer Term

The meeting with my supervisors and RBS was very positive and the idea of a creative consultancy base within the university is to be pursued. The supervisor from Management, Prof Buchanan, also helped me really focus my research particularly the action research in a way I had been asking for since I started. He commented that my research proposal, while very interesting, was too wide ranging and that I should focus on one discipline, theatre, and one business issue, leadership, and should design one experiment which will form the backbone of my research.

This is great, and the same focus will also be applied to the consultancy idea. My only worries now are financial and I hope this year's AHRC application fares better than the last.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised here

14. Reflections

I feel the year has ended more positively than it started but the energy expended getting to this point would have been better spent on writing and reading. My research is based within the School of Lit and performing Arts but most of the momentum has come from my secondary supervisor in Management. With a new found focus, particularly in the direction of action research I have approached a major company in the UK with a pitch to host the action research and to pay for it. The first meetings have gone very well and I have another in September. The lack of funding and the general frustration I have felt has meant that I have spent more time pursuing other career interests to the detriment of my PhD work. I know I will have a lot of catching up to do. I have resolved that if I do not get a grant from AHRC this time I will down grade to MPhil. I'm not happy about this but after spending £3000 this year I do not want to walk away with nothing and I can be expected to work/look for work/ and research effectively.

On the plus side I do not regret for one moment having undertaken this. It has already opened a number of doors for me and has been interesting and worthwhile. I just wish that everything had been clearer and more organised at the beginning (and indeed pre acceptance). I think academics may forget just what a trial research at this level can be as for many of them it will be second nature by now. Also I feel that the more crowded HE environment and the particular pressures of time finance and expectation require a re-think of how PG study is offered and administered.

On the acetates provided

- 1. Give a summary risk assessment of Samuel's PhD,**
- 2. List the main issues that need attention at the University (for later discussion during this seminar), and**
- 3. List the main features of a training programme for postgraduate research students**