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<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6006002>

PACKED AND READY TO VENTURE FORTH: THE REFLECTION ON  
CRUX POINTS IN THE DATA GATHERING STAGE

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

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# PACKED AND READY TO VENTURE FORTH: THE REFLECTION ON CRUX POINTS IN THE DATA GATHERING STAGE

Leigh Quadling-Miernik

Education and studying on a programme are often compared to a learning journey. There are phrases used frequently to remind us of the development and growth that comes from learning and the fact that, in the bigger scheme of things, it never ends. A life-long learner; on the road to somewhere; reaching a milestone; the ups and downs along the way; the roadblocks we encounter; mapping out the tasks; and finishing successfully; these are but a few phrases that are often stated. Literature on the experiences of doctoral students has focused on the educational journey (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Cook, 2020; Gravett, 2021), the sense of becoming or evolving (Arnold, 2021; Clark, 2022), and the resilience and persistence of doctorate students (Chamadia & Qureshi, 2021; Javier, 2022).

## CONTEXT OF THIS ARTICLE

This article builds from previous articles on the author's doctorate journey and continues the subjective narrative outlined in 2023 (Quadling-Miernik, 2022, 2023). It has a reflective focus which is evidenced by sections within the author's reflective journey. It continues the goal of documenting the author's journey as part of the 'Me Project' in the doctorate and to support future doctoral candidates whose journey perhaps echoes the author's.

Doctorate studies are hugely personalised and individual (Arnold, 2021). The idea of becoming a holder of a doctorate qualification perhaps focuses on the person regardless of the journey taken, while the phrase "the doctorate journey" perhaps focuses on the experiences rather than the change in the person having those experiences. To combine both the changes in the person and the experiences that resulted in the changes is the goal of this article. It discusses critical moments or crux points in the journey that Arnold (2021) names as a series of challenges that transform the person in "a myriad of ways" (p. 82).

The reflective nature of this article is based on the Framework of Reflective Practice (Rolfe et al., 2001). The model has three simple questions: What? So what?; and Now what? The What? becomes the crux point in the journey; the So what? links to the understanding of these crux points in the bigger context, and the Now what? links to actions the author took or the lessons the author learnt.

## A LEARNING JOURNEY DESCRIBED AS A SPHERE

Consider the journey in the NZQA Level 1 to 10 framework as an ever-expanding sphere of nine layers, where the core is the start of formal education at primary school, and the sphere's surface holds all the body of knowledge that exists up to Level 9. Now if you put yourself midway between the sphere's centre and its surface, you are at Level 1, when you have started formal external assessments in secondary school. You have only started to span some of the circumference (high school maths terminology = an arc) as you specialise in your favourite subjects along with the required English and Maths. Before Level 1, you had all the basics covered: foundational reading,

writing, and numeracy along with general knowledge of the world and its makeup. By the end of secondary school, at Level 3, you might be spanning less of that arc than when you started, really focusing on the subjects that might support you further at university or the career you are planning. Then university – again reducing the focus and the arc span. In my case, my first degree was in Chemistry, mainly Organic Chemistry. Post-graduate is next; in my case, a master's in Education/eLearning – a smaller arc on that sphere of knowledge. Level 9 is at the sphere's surface, its very edge. Imagine that the Level 9 thesis is making connections between points on the surface to make the surface layer of knowledge stronger. So what is Level 10? Envision the act of stepping outside the boundary of knowledge and creating new knowledge, contributing to the existing body by building more. Level 10 is pushing that sphere wider. A launch off the sphere as an exploration into the unknown.

Exploration, expedition and adventure. These words hark back to the idea of a journey. So imagine, again, the early explorers: Cook, Magellan, Tasman, Amundsen, Livingstone, Shackleton, Hillary and Tensing, and Armstrong. Politics aside, they explored areas that were mostly known or known about by people; to the Indigenous people intimately known, yet unknown to the explorers. All the previously named explorers could not have ventured out without preparation and support, financially, mentally or emotionally. None of them just walked out the door saying, "See you, honey! I'm off to explore. I'm going to find something new." They took their time, planned and unplanned, packed and repacked, perhaps even unpacked. Some may have had maps, complete or partial. Some had training, others did not. They all had built their reputation and skillset for the journey ahead.

Connecting this back to the doctorate, Level 10 research, and my journey so far, I take the data collection as the preparation, and the data analysis as the exploration and discovery. This article spans the preparation time before I opened the door to 2024, waving goodbye to the known. This time spans my first leap from Level 9 into Level 10, at the beginning of 2023 and the year of preparation I have taken getting ready to embark. It covers three crux points encountered and the thoughts and decisions taken on actions at these crossroads in my journey. It is supported by my learning journal entries, which could be compared to a ship's log. These are put in italics here to separate them from literature I have read. And, as always, it has road trip music playing, the soundtrack I have built to get here.

## WHAT? – CRUX 1: THE LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN

The Doctor of Professional Practice has Level 9 and Level 10 components, where Level 9/Course 1 is the *Articulating Practitioner's Research*, 120 credits or approximately 1200 hours of learning, and could be considered the coursework phase of the doctorate. Level 10/Course 2 is the *Practitioner Research Enquiry*, 240 credits or 2,400 learning hours, and is the Research phase. The jump from Level 9 which is on the arc of the sphere, from the known space of knowledge into the vacuum/the unknown space of knowledge started on Day 1, 28 February 2023:

*Yesterday was my first mentor meeting in Course 2, although officially I'm not in Course 2\* ... we talked about my questions, what did the feedback mean, how can I remember more/better and how can I push beyond level 9 into level 10. This is something I really need to get sorted and work on.*

\*At this stage my enrolment in Course 1 was finishing and Course 2's enrolment had yet to start. Officially, on paper, I was not in Course 2 but in my learning journey I was.

16 March 2023:

*Yesterday was the first meeting – officially of the next stage. It's amazing how calm I feel. I wonder why? I think it is because I know the steps ahead – I know what to do. I just don't know what will happen. I've set up a new process ...*

These journal entries show the enthusiasm I felt and the calmness I had. Little did I know that the year was going to be a year of semi-slogging in my preparation; a year of frustration, a year of annoyance, sometimes procrastination, sometimes high energy and focus. Itching to get onto the journey meant I had to spend a year getting ready.

## SO WHAT? – WHAT NOW FOR CRUX 1?

Denicolo et al. (2018) state that undertaking a doctorate or any project that spans several years will mean dealing with uncertainty and becoming comfortable with it. In slight contrast, Arnold (2021) states “doctoral students have a high level of comfort at the beginning of the program” (p. 76) due to the fact that the requirements and expectations of the coursework phase are known and familiar.

Cook (2020) outlines the various tests that must be passed along the way, though this could be considered more about the start of the journey than its duration. Cook further adds that the journey of learning is more than just doing the doctoral degree but expands into gaining an understanding of the academic culture that surrounds the doctoral candidate.

So what did I do, and now what have I learnt to do better?

In reflection, I did nothing but continue onwards. But also in reflection I see that my journey to now mirrors literature. I have dealt with uncertainty; I am still getting comfortable and there are more tests to come. However, I feel my coursework phase was anything but comfortable. In contrast to Arnold (2021), at the end of the first year in the Research phase my journal states, on 27 January 2024:

*I reflect on how extraordinarily calm I am compared to my first year. I know how to code and theme. I've got experience. I also know that this coding and theming is next level. But still having knowledge on the actions I have to do is calming, motivating and reassuring. I am not sure when I started I knew I would be doing what I already knew. I think that if I had known I might have been less panicky. But how would I have known back then what I know now?*

## WHAT? – CRUX 2: LOST IN MY PREPARATION

17 June 2023:

*Wow a month – a month of wandering around aimlessly. I feel like I have nothing, nothing recently although I probably have done lots to support my growth .... So I'm on a plateau and that's apparently normal. I don't feel positive about the plateau. In fact I feel very aimless. The previous 2 years I've had a very set goal but this year I haven't got one that's clear. Obviously the goal is to interview and start analysis but maybe it's not as clear as it should be. I should set the goal and make it clear. I should make a timeframe schedule – then I will feel less aimless and have direction.*

Both the 16 March (in crux 1) and 17 June entries allude to new strategies to achieve the plan. What is not seen in the journal is that those strategies were not implemented nor adhered to.

4 April 2023:

*Another frustration this week – I thought over the weekend that I need to organise the folder and get a process document sorted. I scribbled things on paper, thought that looks good, opened my DPP folder to find ... I had already done all this last week and everything looks great. So why did I think I needed to do it again?*

3 November 2023:

*Data collection is a drudge. The motivation to keep focused wanes. I know there is a goal and I know I want to keep going but how does one draw on the internal motivation to trudge through when one has a choice to stop.*

## SO WHAT? – WHAT NOW FOR CRUX 2?

Arnold (2021) repeats Muskal's statement that "everyone muddles through although some muddle faster than others" (p. 78) and then emphasises that even the best of us muddle, and this process is a way of enlightening us.

Cook (2020) has a chapter called "The Journey's Milestones," again referencing the idea of travel and signposts of how far you have come versus how far you have to go. They emphasise the effort to reach a milestone and the joy of achieving it, as well as adding that no one should underestimate the mahi/work required in the process to reach each milestone within the journey.

Great suggestions for strategies to prioritise for balance and long-term success are discussed by Denicolo et al. (2018). They continue to add that doctoral journeys are often described as linear but, in reality, the experience is varied across time with periods of "increasing confidence interspersed with dramatic dips" (p. 46).

Batchelor and Di Napoli (2006) speak of becoming becalmed; having times of inactivity where the confidence wavers while that inner voice overplays the sense of failure. Ultimately research is considered as "a voyage of vulnerability, part of this vulnerability is to do with being open to finding your own voice through periods of apparent inactivity as well as activity" (p. 14).

So what did I do, and now what have I learnt to do better?

I started seeing the data collection phase as my preparation for the exploration. My journal entry from 8 December 2023 shows this in my reflection after reading the biography of Peter Freuchen (Mitenbuler, 2023), a Danish polar explorer:

*I keep thinking about Wanderlust and the "art of exploring." It's like my doctorate journey. I'm exploring the unknown – well actually at this moment I'm just collecting everything I need to explore. Data collection is the equivalent to prep-ing and packing my bags, where prep-ing is the gathering of data through the interviews and packing is the editing, reformatting of the transcript.*

I attempted to drown out the negative inner voice and started listening to the voice that was trying to connect points together.

Every session of study starts with opening my Go-to page in my notebook. It outlines what I have done, crossed out, and what the tasks to do today are. It is my way of controlling the muddling, by becoming a map of my next steps so that when I do become lost, I will have the goals to find a way out.

## WHAT? – CRUX 3: SELF-DOUBT, CONFIDENCE, AND BELIEF

4 April 2023:

*I don't feel panicky because I'm unstoppable. In fact ever since getting into Course 2 I've not felt confused or worried or nervous. Just I feel a huge mountain to climb but I know I can do it ... [but later in the same journal entry] Something that worries me is that those that respond will be proactive people where the people I want in my study are the reluctant ones ...*

Yet, only nine days later, on 13 April 2023:

*Why do I feel like I am just not grasping what I should do to be what I feel I should be. The words fake and imposter just ring in my head. Is it because I have an image (unconsciously) and I feel I am not of that image?*

5 December 2023:

*One of my biggest concerns has been “What could I possibly add to the body of knowledge?” It’s an element of self-doubt. It’s scrawled on Post-it notes in many places. In fact it is only recently I have worked out that I am speaking to teacher educators. – I have an audience. Gee \*SIGH I know this! No-one writes without a purpose and an audience.*

### **SO WHAT? – WHAT NOW FOR CRUX 3?**

Stone and Stone (2011) talk about an inner critic – one who criticises and belittles yet is anonymous as an inner voice that developed early, assimilating itself as a natural part of ourselves.

Arnold (2021) states “recognising that the doctoral journey is a remarkable one with an emphasis on you, the student, is important to your success” (p. 82). This statement highlights the journey and the need to focus on yourself perhaps more than the research being done.

Cook (2020) states “possessing a PhD provides evidence of the student’s resilience and persistence” (p. 51). They then outline all the hoops that a doctorate student needs to jump through to be accepted into the community of scholars, from mastery of the subject and critical thinking to “implementing behaviours and standards required to become a scholar,” all leading to the student’s “earning the right to use the title of Doctor” (Cook, 2020, p. 51).

So what did I do, and now what have I learnt to do better?

When the inner critic is loud and taking control, the emotions take over rather than the sensible voice in my head. My solution is to chant the mantra on my visible Post-it note: “Shut the devil on the shoulder up.”

Arnold’s (2021) statement above highlights the journey and the importance of the growth of me rather than the outcome of my studies. By adding entries to my journal, reflecting on the entries and writing articles on my doctorate, I realise that this is all part of the journey, the preparation for the year ahead and for my development as a doctoral student into a doctorate holder. It has been about my growth, not my research.

I have learnt that above all else I have the tenacity to keep going, one tiny step at a time. This is the route I have taken to get to this point, and it has worked so far.

I have learnt that my mentors will steer me right if I get lost. Letting go of my cautiousness and hesitancy in being myself allowed me to trust their guidance, and their belief was perhaps the biggest critical moment in my journey so far.

15 February 2023:

*Tonight is the night before my DPP LA presentation where I need to present my proposal. ... I practised my presentation with my mentors. They were happy. I rudely cut Danny off when he wished me good luck saying I don’t need luck, I just need ... and I couldn’t finish my sentence. Hours later I realised – I need their belief, which I have. I need to realise, and I have, that tomorrow is a judgement but it’s a gate they need to open but they won’t open until I am ready for what comes next. I have to go on by myself*

*and I need to be prepared as much as possible. They are there as a form of my protection. Danny and Martin are behind me as cheerleaders as I approach the gate. They are my supporters, sponsors demonstrating to the gatekeepers they believe in me. So I just need to have their belief, their backing and their support.*

## OPENING THE DOOR AND VENTURING FORTH

Arnold (2021) says “the preparation for the dissertation is a solo venture” (p. 77), again echoing the vocabulary of journey and exploration. I have completed 14 interviews and, over the Christmas/New Year break of 2023–2024, worked to have them all sorted, all tidy, and all packed into nice folders within easy access when I am in the data analysis stage. I even have a backup paper copy of every transcript. I am not losing my luggage. What else do I need to pack? Here I draw on inspiration from the other great explorers and adventurers and their packing lists (Stafford, 2019).

| Explorer and journey  | What they packed   |
|---|--|
| <b>Race to the pole</b>   |  |
| Scott:<br>1910–1912<br>(p. 20)                                    | 19 Mongolian ponies with special snowshoes, off-the shelf sport skis, canvas tents, Burberry gabardine jackets, three caterpillar-tracked motor sledges, Fry's chocolate, Heinz baked beans, HMV gramophone, and 35,000 cigars.  |
| Amundsen:<br>1910–1912<br>(p. 30)                                 | 97 Greenland dogs, snowshoes, snow knives, custom-made, extra-long skis, Swedish designed primus stove, Amundsen designed ski boots, Inuit styled fur coats and long wolfskin boots, 3,000 books, piano, mandolin, Amundsen's biscuits, gramophone, a violin, and one canary.  |
| <b>Mt Everest's first and first solo ascents</b>                  |  |
| Hillary and Tenzing:<br>1953<br>(p. 84)                           | Goggles, custom-made boots, climbing suit, heavy cotton dress shirt, woollen long john woollen pullover; nylon and cotton tent, sardines, biscuits, tinned apricots, and Kendal mint cake.   |
| Reinhold Messner:<br>1980<br>(p. 136)                             | Titanium ice axe, a custom-made Gore-Tex conch tent, expedition suit, down sleeping bag, and a foam-rubber sleeping mat. Messner carried a backpack of absolute minimum equipment and set up stations on his route. He was the first to ascend solo, without oxygen.   |
| <b>Circumnavigation of the globe</b>                              |  |
| Nellie Bly:<br>1889–1890<br>(p. 14)                               | One brown leather gripsack, £200 British gold sovereigns and Bank of England notes, silk bodices instead of a heavy-duty woollen overcoat, an ink-stand, pens, pencils and copy paper, Mumm champagne (to present to railway superintendents who fast-tracked her passage), McGinty the monkey (bought in Singapore), a supply of handkerchiefs, one jar of cold cream, three veils, and travelling gowns. |
| Clarenore Stinnes:<br>by a production car<br>1927–1929<br>(p. 52) | Sand ladders, jerrycans, grey flannel breeches, snow chains, dynamite to blast their route, an evening dress, 128 hardboiled eggs for the Ural Mountain crossing, vodka, and Lord (her black Gordon setter).   |
| Sir Ranulph Fiennes:<br>1979–1982<br>(p. 126)                     | Land Rovers, jerrycans, Ski-doo's, rubber boats, a Jack Russell terrier, insulated cardboard huts, and a magnum of champagne.  |

Table 1. Explorers and their packing lists (adapted from Stafford, 2019).

Of the items packed for exploration, some were the very best of their day, superseded by the technology taken by later explorers on similar adventures. Some items seem obvious and vital to the journey ahead. Some items seem frivolous or expendable for the purpose of the expedition. The items I have packed:

- Transcripts – triple-checked, identifying aspects highlighted and substituted for generic phrases. Filed into folders, neatly arranged. Paper copy filed.
- Coloured Post-it notes, notebooks, highlighters, pens and pencils for the road ahead.
- An inspirational and focused reminder poster of the priorities and sacrifices for the year ahead.
- Verbal promises from family and friends that they will refocus me when I procrastinate, but also will join in the non-study time I allow myself.

Lastly, I packed my road trip playlist, which has not grown beyond three songs. For the entire year of 2023, I had the last song added on repeat. Strangely it played on the radio every morning of a study day. In 2024, I plan to play all three on repeat: “I’m not afraid,” “Unwritten,” and “Unstoppable.”

**Leigh Quadling-Miernik** is building on her experience in a career of education by taking the Doctor of Professional Practice journey. The journey, soon finishing its fourth year, is looking into professional identity development for tertiary educators. Her passion for creating learning opportunities and the motto “whatever gets to the goal with integrity” are her trusted travel companions.

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