

Scribbling in the margins: Negotiating the tensions and challenges of the regional research student

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Abstract

This paper is a critical reflection on the experience of completing a PhD at a regional campus of a regional university. The paper employs the idea of writing in the margins, and the generation of marginalia as a long established academic practice, as a metaphor for the regional postgraduate experience. It considers the experience of the research student from a variety of perspectives, including personal transformation and change, the experience of writing in a non-metropolitan centre, the tensions in researching at a multi-campus regional university and the challenges of undertaking research in the discipline of the humanities in the metaphorical terms of marginalia. By critically reflecting on these aspects of my own PhD experience the paper observes how these challenges produce a different understanding of marginalia. That is, rather than connecting this to the common notion of marginalisation, postgraduate research as “scribbling in the margins” has the potential to generate research which is arguably a richer, more rewarding experience than it might initially appear.

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Preface

This article tells the story of a postgraduate student who completed a PhD at the end of 2006.

Me.

Now, I am not claiming that my postgraduate experience was particularly different to the many other postgrads immersing themselves in their research on a daily basis. So, if you are reading this paper looking for a melodramatic tale of misery, joy, despair and exultation you should probably put it aside. Before you do however, let me point out that it is what I see now as the very ordinariness of my PhD journey that is, its value to anyone seeking to understand how we might improve the lot of postgraduate students in the current tertiary education system. Of course, when I was mired in the depths of the PhD writing process I thought I was the only one going through what I frequently catastrophied as a research hell. However, with the benefit of hindsight, as well as interaction with other postgraduates and researchers, I have come to realise that this is, in fact, quite the norm. If that is the case then why have I chosen to couch my reflection on the

postgraduate experience in terms of marginalisation? Let us begin with some background and context.

Scribbling in the Margins

The metaphor of margins and marginalia appeals greatly when I look back at my postgraduate experience. It seems that there are many aspects of my PhD that could be characterised as marginal. The practice of marginalia, writing thoughts, notes and personal comments in the margins of more published and therefore (implicitly) authoritative texts seems to be a useful metaphor for postgraduate study. We are told we are to make an original contribution to knowledge; however, first we must wade our way through as much of the literature already published in our research area as we can. We are looking for promising glimpses of a “gap in the knowledge,” a hopeful location where we might situate ourselves and then expand a new idea into a great and groundbreaking thesis. That sounds easy doesn't it? Well it is not particularly. I spent many hours (years in fact) reading and taking notes, trying to come up with some form of acceptable argument that was going to get the green light from my supervisor. I scribbled reams of verbose, inarticulate repetitive summaries in the vain hope that somehow a brilliant idea would emerge from my loitering about in the margins of the fields of poststructuralism, postmodernism, cultural studies, television studies, media studies and their disciplinary friends.

“It's no cure for cancer ... but”

It is here that we arrive at what might be seen as a first point of marginalisation. My PhD was undertaken in the humanities, an increasingly marginalised and under-funded disciplinary field within the tertiary education sector. I was writing about, and researching, television. My project may have seemed slightly less marginalised if I had chosen film (still sadly seen as the superior aesthetic form of the two). Additionally, I was also writing about television through the lens of critical theory, unpopular with many in the field of cultural studies. Furthermore, if we want to get all formal about it, I was doing “qualitative” rather than “quantitative” research. There were no surveys, no statistical analysis, no semi-structured interviews of television audiences, no discourse analysis of broadcasting and production policy. Instead, I was very subjectively structuring a complicated argument about the power relations of television as a cultural technology, by considering its comic forms. (N.B. That is the concise version. I shall spare you the intricacies of the thesis.) In the grand scheme of research value it seemed like I was only just clinging to a place in the margins. What was I contributing to the world, to the future of the human race? Clearly not much, unless you believe that the writing of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze are vital to the survival of humanity, and are interested in theories of power and resistance. Perhaps I am overstating that point somewhat. However, I regularly felt marginalised by an unspoken attitude (which of course could have been generated by my own inferiority complex) that my research wasn't “real.” It was not useful in any way, shape or form to the university. Nor, did it offer anything “practical” to the world at large. Therefore in these terms, I was situated on the margins of the broader field of postgraduate research.

Where are you? That's near Townsville right?

The question of place or location also resonates with the metaphor of marginalisation in my postgraduate experience. Not only did I undertake postgraduate studies at a so called “regional university” located in Rockhampton, I was also located at one of its “regional campuses” in Bundaberg. While every so often there is a slight hullabaloo about the naming of this multi-campus operation, in an attempt to avoid the perception that there is a “central” or “main” campus, with the others being seen as somewhat lesser, this rarely works and the tag of “Rocky-centrism” remains a recurring theme for those working at other campuses.

What are the implications of this in terms of marginalisation? Well, first, the bulk of the university’s staff, as well as its postgraduate supervisors are located in Rockhampton. With my supervisors located in Rockhampton the most regular contact I had with them was by email or phone. There was the rare visit to Rockhampton. I only need ten fingers to count the number of times I met with my first supervisor face-to-face during the first couple of years of study; however, I must add that this also came with a certain freedom. I quickly realised the value of this freedom when my principal supervisor made the decision to leave the tropical climes of Rockhampton and move to the Bundaberg campus where I was located. No longer was I free to walk around the campus without a potentially awkward “non-meeting greeting” and the uneasy feeling that I should be buried in my research rather than wandering about talking to other human beings.

It was not only supervision in which I can observe a feeling a marginalisation. There are other aspects of research which were complicated somewhat by my location at a regional campus. For example, the central and largest library is in Rockhampton. While inter-campus loans were always efficient (taking a day or two at the most), there remains a difference between being able to walk through the library shelves checking through books, to looking them up on a database, ordering what looks most relevant and hoping it is what I wanted when it arrives. Being located at a regional campus of a regional university also led to the regular comedy of receiving emails directed to all research students telling them useful information about the postgrad photocopier being out of order (what photocopier?), the new scanner arriving for our use (where is this scanner?), invitations to research workshops (we do not have a building 32, 33 or 37) and other such irrelevant information that further emphasised that isolation and marginalisation of my postgraduate experience in rather more real terms. Attending some conferences and seminars in capital cities, at metropolitan universities, also reinforced the view that I was from “the sticks” and therefore a little bit out of place. Reactions such as “Where?”/“Is there a university there?”/“Is it made of sandstone?”/“Sorry I’m not interested in speaking with you” were not uncommon. Fortunately this view seems to be changing among my own generation of researchers at least, and I do not wish to imply that it was universal; however, it was evident on more than one occasion. Contrary to urban myths, there is life outside of Sydney.

You want to do what? Now?

I do not want to create the impression that this reflection on my postgraduate experience is one long lament of marginalisation and isolation where support was lacking everywhere I turned. While there were clearly challenges in researching in a regional location, there was also unexpected support from various areas and people. The challenges of the regional location and some of the issues I have already noted also brought with them the opportunity for me to learn and grow as a

person and as a researcher. That is, completing a PhD in a marginal discipline, in a marginal location encouraged me to look for opportunities and solutions to difficulties that I may not have considered had my postgraduate experience been somewhat different.

The first, and arguably greatest, challenge was in terms of supervision. As I have mentioned above, the question of location added an extra layer of complexity to the supervisor/student relationship. In terms of supporting postgraduate students, supervisors are perhaps the most important factor in a student's successful completion. Without a supervisor who is prepared to guide (without overpowering), listen (in a constructive manner), and encourage (yet remain objective to the project) it would indeed be difficult to complete any kind of research project. In my own case the supervisors with whom I began my postgraduate learning journey were not the ones with whom I finished it. The reasons for this were many, but in terms of this reflection, the key issue was one of support and how it was manifested. In my experience my initial supervision, which in fact lasted for most of the candidature, was in hindsight quite disastrous. The goal posts were continually shifting (normal in the early stages as the project settles) but this continued even into the last six months of the PhD. There was little effort to encourage my own ideas, rather ideas and arguments were "presented" to me. At times when I did produce my own work encouragement and feedback was hazy and unproductive. So, when I finally reached the point where, with barely any time left in my candidature, I was suddenly faced with an extremely negative response to my thesis draft; it was time to take action. Luckily, I had some wits about me early in the process and had invited an associate supervisor to join my supervisor who was more than capable, as well as willing, to take over.

It was a pleasant surprise to find support from my Office of Research, my Head of School, and other colleagues when I broke the news that with a short time to go I was changing my supervisory arrangements. I gather this is not really the done thing, but for me it had become "do or don't." As might be imagined my initial supervisor was less than impressed, but in the end this was a PhD that had to belong to me, so I had to take steps to take ownership of it. In this way, what was a difficult and challenging time actually turned out to be also a time a personal growth. I had to assert myself – a quality that I was not famous for previously. Since that time, the strength gained from solving this problem has continued to grow and I have been able to meet many challenges that I would once have shied away from. In hindsight I would argue that all postgraduates should experience a clearer understanding of their rights as students. There are workshops for potential supervisors, but postgraduate students should also be trained in appropriate ways to interact with their supervisors. My location meant that even if workshops were offered for postgraduate students it was rarely possible to attend them. For me, the supervisor-student relationship was very much a hit and miss affair for a number of years. I remained rather naïve as to exactly how I should interact with my supervisor and how the relations of power might operate at an optimum level. The isolation and marginalisation of working at a regional campus exacerbated these issues, as there was very little in the way of a cohort of postgraduates to interact with, a cohort that may have alerted me to the fact that the supervision I was experiencing was far from ideal.

How's your PhD going anyway?

This is the question that strikes fear into the heart of every postgraduate student. Well, perhaps that is slightly melodramatic, but it is an extremely annoying

question nonetheless. The support postgraduates receive from their family and friends can be wonderful, yet also a challenge to negotiate. For as anyone who has undertaken postgraduate study might agree, it is nigh on impossible for family and friends to walk a mile in your shoes. However, they can walk alongside you if you let them. This might be the best support there is. I was fortunate to have extremely supportive parents who, while they had little idea of what I was exactly doing in my PhD, were quite prepared to listen to me talk about my headaches and problems. They watched me very carefully throughout the entire process from beginning to end and always gave advice when it was asked for (and sometimes when it wasn't). The key here is not to push potential support networks away just because they are not the perfect supporters you might imagine you need. It does not matter if they do not actually understand what you are researching. Any kind of "pastoral care" support is valuable. These are the people who will drag you out of the house for breaks, encourage you to maintain a balanced life (no matter how many excuses and barricades you put in their way) and just generally be there when you need time out; which of course you will even if you think you won't. As I have noted, being in a marginal discipline and location makes such support networks even more vital to maintain.

Friends can prove tricky. Suffice to say, in a regional location it is unusual that your friends will also be budding researchers undertaking postgraduate study. They probably won't understand why you are doing so, what you are doing, or why it is that you keep fobbing them off. Well that was my experience anyway. For the first number of years in my candidature I had perhaps two friends who were also completing PhDs. We would spend some time comparing supervisory notes and commiserating with each other. I also gained lots of good advice from them as they were further along in the process than I was. However, as is the case in so many regional areas they left town for greener metropolitan pastures. There was then some time when I was without any research friends in the vicinity until I was fortunate enough to begin a new job at the campus which brought me into contact with a colleague who quickly became a valued collegial friend. Her encouragement and willingness to spend valuable time talking through my journey was of immense importance to my completion of the project. Not all postgraduate students might be as fortunate as I consider myself to have been in this regard. And of course I realise that this may not be peculiar to completing postgraduate study in a regional area. However, as I have already noted, living in a regional area means the likelihood of finding others on the same "intellectual wavelength" is a rarity. (I note this without intending to appear a snob.) So, if you do happen to be so lucky, grasp the opportunity with both hands and don't let go. These are the people who know better than to ask you "how's your PhD going?" Keep them close by. Together with this collegial friend we created our very own Foucault reading group and ploughed through *Discipline and Punish* (1977) together with positive and unexpected impacts on our respective research. We began an oral history project on women in the Bundaberg region which is ongoing. In this way we took advantage of our place in the margins together, creating a space for to open up our research in what might be considered an unlikely place.

"Those bills won't pay themselves you know"

A further challenge faced by postgraduates is clearly an economic one. How is it possible to support yourself financially (and indeed sometimes others) while spending time and energy on your research. In my case I was fortunate to have a university scholarship for the first three years of my candidature. However, at the end of those three years, I had not completed (due to some of the reasons outlined

above with regard supervision) and needed to find money. I was extremely lucky to be given casual tutoring work with various faculties at the local campus. However, as all casual tertiary education workers know such employment is unstable and precarious at best. It also meant that time and mental energy was spent on preparing tutorials and marking, and then when it came time to return to my PhD I was often not at my best. I quickly changed my candidature from full time to part time which meant I was not using up my position too quickly for the amount of progress I was making. For the final year of my PhD I was employed on a full time fixed term contract. While this was positive financially, it was a challenge to fit my research around full time work. My work area was supportive in that I was given time to use for research, but still that was not enough, so I came up with a strategy that saw me working solidly on my PhD from 5am-7am every morning before going to work. This utilised the time of the day when my mental energy is its strongest. I am not a night person. It was also positive in that I could see regularly, daily progress being made. This was far better than the alternative of waiting until the weekend and feeling constantly guilty during the week that I had not achieved more.

“Please return your 6 monthly progress report after consultation with your supervisor”

You know I can not actually remember what the exact instructions were on our six-monthly progress report forms. I do know I filled out a lot of them with possibly the same comments on each one, no matter whether progress had been made or not. No questions were ever asked. I am sure they were just one of the hoops that all postgraduates jump through and then get back to their own business. It is probably a quality assurance thing. Still, that being said, I did find that the Office of Research were tremendously supportive and helpful in other ways throughout the duration of the candidature. The various staff that I had dealings with actually did take time to listen, give useful and appropriate advice and always responded in a timely manner. This was somewhat unexpected, but nonetheless welcome.

Other areas of the university were no less supportive. My Head of School at the time (a school which no longer exists due to numerous university restructures) was also supportive, particularly during the time of the late change of supervisor. My final supervisors were a delightful breath of fresh air as I realised what good supervision was supposed to look like, and I kicked myself many times for not following my hunches and making the change earlier. Similarly, the Bundaberg campus was supportive in terms of everyday things, like the all important office space, access to photocopying and other forms of administrative support. And there were a number of lecturers from various faculties who kept an eagle eye on my progress, offering a listening ear, and in one case a final proof read which again was immensely valuable.

So what now?

In this reflection on my postgraduate experience I have discussed mostly the issue of support for the duration of the candidature. This is the area that is arguably the focus for universities in their dealings with postgraduate students. What is discussed less is what happens when you actually finish your postgraduate study. Isn't there supposed to be a moment of elation? Should you not feel as though a huge weight lifted from your shoulders and you are now free? Free to enter the world of academia as a fully fledged and highly respected researcher. To this I might say, “tell her she's dreaming.” Suddenly, after years of focusing my life

toward a single goal, that goal disappeared leaving me bobbing about rather aimlessly, Sure, I had a permanent job which is more than many, many postgraduate students. However, it was not in my discipline area. I had to argue my case for having any research output recognised by the area of the university in which I was working, and for time in my workload to give to research (in the form of writing journal articles etc.). This proved to be an ongoing challenge as well. For some time it seemed as if the marginalisation was to continue.

My experience was that it is post-candidature where more support could be offered from the university. Once a PhD is finished and you have shaken hands with someone important at a graduation ceremony that is when support is most needed. By this I mean support that would ease the transition from being a PhD candidate, an identity years in the making, back into the world of normal people. For me, this was perhaps the most challenging stage of postgraduate study. For I can look back now, two years after everything was finished and trace a period of what we might call mild post-PhD traumatic stress. It took me months, even years to recover from the mental exhaustion and stress involved in the candidature. During that time, I found it difficult to look towards the future of my research. It is only in the last six months that I have regained some enthusiasm for the future of my research work. To do so I have had to rely heavily on the support of family, a few close friends, counselling and meditation. I have also had to work hard personally to put the PhD experience into perspective and I think this can only be achieved through the passing of time. The university as an institution could do more to retain support networks for its postgraduates. Even if they move away to other institutions it seems to me that some work could be done to maintain contact, advice and other pastoral care support should a candidate require this.

My reflections on marginalisation and postgraduate study are clearly specific to me. It would nice to think that many PhD students finish their thesis and then skip happily off into an academic future. From my observations however, this is rarely the case. Whether, they experience challenges before, during or after the candidature (or indeed all three) what we must recognise is that postgraduate study impacts on the lives of its students in personal ways. Whether it is anxiety, depression, relationship breakdowns or an abandonment of the candidature before it is finished, universities need to recognise that if they want more postgraduate completions (which of course they do for various bureaucratic and economic reasons) they could improve their statistics by recognising the particular life challenges faced by postgraduate students while they study, tailoring support to encompass this aspect of postgraduate study, as well as the support they already provide. Similarly if they then want their researchers to contribute to the academic life of the institution, to build and improve its vitality, the place of those researching in the margins (which to various degrees is probably all postgraduate students) needs to be recognised and valued. For often it is the scribbling that takes place in marginal spaces that might produce something more than ordinary.