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STARTING THE DOCTORATE:  
LEARNINGS FROM THE JOURNEY SO FAR

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## STARTING THE DOCTORATE: LEARNINGS FROM THE JOURNEY SO FAR

Leigh Quadling Miernik

I'm not afraid ... to take a stand.

This lyric by Eminem (2010), has been ringing in my head for the last month in regards to just about everything I do in my Doctor of Professional Practice (DPP). This contribution outlines my DPP so far; from the application stage to realising it is my journey, just before the submission of the Review of Learning (RoL) task, ending with the emotional conclusion after reading its feedback. This realisation and feedback changed my perception of where I stand, how I feel and where I place my mentors. Using diary entries to give evidence to my transformation, this contribution is to support future DPP students, though they might be feeling afraid, to gain the confidence to take the steps. Seeing their journey as a mirror of mine, or knowing that it is a emotional roller coaster of a ride could assist with knowing they are not alone.

With the DPP itself aiming to be innovative and creative (Otago Polytechnic, 2022), so too is the opening of this contribution and the approach taken. The above lyric comes from the song "Not Afraid," and according to the Rolling Stone magazine (Kreps, 2010), the song is about a change in direction for Eminem, a positive transformation from a life of drugs and violence. The song conveys the struggle and the recovery, filled with lines of his personal stories. Perhaps if he was on the DPP journey, his RoL would incorporate this song, where these words are used to capture a learning.

So why has this lyric been stuck on repeat when I opened my RoL document to do some writing, or when I log into Mendeley to do some reading, or when I click "JOIN" for my mentor/mentee meetings? It's because my journey so far is filled with moments of being scared, overwhelmed and underconfident. These moments are reflected in the excerpts from my DPP diary. I will base the reflective exploration of my Review of Learning Journey for the first seven months of my doctorate using the 'ERA' framework (Jasper, 2013).

The 'ERA' cycle of reflective practice consists of a triangle of three points in a process where reflection occurs resulting in learning. The components within the cycle are Experience–Reflection–Action, where 'experience' is a critical moment or when something has happened to a person; 'reflection' enables the person to learn from the experience; and 'action' is the result from the reflection. A simple cycle of reflection is outlined in this contribution where I have noted experiences cumulating to a comment that lead to a critical understanding. From reflection on this moment, I outline my future actions as I head into the Learner Agreement task for 2022.

### OTHER INVESTIGATIONS INTO DOCTORAL JOURNEYS

A doctorate journey is one that is well researched for being an emotional journey (Baptista, 2013; Cotterall, 2013; Hänggi, 2019; Morrison-Saunders et al., 2010). In Cotterall's study (2013), the focus was on the areas of tension that were common for PhD students. Results highlighted two areas of interest. The first: one third of emotional episodes related to accomplishing objects, described as a long-term goal. In this case, it centred around the writing of the work, while the second area that caused emotions, mainly positive, was the area of supervisor

interaction. Hänggi (2019) looked at the events which mobilised and demobilised doctoral students, where the emotions range from contentment and hope to fear and despair. Morrison-Saunders et al. (2010) discussed the doctorate journey as an emotional roller coaster where the initial phase is dominated by positive emotions of elation and enthusiasm, with elements of fear and bewilderment; the middle phase being predominately negative emotions linked to motivation goals and performance, covering frustration, boredom and isolation; while the final phase is a mix of both positive and negative emotions ranging from anxiety and panic to elation and satisfaction. This emotional journey is the result of the challenges related to doing research.

## MY JOURNEY

The original thought to start my doctorate started in December 2020. It took a while to gather thoughts, confidence and complete the application. It was at this point I decided to keep a journal named "D.P.P journey: A diary of moments in the road to graduation."

Pre acceptance

Diary: March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021

Today is the first day of what will hopefully be my Doctorate diary...

Today is the day I have my interview after the app. I am trying to stay calm and focused. To be myself and not to feel judged or threatened. So many pieces of advice or previous conversations (bits of) are coming into my head. I believe they are excited to chat to me. I believe they are there to support and uplift me, not to shut the gate in my face.

Acceptance

Diary: March 31<sup>st</sup> 2021

I've been accepted. Wow. Just that in itself is amazing, especially after all the thoughts of what I should've, could've said.

First day

Diary: May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021

Today I am officially enrolled, part time in my doctorate. It's not feeling much different – obviously. But it is. I officially have a student debt and can say I am enrolled.

These diary entries highlight the elation and nervousness of the application stage. The surprise and the doubt show through even before I officially started and knew what I would need to do.

Consider the student's learning journey, which has become my journey. Imagine the road, a student is on it (me!), facing towards to end of the road, wherever that may be.

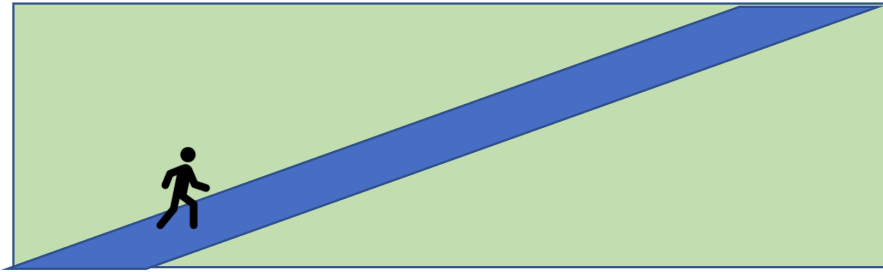


Figure 1. The learning journey.

Figure 1 is an overly simplistic representation, but that is me, on the start of my DPP journey. Can you describe the route? Do you see the destination, my destination? Is the route straight, meandering, with intersections or branches? Do I see the same route as you? Who decided the destination?

Now include yourself in the image as if you were my mentor. Where do you place yourself as the educator on the journey? Are you perhaps a font of knowledge? Or a facilitator? In a three-dimensional world, where is your position? In front of me? Beside me? Behind me? What is the distance between you and me? Which way are you looking? Towards the goal, or at me?

If the goal is 12 o'clock then I place myself as a teacher at the 5 or 7 o'clock position. Close enough to reach out for the student if stumbles happen. Far enough away so that the student has room to move and wander. I face forward so I can see the goal but more importantly the student. Perhaps the goal changes, but if I can see it, I can support the student to achieve it.

On my DPP journey I am the student, and the goal is scary, and very far away.

Post acceptance/Pre official start

Diary: April 6<sup>th</sup> 2021

And now for the last 4 days I have had waves of panic – am I doing the right thing, can I survive, will I make it to the end, what toll will it take, am I strong enough, intelligent enough, brave enough. With each wave I think I can easily pull out now so do it – I got accepted that's enough. But then I think I more step forward, just to see how it goes. And that is where I am at the moment, dithering about in emotions before May 1<sup>st</sup>.

This diary entry shows my hesitancy, from the initial elation to the panic and further doubt. However, it also has a slight sense of tenacity, a determination or inquisitiveness to keep going to see what comes next.

Sometimes I look up and have been frightened at the distance, and the sheer amount of work needing to be done. My mechanism to cope has been to metaphorically look at my feet and take one step forward on the good days, and half a pin step forward on the bad. Always forward, no matter how small. Every time I look up, I am overwhelmed. When I hear the mentees talk about their journey and what's ahead for me, I feel anxious. When I think about speaking at the viva voce, I feel queasy. Yet every time I feel these emotions I look down and focus on my feet on the road.

Where did I put my mentors?

### Post acceptance/Pre official start

Diary: April 9<sup>th</sup> 2021

About to officially meet my mentor, ummmmm, butterflies in stomach. Zooming meeting – weird but now normal. Feeling strange cos I know my Zoom face is not my normal face.

Re-reading my application – I know I am good, I know this is right and the correct way forward. Questions to ask – I have many, but I have none, only one – why are you interested in doing this project with me? What is motivating you to be involved? I will ask – I need to ask.

This diary entry describes the feelings of slight self-doubt and nervousness around meeting a mentor. Yet it holds a sense of self-belief.

I put them in front of me, blocking the view. As they were in front, I was awed at their knowledge, their experience, their statements, their extensive readings and their big words which I kind of understood but still needed to search up to understand. I have been amazed at their sentences that pour forth when we meet, which I scribble down as fast as I can. But the next day I do not quite understand my notes. And the distance between them and me? I have put far apart. I put them on the dais, which perhaps they did not know they were there, and possibly did not want to be there. To be honest they frightened me slightly.

### Start of RoL

Diary: June 15<sup>th</sup> 2021

Yesterday's meeting was about building a Community of Practice – a group of knowledge, shared experiences, learning support, teaching, mentoring etc. I struggled to feel confident to speak, to add my voice – it's something I always have in my head and then something clicks/says "Stop – just do it."

I am officially 7 weeks old at this thing – a journey which will take 3 to 7 years. I want to rush ahead, do things, start on something but I am in a spin on how to see, how to travel this journey, how to tread, how fast to tread, which direction to move first, just everything. I'm spinning. I panic when I think about the goal – the writing, so much so that I force myself to look down at my feet and take the next step, not knowing if it is right or not but trusting in the journey, trusting in the people, trusting in myself to be strong in the next step, to stand not fall.

Many emotions are present in this diary entry. Excitement is still here, along with confusion and bewilderment. At this time, I am aware of what lies ahead, unlike the previous entries, where I do not fully know or understand the Review of Learning task. I am maintaining my solution to stem the negative emotions; take the next step, see where it goes.

Why have I put them in front of me? What in my background creates this situation? I believe that is my natural reaction when I feel the teacher knows more than me or has more experience. My educational experience is one of rote learning and teacher-centred, that is, very controlled. Most of my education up to my bachelor's graduation was led by the educator to the point of knowing what I need in order to pass the assessments. This is the one of the reasons why they are in front of me.

Until a repeated statement from both mentors finally stuck in my head. The message was "You don't have to agree with all the feedback. It's your journey" (M. Andrews & D. Freiburg, personal communication, November 17, 2021). This comment helped me reflect and realise that my mentors do not know the goal of the journey.

They do not know where I am going, any more than I do. So, although we are in it together, I am the pilot and navigator. This crucial moment placed me in control of what I want to achieve, how and when.

Furthermore, at this crucial moment I placed my mentors in the same position I place myself as an educator: beside and slightly behind me. They are now my mentors in role as well as job title.

Post RoL submission

Diary: January 14<sup>th</sup> 2022

8pm – an email from Martin to say that I've apparently passed the RoL and Danny saying Congrats, he had no doubt. Strange how both thought it would be ok whereas I felt it wasn't quite there. I need to believe in myself more.

Diary: Jan 27<sup>th</sup> 2022

At this moment, as I struggle to find a pen that works, I am very teary. Maybe it's the weight of 2021 or the fact that my teeth hurt, but it's also cos I've just read my RoL feedback. It's positive, it's joyful, it's an expression of the readers being excited by my work. It's the comment that I am working at a pace, not expected by a part-timer. It's the comment that the next part/course is exciting and a "very good idea." It's just everything.

I've just written an email to my mentors. 'If ever there was a moment where confidence has been increased, it is now. I need to remember this moment!'

An emotional high after times of self-doubt. Here I show how important it is for me to see the happiness, to hold this emotion and celebrate my achievement.

According to the ERA framework, by reviewing my reflections and evidence I have the ability to learn and set my actions. The actions for 2022, as I start the Learner Agreement, are:

- Remember: I have the motivation for change so I can step forward with confidence.
- Remember: I am forming my scholarly identity, and this will take time.
- Remember: My journey will be an emotional roller coaster, like those of other doctoral students, and that is to be expected. Accepting this brings me relief and confidence.
- Action: I will keep singing Eminem's song. The more I sing, the more I do. The more I do, the more confident I become. The more confident I become the less I will need to sing.

I finish this contribution where I started – with Eminem (2010). The next three lines aptly state the journey ahead:

We'll walk this road together, through the storm  
Whatever weather, cold or warm  
Just letting you know that you're not alone.

**Leigh Quadling Miernik** has experience in teaching, teacher training, learning support and educational management and is now relooking at her 30-year journey and the learnings that have arisen. Her passion is to create learning opportunities for students and educators and she has the motto "whatever gets to goal with integrity." Her interest lies in supporting educators to develop their knowledge and skills, and is starting to look into professional identity development for tertiary educators. She meanders through life, flowing strong at times, but petering to a trickle at others – a uniquely individual global community member.

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