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ADVENTURING IN DOCTORATE LAND: CHANGES WITHIN ME FROM A YEAR OF EXPLORING

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ADVENTURING IN DOCTORATE LAND: CHANGES WITHIN ME FROM A YEAR OF EXPLORING

Leigh Quadling-Miernik

In the article “Packed and Ready to Venture Forth” (Quadling-Miernik, 2024), I left the reader with the image of me heading off on an adventure, packed with all the resources, equipment, and probably extraneous stuff that I thought I needed to survive my adventure in data analysis. Knowles (2016, p. 99) says, “Professional doctorate researching is a transformative practice in and of itself.” Therefore, in this article, I would like to answer the question: what has the one year of exploring taught me about myself?

As background, I have travelled to over 30 different countries in this wide world, and I have lived and worked in six of them including Aotearoa New Zealand. In each country I have added to my knowledge about myself as a person and as a professional as I have navigated around the complex environment of a foreign land. Some of those countries were less foreign than others, but arrival still meant locating myself and learning to operate. These experiences have developed and changed me, which illustrates Knowles’ statement above that we change as people through the learning we have.

Google Gemini (Open AI, 2025), in response to the statement “process of adjusting to living in a new country,” suggests the following:

The four important factors for a smooth transition:

- Positive Attitude—embrace the new experiences and be open to learning new things.
- Flexibility—be adaptable and willing to adjust to different situations and customs.
- Self-Awareness—recognise own cultural biases and actively work to overcome them.
- Respect for local customs —learn about and follow local etiquette and social norms.

Already you can see how these four factors might support the transition of an educational practitioner to a doctoral student.

In this article I review:

- The land I come from: TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Land;
- The land I live in now: Practitioner Land, and
- The land I visit: Doctorate Land.

I will explore the identity of Leigh through four lenses looking across each of those lands: experience, emotions, adjusting/adopting/adapting, and questioning and reflecting.

Whalley (2016) explored her change from practitioner to early-stage researcher by mapping incidents through the transition. By looking at the lands I inhabit and their differences I can see the changes and development within me as a result of living in these different locations. Labaree (2003) supports us to overcome the perceived “cultural divide” (p. 21) between educators and education doctoral researchers through explicitly focusing on this divide and demonstrating that it may not be as wide as it seems. Through writing this article, I hope to map the border between Practitioner Land and Doctorate Land.

EXPERIENCE

TESOL Land: the land I originally come from	I taught children, teenagers and adults from different countries and cultures with the express purpose of improving their English. I also taught teachers with the purpose of developing and building their pedagogy and skillset. I know this world like the back of my hand. I understand all the nuances. I hold all the qualifications to be able to live in this world. My community was my ‘family.’ Our discussions were familiar as our language was the same. My actions were similar to my colleagues’ actions and, where they differed, we helped each other develop. I was never alone and actively had to escape for a private life.
Practitioner Land: the land I inhabit now	I live in the tertiary world now. I have been here five years. This is my practitioner world. I am involved in education of adult students through working with their tutors and the students themselves to develop better teaching and learning. Education and teaching adults are familiar. I know teaching and I know learning so, when things are strange, I fall back on my experience to overcome the obstacles and even push aside the challenges I encounter. The language is almost the same. Communication is smooth, as if we have different accents in the same language. So, when I don’t understand, I ask and the answers are understood. This lexis becomes part of my vocabulary.
Doctorate Land: the land I visit on study days	I am a doctoral student visiting the Otago Polytechnic/Capable NZ Doctor of Professional Practice land. Here, I am researching teacher education so that I can understand my practitioner world better. I am alone but I have two friends, and I know a community I can reach out to if I want to. The language is strange and, in the beginning, I struggled to understand, often resorting to a dictionary to follow readings or conversations. More recently, I can read without worry or struggle as I know the lexis within the text. My academic literacy has changed. My actions are planned, thought about, and discussed beforehand, researched to understand which actions to take and why. My actions I feel are not similar to anyone’s, because I don’t discuss them with anyone but my mentors. My mentors at the start told me what to do, but yet also expect justification from me of my decisions on my actions.

Buss et al. (2014) say that education doctorate students “do not hold prominent perceptions of themselves as researchers” (p. 137), while Labaree (2003) acknowledges that “doctoral students in education have already lived a life” (p. 16). Here I can relate. I lived in TESOL Land for over 25 years, with thousands of students, colleagues, bosses, and others sharing this time. Yet none were researchers for me to observe nor could they mentor me. In Practitioner Land and Doctorate Land I utilise my previous life to develop and adapt but I do not feel at ease within myself here.

Returning to the important factors for a smooth transition, what has aided this change? A positive attitude has helped here. I have been alone but been comfortable with this as I knew it would be a solo journey. Flexibility has supported the change. Different environments do not scare me; usually they excite me. Just being on the doctorate journey is changing me, from someone reluctant to disclose my study and hesitant to explore to now being open and up front in stating that I am an emerging researcher in the area of tertiary teacher education.

EMOTIONS

TESOL Land	In my TESOL world I was bored. Excitement came occasionally due to students presenting situations never experienced before. I could predict responses to my questions before students or staff uttered them. Life was routine and the emotions were stable. Anger very rarely occurred and any frustration was only due to lack of resources, money, or time.
Practitioner Land	Emotions are settling because I have been here over five years. I am not as naïve as I was. Boredom is starting to creep in, yet each intake of students brings excitement as there will be more opportunities to support them to achieve their goals. I have slowly built relationships with the tutors whom I support. They didn't trust me at first, because I was not from their land. I was an outsider. Who was I to offer suggestions and advice on teaching in the tertiary world? The occasional distrust happened because of my authority that came with my position or my knowledge. Justification became my new response to questions asked of me.
Doctorate Land	I visit the doctoral student land during my study periods: Wednesday and Friday afternoons and either one or both days during the weekend. The time is precious, and I get annoyed if for any reason I can't visit. At first, I was naïve and innocent, aimlessly blundering about, not knowing if I was causing offence or amusement. My mentors, I assume, knowingly smiled at my actions and statements like parents watching a child's first interactions with a pet, new food, or toy. I am frustrated because I know I can do better; I know I have the skills and intelligence. I just seem to stumble, get lost, and am confused. I am excited and in disbelief. Finally, the journey towards my goal has started and is progressing. How have I got here and why do people think I can do it? I pass each milestone with disbelief that I have completed the slog and achieved that step. I am determined. The challenge to understand, to develop and prove myself to myself and others pushes me forward and drags me into my study block.

Labaree (2003) speaks about how education doctorate students are released from responsibility, allowing their focus to change from teaching and learning events and classroom processes to understanding these events and processes. By looking at my time in Doctorate Land, I can see that I too am changing from the doing to the understanding; in other words, from the practical to the theoretical. I step away from doing into examining my experiences and research in relation to what other researchers have said. It has been difficult to switch into the identity of a researcher.

What has helped this change? Recognising that I am resilient during this difficult transition, I can overcome hurdles and get through the struggles. Cook (2020) says “not everyone has the fortitude, persistence or resilience” (p. 47) to complete a PhD, something that resonates with my journey. I have shifted from feeling like I am one of Cook’s “not everyone,” unable, wavering and fragile, to feeling I am someone who can complete. Being self-aware is another factor that has allowed me to grow in my sense of belonging to the community of researchers. I can see the differences between the TESOL and the tertiary worlds and have explored what these differences mean and how to adapt myself.

ADJUSTING/ADOPTING/ADAPTING

TESOL Land	In my TESOL Land I rarely adjusted or adapted myself. I hardly ever adopted a new position, a new action, or a new skill. With over 25 years' experience it was me supporting others to change and develop. There were few moments of reflective practice, more within my teaching than anything else: what could I have changed in the delivery to support students better? I never reflected on what I could change within myself to improve myself. In TESOL Land I learnt my students' cultural background and how they influenced their learning. I never needed to examine my own culture; the Pākehā that I am nor the Māori influences on my culture.
Practitioner Land	Here, I know I have adapted my behaviours, my actions, and my language. I incorporate tikanga Māori and te reo Māori into my daily actions due to the need to be inclusive of the environment I am in and the students I face. I felt so uncomfortable standing where I stood that I started my te reo and mātauranga journey. This knowledge brought a deeper understanding of not only the effects of colonialism and my determination to improve the current situation but also of where my Māori students live and often breathe. My learning aligns with my beliefs about education and the Māori tikanga principles of kaitiakitanga, whanaungatanga, and manaakitanga.
Doctorate Land	Here I am reaching for security and stability in where I stand. I know if I copy what others say and do then I am not going to fall or be judged as an outsider. I follow others without knowledge. I listen and belief in my mentors without understanding and hardly ask questions. I am afraid to show I don't understand so I nod and say I do. Over time I stop crawling and can stand, wobbling in my own knowledge. I understand the bubble around me and, more importantly, I decide on and believe in my actions. I am adopted into a community and find myself adjusting to their culture.

The culture gap is emphasised when practitioners are asked to abandon the teaching culture to take up the academic culture (Labaree, 2003). Cook (2020) tells supervisors to respect and foster the growth in doctorate students as they develop and become confident to “stand their ground” (p. 46). In Doctorate Land I have gained confidence in who I am within my identity as a researcher. I now no longer fear questions from my mentors. In Practitioner Land I am confident in knowing that my experience carries through, and I can stand proud with my skillset, bridging the gap. Cook (2020) also says that the first rule of a PhD is to “accept the role of a neophyte or beginner, albeit a talented, educated one” (p. 44).

What factors have supported me transition? Ultimately, the key factor is developing a high level of respect. Respect for the theorists who lay the foundations for my understanding. Respect for my mentors who guide and support my wobbly steps towards vaguely running. Respect towards myself that, though I have limited knowledge in Doctorate Land, I am willing to grow and open to that growth through using my skills from TESOL Land and Practitioner Land.

QUESTIONING AND REFLECTING

TESOL Land	In my TESOL Land, questions were more than likely to be directed to me than to come from me. I was the wise one people turned to for answers. If I did question, it was to understand the thinking behind the questions asked to me. It is easier to disseminate answers when you understand the reason behind the questions. My other questions were in order to understand the reasons for actions taken by people so I could decide upon my approach—would it be to support and develop the person, or would it be to discipline the person? Very rarely did I reflect on my actions, my questioning, or my behaviour beyond the teaching.
Practitioner Land	In my Practitioner Land, I question, and I reflect often. I question to understand the nuance of the situation that is familiar but yet not. I reflect to see if I can draw upon past experiences to support new experiences. I reflect often on my time in Doctorate Land as a student, to show up for and support the tertiary students who come to me overwhelmed with returning to study after years in their respective careers. I can relate to their emotions, their questions, and their struggles.
Doctorate Land	I feel that my time in Doctorate Land consists of nothing but questions. First, it started with the question of what I wanted to know that led to researching the answer. Then it went to questioning every item of vocabulary, each article I read, every action I make, and every word I write. This is interspersed with questions to myself about why, when, how, who, and what, and around the topics of methodology, methods, epistemology, research design, the implementation of research, analysis, timeframe, progress, and probably much more. Finally, the big question asked by everyone who doesn't visit doctorate land is <i>Why are you doing a doctorate?</i> With the sub-questions: <i>When will you finish? What's it about?</i> quickly followed by <i>Huh, what does that mean?</i> In Doctorate Land the word reflection is overtaken by a new vocabulary item: reflexivity. Here I have to learn the vocabulary item's meaning before I can enact it. I struggle to be reflexive, automatically slipping into reflection. I have taken over two years to cement actions to the meaning of this term. And I still question myself: Have I truly got it? Am I being reflexive enough?

Dall'Alba (2009) outlines that through questioning and reflecting on ourselves and the world around us, we can transform. In becoming an academic, and belonging to the world of academics, part of the process is questioning myself in the non-academic world. Labaree states that “if teaching is a normative practice ... then educational research is a distinctly more analytical practice” (2003, p. 17), where the former focuses on producing outcomes and the latter on producing explanations. Acknowledging there is a difference between Practitioner Land and Doctorate Land, I am adjusting to the requirements from me in both. Labaree (2003) further outlines how theoretical discussions can be eclipsed by a practitioner’s experience, which brings me solace because it suggests that the division between the two lands is not wide and extreme but that they are interlaced and strengthened by each other.

Of the factors that support this transition, it is my reflection and focus on reflexivity that are most important. Helping me adjust is my own self-awareness of how I analyse my data, not with the question *What happened in the story?* but *What is the story telling me and how do I know this?* I am aware that I can see myself in participants’ narratives but that I also need to see beyond myself.

The year of exploring has brought about a feeling of belonging and becoming a native in the world of academia. As I will hopefully end my doctorate within a year, perhaps my transition will now be one of a successful doctoral candidate to that of a more informed practitioner.

Leigh Quadling-Miernik is still on the road labelled the Doctor of Professional Practice journey, which started in 2021. The project has been looking into professional identity development for tertiary educators but is slowly turning its focus inwards towards her own personal growth. Her passion is for creating learning opportunities for both educator and ākonga, following the mantra “whatever gets to the goal with integrity.”

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