

Ringling the Changes: Mapping Networks of Support for Two Doctoral Students

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Abstract

Supporting postgraduate students in their efforts to soar through the rings is a crucial endeavour of contemporary universities. A variation on this approach is ringing the changes for such students – that is, identifying the distinct stages in their learning journeys and seeking ways to maximise opportunities to facilitate their movement through each stage and in the transition from one stage to the next. This approach recognises the many common issues faced by postgraduate students, yet also values the diversity of context and experience framing their engagements with those issues.

This paper rings the changes in the learning journeys of two doctoral students, both in faculties of education in Australian regional universities, yet with different topics, research questions, theorists and findings. The account explores another incarnation of the ring metaphor: as a network of support. The authors map and compare their respective networks and link them with broader literature about contemporary doctoral students' experiences and outcomes, particularly the four "islands" distilled by Di Napoli (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006). The paper then considers four sites of potential student support that arise from the preceding discussion. These findings emerge as ongoing elements of the doctoral student journey and highlight the contradictions as well as the complexities of multiple understandings of ringing the changes for postgraduate students as they soar through the rings.

Keywords: Australia; doctoral students; doctoral supervisors; postgraduate students; student support

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Introduction

Supporting doctoral students constitutes a specific strand of activity and study within the broader field of postgraduate student support (Ketteridge & Shiach, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006). Not only are the research and writing elements of producing a lengthy dissertation that makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge complex and in many ways arcane (Aitchinson & Lee, 2006; Lovitts, 2005), but also the sheer magnitude of the task is likely to generate pressures and tensions that are as much emotional and behavioural as they

are intellectual and cognitive (Neumann, 2006). This situation is associated with an asserted “persistent uncertainty and enduring lack of consensus over the purpose of the doctorate and over the benefits a doctoral education offers” (Park, 2007, p. 6; see also Park, 2005; Shulman, Golde, Conklin Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006).

This paper adopts a particular approach to investigating some of the ways in which doctoral students can and should be supported: by unpacking the evocative metaphor of soaring through the rings (understood here as striving to attain the heights of completing a doctoral dissertation) – principally in terms of ringing the changes and networks of support, and also in relation to a constraining ring and sawing through unproductive student emotions. The connection among these metaphors is centred on intersections, changes and mobility, reflecting the ongoing alterations to doctoral students’ psyches and situations as they engage with a complex array of influences. This approach is enacted by means of a comparison between the authors’ reflections on the support received during their respective doctoral journeys, as well as a consideration of the support that they aspire to provide as doctoral supervisors.

These reflections and consideration are framed by reference to the lively images associated with the doctoral journey created by Batchelor and Di Napoli (2006), in particular four islands encapsulating “different degrees of interactions between epistemology and ontology” (p. 18): “the *island of expectations and passion*” (p. 18; *emphasis in original*); “the *island of narrow and dark spaces*” (p. 19; *emphasis in original*); “the *island of reasonability*” (p. 19; *emphasis in original*); and “the *island of eudaimonia*” (p. 19; *emphasis in original*). Each author’s reflection in response to each of the four islands is presented in turn, after which we identify some of the wider implications of this discussion for supporting doctoral and more broadly postgraduate students.

Some relevant contextual information is in order before we move on. The first author completed his doctoral journey in 2009 (Tyler, 2009), at the same institution where he and the second author currently work, and with the second author as his principal supervisor. His study examined the identity discourses of a group of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers from Queensland and Western Australia in relation to the notion of critical spirit (Oxman-Michelli, 1992; Siegel, 1988). His candidature began in 2006, representing a completion time of just over three years – the usual expectation of full-time doctoral candidates. By contrast, the second author commenced his study in March 1992 and submitted his dissertation for examination nine years later in March 2001 (Danaher, 2001), reflecting long periods of procrastination and non-engagement accompanied by the production of several publications about the research topic and a period of study leave that contributed to data and understandings relevant to the broader field in which the dissertation was located (see for example Danaher, 2000; Danaher, Coombes, & Kiddle, 2007; Danaher, Kenny, & Remy Leder, 2009; Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2009). Despite this productivity, it is likely that the second author would be required to ‘show cause’ why he should not be removed from the doctoral program if he were enrolled today and taking such a long time to complete the dissertation. His study focused on the phenomena of marginalisation, resistance and transformation underpinning the educational experiences and aspirations of a group of mobile show people in coastal and western Queensland as informed by the concepts of ‘tactics of consumption’ (de Certeau, 1984, 1986) and ‘outsideness’ and ‘creative understanding’ (Bakhtin, 1986). While the two authors’ doctoral studies were therefore both qualitative and interpretivist (Somekh & Lewin, 2005),

they employed different theoretical frameworks to address different research questions in different sites and with different findings.

The Island of Expectations and Passion

For Di Napoli, writing in the second half of the article with Batchelor (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006), it is crucial for doctoral students and their supervisors to engage fully with both the ontological (understandings of the character of being) and the epistemological (understandings of the character of knowledge) dimensions of the doctoral journey:

Ontology, however, is also important in another sense: we come into our studies as whole people – we bring with us values, hopes and beliefs that colour our very learning and, especially, our motivation for it. One also hopes to emerge, and indeed does emerge, as a more enriched human being at the end of one’s doctoral journey. This is why the ontological aspect is as important, at least, as the epistemological one. The two levels are intertwined and their lack of alignment is one of the main sources of dissatisfaction and frustration experienced by students. Any supervisor’s main tasks should be to help students reflect, in a critical manner, on this relationship and help them to gauge gradual changes in it. (p. 18)

Di Napoli characterised the beginning of the doctoral journey as “the *island of expectations and passion*” (p. 18; *emphasis in original*). “This is the stage at which, ontologically, the most passion for the project is felt: motivation and excitement are high, along with some trepidation for the things to come” (p. 18). “Epistemologically, a student is often at a very ‘immature’ stage, ... ” (p. 19), given the need to refine the topic into something that will lead to the submission of an examinable dissertation within the constraints of time and word count. For Di Napoli, “[t]he major role of the supervisor at this stage, apart from guiding students to shape their thoughts and understand the nature and scope of a doctoral degree, should be that of capitalizing on a student’s enthusiasm and energy ... ” (p. 19). Our response to these dimensions is at once academic and personal, with intellectual and emotional elements inextricably mixed.

Mark

The beginning of my PhD journey started with a sense of foreboding. It loomed before me as something I had to do. A long, arduous, dull task. You see, I don’t like writing. I think that the novelist Hari Kunzru provided a description to which I relate; he said that writing “is largely an exercise in psychological discipline – trying to balance your project on your chin while negotiating a minefield of depression and freak-out” (Kunzru, 2009, Para. 3). And doing a PhD meant lots and lots and lots of writing! Thankfully, I like the results of writing! I experience a huge sense of achievement in producing a document, a journal article or a chapter. (I may even write a book one day!) The feeling of elation arises from a sense of completion that comes from producing the published artifact, knowing that my compatriots and peers have judged it as worthy and yes, the status bestowed upon me by those who have yet to soar the lofty heights of publication. Just announcing to the world that “I’m starting my PhD” got reactions of awe from the polite and looks of pity from some of the wise, but overall it attracted sociocultural approval. “It must be the right decision,” I remember thinking.

Passion? I’m not so sure! I believe it was more a feeling of indignation that developed from the experience as a TAFE teacher and the TAFE bureaucracy. My lived experience was one of a sense of hopelessness developed from not experiencing efficacy in my job. The expressions of my efficacy appeared thwarted

through repeated engagements, where the bureaucracy stonewalled practices that aligned with my identities as a teacher, yet privileged practices that aligned with certain entrepreneurial identities to which I could not relate.

And so to epistemological immaturity; to quote the vernacular: “My oath”. I didn’t have a clue what counted as legitimate knowledge in relation to critical spirit (Oxman-Michelli, 1992), the central concept in my dissertation, and the teaching identities of the TAFE teacher. All I thought I knew whilst occupying this island was that my ontology was focused upon my ‘certainty’ of the lack of critical thinking skills deployed by certain TAFE managers (Tyler, 2008a). How this morphed into my research questions about critical spirit, TAFE teacher identity and relationships at work (Tyler, 2009) could be said to begin to develop on “the *island of narrow and dark spaces*” (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19; *emphasis in original*), the next airfield on my sortie.

Patrick

Although my doctoral journey began 14 years before his, and therefore my recollection of the starting point is inevitably considerably hazier than his, I shared with Mark a sense of foreboding, not necessarily dissipated by a comprehensive ignorance of the agony and the ecstasy awaiting me. My enjoyment of the processes of writing is probably greater than that of Mark: like the novelist Will Self, “I even enjoy the mechanics of writing, the dull timpani of the ... [computer] keys, the making of notes – many notes – and most seductive of all: the buying of stationery” (2009, para. 5). Furthermore, I also agree with Self that “... [writing] is my way of thinking about and relating to the world; if I don’t write I’m not engaged in any praxis, and lose all purchase” (2009, para. 5; see also Danaher, 2008a). Nevertheless the sheer size and complexity of the task before me were initially daunting and as time went on fuelled a great deal of my procrastination and my involvement in parallel projects rather than completing the dissertation until after I had left the island of narrow and dark spaces.

Unlike Mark, my doctoral topic did not arise from my previous professional and personal experience; instead it was an act of serendipity (whose role in research is elaborated by Mark below): a group of colleagues in the faculty staffroom reading the local newspaper about the show coming to town next week and wondering how the show children receive a formal education. That chance conversation prompted the submission of a successful research grant application and periods of sustained data gathering and analysis and associated publications in a field that quickly developed as my central research interest.

I certainly displayed as much epistemological immaturity as Mark; the corollary of that, of course, is the extent of one’s learning during and after the doctoral journey. Similarly with the ontological dimension of that journey: the island of expectations and passion proved to be the launch pad of the “values, hopes and beliefs that colour ... [my] very learning and, especially, ... [my] motivation for it” (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 18). Likewise, although I was most likely unaware of it at the beginning, by the end of the journey I undoubtedly “emerge[d] ... as a more enriched human being” (p. 18). Whether at the end of my journey the ontological and epistemological dimensions were in alignment I remain unsure. Certainly, given the complexity and unpredictability attendant on such an alignment, I cannot agree wholeheartedly, either for my supervisors or for me as a supervisor in my turn, that “Any supervisor’s main tasks should be to help students reflect, in a critical manner, on this relationship [between the ontological and epistemological dimensions] and help them to gauge gradual changes in it” (p. 18). It is a laudable

aim, but it depends as much on the student's disposition and capability to engage with it as it does on a supervisor's capacity to facilitate it.

The Island of Narrow and Dark Spaces

For Di Napoli, “the second and most critical stage of the doctoral studies ... [is what] I call the *island of narrow and dark spaces*” (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19; *emphasis in original*). This is partly because, according to Di Napoli, the epistemological dimension expands (however falteringly) at the cost of the ontological dimension: “This is perhaps the most difficult moment for any doctoral student, exactly because the ontological drive loses momentum, as the epistemological doubts augment” (p. 19). Di Napoli's prescription for moving beyond this stage is intriguing, again highlighting his view of the supervisor's vital role in supporting the student:

This is why it is important to be ‘becalmed’, allowing what are apparently periods of inactivity and confusion to germinate into better shaped ideas and practices. It is the moment at which the presence and support of the supervisor is the most necessary. S/he should help the student not only, epistemologically, to make growing sense of ideas, thoughts and intuitions, but also, ontologically, to sustain his/her lean and fragile sense of self both as a researcher and, more generally, as a person. (p. 19)

Mark

The deep, dark and convoluted place of critical thinking caused me to abort my initial landing and ‘go around’ on several occasions. Brookfield's words on critical thinking neatly described its obscurity: “Phrases such as *critical thinking* ... are exhortatory, heady and often conveniently vague It has been interpreted in a variety of ways” (1987, p. 11; *emphasis in original*). The likes of Paul (1992), Siegel (1988, 1997) and Facione, Facione, and Giancarlo (1997) have all added their particular valences to a concept associated with “rational and purposeful attempts to use thought in moving toward a future goal” (Brookfield, 1987, p. 12). For me, the “future goal” in relation to TAFE teachers and their jobs was questionable because of what I thought as an absence of the deployment of critical thinking by those in leadership positions.

Reflecting back, it was not until I had landed on this narrow island and accepted the ontological insecurity of its dark spaces that my indignation began to temper. I questioned my previous role within the tense terrain between myself as a TAFE teacher and the accompanying bureaucracy, and wondered about and questioned my own critical thinking.

During this reflective time, an act of serendipity was just waiting around the corner. Patrick Hannan (2006) described the possibilities of serendipity in relation to research by suggesting that “A black stormy sea is not conducive to success in a research project, but its effects might still be overcome by luck” (p. 2). I happened to trip over the concept of critical spirit (Oxman-Michelli, 1992) when mindlessly net surfing. Importantly, I did not just kick it away because it made me stumble. I believe I was ready to take notice, and I did. I thought, “Here is a concept that might be of use to TAFE teachers by enabling their practice.” Interestingly, I was not yet out of the woods. Critical spirit appeared in the literature as an essentialist notion fixed to a particular identity through notions of dispositions. Yet my reflections on this island of dark and narrow places also brought me to an ontological position that aligned with postmodern notions of uncertainty, contextual dependency, co-constructed realities and multiple identities. The two didn't fit together! This is what Di Napoli (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006) would

probably describe as a an example “of heideggerian ‘throwness’ ... a growing sense of profound insecurity which is born out of ... one’s engagement with the complexity of the research process” (p. 19).

I had got as far as the departure lounge; the flight to the *island of reasonability* had to be postponed. It took the ontology of discourse (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001) and the epistemology of discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) to negotiate the attainment of a boarding pass. I conceptualised critical spirit as a discourse, and TAFE teacher discourse – written artifacts, responses to credibility checks and interviews – became my data (Tyler, 2008b).

Patrick

Perhaps it is inevitable that we admire in others the qualities that we believe that we lack and yet would like to possess. Among many other strengths, I admire Mark’s single-minded commitment to completing his doctoral journey in minimum time – as noted above, the equivalent of a full-time doctoral candidate and one third of the total time that I was enrolled in the doctorate. My admiration is enhanced by the fact that he achieved that outcome while enacting his family responsibilities at home and his teaching and service commitments at work, as well as writing several sole and co-authored publications.

While the counterproductive and sometimes destructive convergence of procrastination and perfectionism has assailed me several times in my professional life, at no time was it more stressful and debilitating than when I inhabited the island of narrow and dark spaces in my doctoral journey. This was a time when I avoided interpersonal contacts with my supervisors and other colleagues, dreading the question, “And how are you getting on with your PhD?”, even using the communal photocopier machine at times when I predicted that no-one else would be there in case the question became articulated. These dark and narrow spaces were concentrated on a pervasive and all-enveloping sense of the size and complexity of the task confronting me, combined with a perception of heightened expectations of the quality of my work held by myself and perhaps by others. Yet even deeper and more fundamental in restricting my progress was the conviction – present and powerful but not necessarily expressed to myself, let alone anyone else – that I was incapable of the level of intellectual activity needed to complete the journey. This was partly the imposter phenomenon (Felder, 1988; McDevitt, 2006) elaborated by Mark below; it was also remembrance of an earlier period in my life when my “lean and fragile sense of self both as a researcher and, more generally, as a person” (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19) had been significantly threatened and from which I had taken some time to recover my equilibrium and purpose in life.

As noted above, Di Napoli considered the supervisor’s role central in helping “the student not only, epistemologically, to make growing sense of ideas, thoughts and intuitions”, but also, ontologically, to sustain” the “lean and fragile sense of self” (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19) highlighted in the previous paragraph. While a changed role meant a heavy executive responsibility for my principal supervisor (whose earlier influence on my intellectual growth had been considerable), my associate supervisor stepped into the breach in a way that made the difference between my finishing the doctoral journey and failing to do so. She did this through the quality and quantity of her feedback on my developing chapter drafts, by asking pertinent questions about links between argument and evidence and by being prepared to indicate when she felt that those links were becoming stretched beyond credibility. Most importantly, she did this by communicating both verbally

and nonverbally her assumption that I could complete the task and her unreserved commitment to supporting me in doing so. Without that support I would still be marooned on the island of narrow and dark spaces.

The Island of Reasonability

While in Di Napoli's view "the ... most critical state of the doctoral studies ... [is] the *island of narrow and dark spaces*" (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19; *emphasis in original*), the achievement of reaching "the *island of reasonability*" usually represents the most mature stage in doctoral studies, one which preludes to a final synthesis" (p. 19; *emphasis in original*). This island is characterised by "awareness and hope", and the student's realisation of "the relativity of one's own project" and using that insight "to decide when and how to put an end to his/her doctoral efforts" (p. 19). Heightened confidence in one's "own epistemology" helps to fuel the strength of one's "fragile ontology" (p. 19) (which can be understood as the individual's sense of vulnerability at times of stress and marked change). According to Di Napoli, "The supervisor's role is to progressively let go of the student, allowing him/her to navigate more autonomously, while still guiding him/her towards submission" (p. 19).

Mark

Di Napoli (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006) suggested that it is when you reach this island that a "real sense of progression" (p. 19) emerges. That was true for me; I had thought that I had achieved fair mileage thus far. I should emphasise that my sense of progress primarily came from some successful publications around my theorising (Tyler, 2006), and a pilot study that tested a critical spirit framework (Tyler, 2008b). This was not just about thinking and writing down ideas for possible inclusion in my dissertation, but about sharpening up my conceptual and methodological positions to a publishing standard and having them exposed to the rigours of refereeing and public comment. The 'other' hard work was before me: collecting data, analysis and write up. It was a matter of taking bite-sized chunks that sustained a momentum towards capturing the prize.

Patrick

I believe that I reached the island of reasonability later in my doctoral journey than Mark did in his. For me, it was only after I had completed the data analysis and particularly had written a complete draft version of the dissertation that was nearly double the maximum length and had received my supervisor's feedback on that version that I experienced a "real sense of progression" (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19) and the first real conviction that I might actually complete the journey after all. Again the twin themes explored by Di Napoli (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006) were very much to the fore: the not always easy intersection between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the journey; and the varied but always important supportive roles of the supervisor. In retrospect, I can see that my supervisor's feedback became less detailed as she perceived something of which I was probably unaware at the time: a growing awareness that the prize might actually be attainable, which in turn reflected an enhanced alignment between the ontological and epistemological elements of my study.

The Island of Eudaimonia

In Di Napoli's view, the final island in the doctoral journey is "the *island of eudaimonia*", which "is a word used by Greek philosophers to mean not simply

‘happiness’ but ‘well being’” (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19; *emphasis in original*). More specifically:

Eudaimonia is to be conceived as a happier space where epistemology and ontology tend to work more in harmony than ever before, as the student approaches and then gains new doctoral status. It is at this stage that a student comes into his/her own being, reaching a new stage of self-authorship. (p. 19; *emphasis in original*)

Mark

There I was, standing on the island of eudaimonia; what did I feel and what did I see? I thought, “What a relief!” but I’m not so sure I felt it. Upon the receipt of my examiners’ reports (thankfully all positive), I still had other commitments: teaching, research, co-authored papers and family responsibilities. I wanted to feel relief, but I cannot say that this was my experience. I still felt wound up, tight and annoyed. I’m sure that I acted intolerantly to those around me. I continued to experience the sense that the Sword of Damocles swayed over my head. I think it relates to the position of an academic completing his/her PhD whilst working full-time. The intensification of academic workload (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) over the past few years has produced for me a chronic stress that I believe influenced my inability to experience relief at the closure of my doctorate. In fact, I’m feeling tense now just writing this six months after completion. It is as if something of value had been denied. Yet I believe it is something that I had earned and that I should have due access to. So what did I actually see on this island? More work! Thankfully, around me I had and have my ‘community of support’, something emphasised by Brookfield (1994) in his writings about academics and dark places. This community included and includes my immediate family and my close colleagues. Their support is invaluable, immediate and above all authentic. For me it is more valuable than a sense of “reaching a new stage of self-authorship” (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19).

Patrick

I retain three strong impressions of the examination and post-examination phases of my doctoral journey that encapsulate the “happier space” identified by Di Napoli with the island of eudaimonia (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 19). The first was staying awake all night in my work office putting the finishing touches to my dissertation the day before it was to be submitted for examination, and going home to sleep instead of attending a staff meeting immediately after that submission. The second was receiving a message from my supervisor asking me to ring her and receiving from her the news that the examiners’ reports had been received and were largely favourable. The third was standing, arrayed in my doctoral gown, on the stage at the graduation ceremony and hearing applause before and after receiving the parchment from the Chancellor’s hand. All three moments represented a “happier space” than those encountered on the island of narrow and dark spaces, and probably come as close to exhilaration and exultation as is possible given the human condition.

At the same time, I share Mark’s serious concerns about the work intensification and concomitant heightened stress levels facing contemporary academics (see also Danaher, Danaher, & Danaher, 2008). Unfortunately I see few grounds for optimism that these trends are reversible, and I fear for the long-term sustainability of academic work. Yet being an academic is indispensable to how I regard the public and private elements of my subjectivity, and I feel that if I took on another, less stressful role in another occupation I would lose something vital to who I am and how I see myself in the world. So perhaps it is important to revisit the island of

eudaimonia from time to time in order to refresh one's spirit and sustain one in the continuing, post-doctoral journey.

Implications for Supporting Postgraduate Students: Ringing the Changes and Networks of Support

Thus far we have explored separately our respective engagements with the four islands identified by Di Napoli (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006) during our individual doctoral journeys. While we hope that these might be of interest to doctoral students and their supervisors, we acknowledge the risk of an apparent solipsism, even self-indulgence, in our narrative to this point. We turn now to explore what the preceding account might mean for the enduringly significant project of supporting postgraduate, particularly doctoral, students.

That exploration is informed by two pairs of ideas introduced earlier in the paper. The first is the interplay between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the doctoral journey on the one hand and the changing roles in supervisory support on the other noted by Di Napoli (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006). The second comprises the two variations on soaring through the rings articulated at the beginning of the paper: ringing the changes and networks of support. These are used to frame our identification of four sites of potential support for doctoral students:

- an ateleological experience
- support in dark places
- publish as you go
- relationship building and sustaining.

An ateleological experience

One substantial ring that we can inscribe around our experiences, that which encircles the process of producing a doctoral dissertation, is of its being an ateleological experience (Introna, 1996; see also Danaher, 2008b; Jones, Luck, McConachie, & Danaher, 2006). This accords with Di Napoli's contention that "The process outlined above[,] rather than being teleological, is, in reality, quite complex. Hesitations, regressions, false starts and progression intermingle in intricate ways, as a result of the changing balance between epistemology and ontology" (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 20).

Both of our experiences have exemplified an approach not guided by benchmarks, objectives and goals, where one moves from one step to the next in the application of a prescriptive formula, but rather by experiences of to and fro movement similar to the interplay between myth and fact. In this sense neither myth nor fact appears to exist without the other. It is the myth that emerges from the fact and enables us to make sense of our lived experience (Asuband, 1983; Introna, 1996). As doctoral students, we searched the established 'facts', added to them and produced the heuristic-like myth that enabled us and our examiners to form structured and unchaotic understandings of our research world, knowing always that those understandings were just some of the many truths available as an outcome. We believe that this would not be able to be achieved if our doctoral 'choices' had been

“legitimized” by achieving only particular milestones along the journey; if this were the case “[t]here [would be] no burden on [us] to enhance or improve the whole” (Introna, 1996, p. 36).

Clearly understanding the doctoral journey as in part an ateleological experience draws on both the ontological and epistemological dimensions of that journey, and also conceptualises the roles of doctoral supervisors as variegated and situated, rendering ‘support’ a more rather than a less complex phenomenon. Such an understanding also suggests that networks of support are equally variegated and situated, and that their mobilisation is likely to vary during different phases – or island – of the itinerary.

Support in dark places

A second ring could be easily thrown around the community of support that both of us had built and enabled in order to bolster us in our respective doctoral journeys. For Mark it was his immediate family and close colleagues (including his principal supervisor) who would offer personal sustenance through their friendship, camaraderie and acceptance, but who also became critical friends by fostering the courage to question, rethink and risk new perspectives on his doctoral project. The other thing about this community of support was that, whilst this company was being kept, dark places became much less foreboding! He treaded the dark terrain with the knowledge that in the company of authentic others he was less likely to falter and more likely to find stability.

For Patrick it was the timely support of his associate supervisor that enabled him to move from the island of narrow and dark places to more light-filled territory. In retrospect, as noted above that support was as much ontological as it was epistemological, even if not explicitly or even consciously so. While doctoral supervisors are sometimes seen by their students as unhelpful and even destructive (Budd, 2003), in this case the supervisor’s actions and even more so her attitude made the difference between success and failure. Support was also provided by family, friends and doctoral students, ringing the changes on feelings of encouragement and interest in another’s progress that can also contribute to that difference.

Publish as you go

Little sharpens the senses than the feeling that one is being judged. Peer acceptance is an issue for academics and professionals alike; the experience of being a high performer but inwardly feeling like a fake or experiencing high anxiety has been coined the imposter phenomenon (Felder, 1988; McDevitt, 2006). Our experience has been that, if you want to reduce the effects of feeling like an imposter, publish as you go. For Mark the primary publications were a conceptual paper around the dissertation’s core concept (Tyler, 2006) and another articulating the results of a pilot study that tested the methods (Tyler, 2008b). Some co-publication with close colleagues using related perspectives lightens the load even more and equips one with more confidence to tackle single authored publications. As alluded to earlier in this paper, the feeling of accomplishment and acceptance at achieving the publication of one’s own writing is a boon to most researchers’ feelings of worth, and draws them back for seconds!

For Patrick, publishing as he went was ultimately beneficial, but in some ways held up the process of finalising the dissertation – parallel publications were sometimes written at the cost of finishing a dissertation chapter. This is a clearly a balancing act, although one that is less serious or calisthenically challenging than that noted

above and articulated by Kunzru as “largely an exercise in psychological discipline – trying to balance your project on your chin while negotiating a minefield of depression and freak-out” (2009, para. 3). Nevertheless doctoral students and their supervisors need to consider carefully which publications will extend understanding and progress thinking, as with Mark, and which will in some cases impede such intellectual activity, as with Patrick. Again ontological and epistemological elements inform this decision-making, and the network of support should include individuals (whether supervisors or others) able to provide the student with clear sighted advice.

Relationship building and sustaining

The preceding account has highlighted the cognitive and emotional, the ontological and epistemological, and the individual and collective elements influencing the character and outcome of the doctoral journey. In many ways our doctoral journeys were very different – different in discipline, duration, focus and personal relevance. Yet they had in common a continuing dependence on the processes of building and sustaining relationships crucial to supporting us and facilitating the ultimately positive outcome in each case. That change (moving from trepidation as a neophyte to confidence as a competent researcher) is one worth ringing repeatedly in advising beginning students and supervisors alike: finding as much support as possible through as many intersecting relationships as become available.

The reference to sustaining those relationships is also important: acknowledging their reciprocal character and remembering to show as much authentic interest in the other person as we hope that she or he shows in us. Being a doctoral student, particularly at times of inevitable immersion in the thinking and writing processes, can be lonely and usually requires long period of being alone; this can be seen as self-centred, even self-obsessed, which can in turn strain the other person’s tolerance and understanding of what the student is undergoing. Providing mutual support and attending to other people’s ontological and epistemological dimensions are more likely to contribute to relationships that survive post-graduation.

Conclusion

Di Napoli (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006) concluded his section of their article with the following summation of the doctoral supervisor’s responsibilities:

The supervisor’s work consists in a very subtle art: pushing students towards the limits of understanding, probing them all the time, gently, while giving them all possible support. It also implies being able to signal when outer boundaries have been reached and the road towards (provisional) self-understanding and self-authorship has come to an end. It means being able to indicate to a student that another important island, in his/her life journey, has been attained. (pp. 22-23)

This synthesis contains much of value in helping to support postgraduate students, not only doctoral candidates. Yet clearly neither Di Napoli nor we are advocating a prescriptive, standardised, teleological approach to providing such support. On the contrary: our respective doctoral journeys reflect marked differences at different points along the way, even though we landed on the same islands in the same sequence, and even though the destination was the same for both of us. Even without these differences, the complexity of striving to reconcile such deeply embedded and potentially opposing phenomena as ontological and epistemological understandings and growth reinforces the need to consider each student’s journey on a case-by-case and highly situated basis.

Despite these provisos, we contend that the networks of support that we have mapped in our journeys ring some significant changes and point to some distinct stages not only in our itineraries but also in the lifeworlds of postgraduate students more broadly. These findings emerge as ongoing elements of the doctoral student journey and highlight the contradictions as well as the complexities of multiple understandings of ringing the changes for postgraduate students as they soar through the rings.

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