

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE WHO YOU’RE NOT”: REFLECTIONS ON THE LEARNER-MENTOR JOURNEY IN A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

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By the end of 2021, it is estimated that as many as five *Capable New Zealand* learners will have completed their professional doctoral journeys in the Doctorate of Professional Practice, which was launched in 2018 and grounded philosophically in the University of Middlesex’s well-established research and development doctoral model. The *Capable New Zealand* re-versioning of the Middlesex University model revolves around experiential and transformative learning, is grounded in the reflective unpacking of critical incidents, and affords strategies for research messiness and the non-linearity of the process, particularly in the light of COVID-19. The Middlesex model is also for “advanced practitioners to develop their professional knowledge at doctoral level, benefiting both individuals and their organisations or professional fields” (Middlesex University London, online, 2021).

The programme also enables the embedding of self-narrative in the reflective spaces of learner-mentor communications, as is appropriate for the autoethnographic nature of the professional doctorate. This, in turn, allows a practice-based ontological and epistemological background to the generation of emergent knowing, through which the learner can be clearly understood as being socially constructed and in a constant flux regarding their professional/ academic/ personal image (Hayes & Fulton, 2014). Narrative and theorised accounts of doctoral candidatures are increasingly plentiful in traditional and creative doctoral models, and some are beginning to emerge within professional doctorates, starting with the ten case studies of Stephenson, Malloch, and Cairns (2006).

Less common, however, are dualistic, praxically-oriented accounts of the doctoral trajectory from the perspectives of both learners and mentors or supervisors. By ‘praxis’ we refer to a connection between theory and practice that moves beyond the linear and uses pragmatic and reflective processes to enact and respond to real world challenges (Arnold & Mundy, 2020). A praxical orientation reflects a Freirean worldview that values two-way (or multivocal) dialogue in teaching and learning (Freire, 1989), enabling a close exploration of pedagogical experiences and theory to critique the practices of both learning and mentoring. The mentor/ supervisor - learner relationship has been viewed through many metaphors, usually geographic (Gravett, 2021) or journey/odyssey-related (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006), or occasionally through physical metaphors such as dancing the tango with shifting dynamics (Banagan et al., 2012). This paper recounts critical moments in the learning journey – perhaps more like a labyrinth – of one of the first learner-mentor relationships in the early history of the *Capable New Zealand* Doctorate in Professional Practice. It recounts, on a very small scale, a sense of the collaborative effort and mutual participation that Costley and Pizzolato (2018) see as key to the transdisciplinary professional doctorate.

We contend that this study is valuable because it offers a mirror for both learners and mentors at different stages along this journey, enabling empathetic engagement and offering a context wherein fellow travellers might recognise themselves, and see how relative pioneers encountered and overcame disorienting dilemmas through constructive critical conversations, trial and error, and oftentimes sheer faith in the process and hence in each other.

Our purpose here is less to describe the shape of the journeying, often seen as generative, rhizomatic and non-linear (Gravett, 2021), than to use a form of dialogic narrative to chart this process of 'coming to belong' by drawing on data from the collective memory of those on the journey, and to provide a single-case study of a three-year teaching and learning engagement. Such a study exemplifies the "irregular, fluid and messy" experiences characterising doctoral journeys (Gravett, 2021, p. 293) and further disturbs the myth of linearity.

Rather, such acts of storying as research suggest that learnings central to a process of becoming a professional-as-researcher have the power to elucidate the notion that entering into quagmires or indecision and quicksands of dilemma afford the crucial learning at the heart of the professional doctorate. In other words, active reflection both in- and for- action operationalises the kinds of work-based cognitive demands characteristic of the professional in the 2020s. This is less of an individual journey of coming to belong to a desired imagined academic community of scholars than an enactment of the aspiration to research leadership within a professional community which is the key driver of professional doctorates; in Claire's case, that of an educational developer.

This study charts what Manathunga (2019) calls the "unexpected events or issues [that] may impede a candidate's progress" (p. 1230) by drawing on the entire time-scape of the trajectory: past, present and future. We re-enact this time-scape by presenting the process as a praxical dialogue imagined as retold over time. Although pressure to be timely appears throughout the dialogues, the story that plays out here is beyond the performative measures of the neoliberalist agenda. It is not our aim to create either a happy-ever-after or a doctorate as sausage-machine retelling; rather, we wish to highlight how genuinely gruelling moments become a sequence of opportunities for learning transformation by means of collaborative dialogue.

Such voice-centred methods enable the "authentic personal power or agency of the individual," bringing to the fore the forces driving, or impeding the learning (Milburn et al., 2019, p. 90). In the case of Milburn et al. (2019), who recomposed vignettes from a panel discussion with professional doctorate candidates, the key drivers were a sense of responsibility, supporting others, and 'gratitude' for the emerging identity. These same elements are reflected in our own mentor-learner story.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method involves the re-presentation of narrative data (Riessman, 2008) and draws from both collaborative email data (Drake, 2015) and dialogue (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990), including meetings recorded with open consent. Sorting multiple emails over time, Drake (2015) argues, enables access to chains and patterns of developing attitudes and thinking in a way that affords chronological narrative construction. This study also draws on authentic artefacts co-constructed in the 'journey' to reimagine a sequence of dialogues integrated towards confronting and working through dilemmas.

This study draws on the voices of the principal mentor and the learner, following the praxical dialogue-oriented studies of the mentoring-learning trajectory of Batchelor and Di Napoli (2006), who co-construct an odyssey in which dilemmas are harpies or sirens. In another voice-oriented study, Perry and Brophy (2001) draw on Japanese *renga* (collaborative poetry with alternating lines) to construct a sequence of chained thoughts drawing on thoughts, images, and phrases in each other's exchanges, with each utterance grounded in inquiry and the sharing of identities. The phenomenon they grapple with in their sequenced narrative is the material overlap of creative work and exegesis within the newly emerging creative writing doctorate. Their study uses debate as a mode of encountering and allaying anxiety with the metaphors of the path, the sea, and ultimately doing what you're told ("eat your peas") as guiding images.

OUR NARRATIVE

The authentic artefacts chosen are a small sample of the exchanges between mentor and learner. We use symbols here to indicate whether they occurred via email ✉️, in conversation 💬, or are extracts from the learner's research diary 📖.

✉️ 18 May 2018

Kia ora Dr Andrew,

I don't know if you remember me, but we met back in October (with my 'Learning and Teaching' hat on). I have now begun my DProfPrac journey, and it has been suggested that you might be a good fit to be one of my mentors. Please find attached my proposal and an extra piece of writing I did for the panel, around my professional influences and values.

If you are interested in talking more about this, please let me know and we can set up a time to meet

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,
Claire

✉️ 25 June 2018

Kia ora,

My DPP 'Notebook', as discussed briefly on Thursday, is available here. I've added notes from last week, including a copy of the Mentor-Learner agreement (tbc) and the 'Role Perception Rating Scale' document we worked through. Please do let me know if you have any problems accessing anything.

Kind regards,
Claire

✉️ 25 June 2018

Thanks for today's communications.

This will work well for notes! A good share space.

Best wishes,
Dr Martin Andrew

✉️ 20 August 2018

Hi Claire

Thanks for your draft review of learning. Your writing is beautiful, and the work flows wonderfully. It's a perfect length, with room for additions from feedback. It's a joy to read and it is clearly a positive experience to write as well as read.

In offering feedback, according to the DProfPrac Learner Guide (2018), we need to consider:

- the level to which they are self-evaluating and are able to deploy strategies to explore new personal insights
- their critical understanding of how learning occurs in their workplace and how learning has occurred for them through their career

- diverse strategies for engaging in Work-Based Learning
- an analysis of how learning at work has informed their professional identity
- approaches they use to evaluate knowledge gained from their practice
- approaches they use to engage with theory relevant for a range of contexts, and apply that theory to practice
- how their prior and current learning impacts their ability to design and conduct research project.

Terms such as 'self-evaluating', 'critical', diverse strategies', 'analysis' and 'approaches' jump out. Your writing is an autobiography, and it's wonderful. But does it engage with those terms as consciously as the descriptor suggests? Personally, I see the solution in a tighter analysis of how 'autobiography' differs from 'autoethnography'. The latter is more likely to accommodate the ideas embedded in the terms I've pulled out. On Wednesday, I'll bring *Creating Autoethnographies*, as it is an unpretentious, feminist and appropriate way for you to reflect on your work here.

I realise how much we have in common too – including the horror of colleagues committing suicide and working as an educator in a jail.

Til soon,
Dr Martin

13 December 2018

I met with Martin today. I told him I was concerned after the DProfPrac workshop earlier this week – most other learners were all talking about their ontology, their epistemology, and different paradigms. I don't think I'm ever going to talk like that – it just doesn't feel like me. Maybe a doctorate is not for me. Martin thinks I'm having "an ontological crisis" but reassured me that I don't have to change. It really helped when he said, "You don't have to be who you are not".

21 February 2019

I was talking with Martin about 'excellence' today. He suggested thinking of 'excellence' perhaps as the hub of a wheel; so what are the spokes? As he was talking, I had a very clear image of light going through a prism and seeing 'teaching excellence' going through and breaking into its component parts. I asked if that could work. Martin very positive about this. Conveys the complexity of the notion of 'excellence', much more than if I were to just talk about a 'lens'; Refractive thinking?

8 April 2019

Never lose sight of the fact that this is a Professional Practice qualification; it's about my Professional Practice – it's OK (and expected) to write in the first person and include some more personal aspects that you wouldn't typically see in more 'traditional' academic writing.

28 April 2019

Kia ora, Claire,

I think you are almost there with your Learning Agreement. I've answered a few Qs and made a couple of comments.

I had the weird feeling reading your work that I had written it – a sensation I associate with 'saturation', or that sensation when you've read something so often that you feel there is little more that you can say.

Dr M

 **20 May 2019**

I presented my research proposal/learning agreement to the panel today. Unanimous approval for me to proceed with the project, which is great, but panel gave feedback to Martin that I was obviously very nervous. Need to think about perhaps adding my work on this (nerves re: public speaking) as a sub-outcome of my project. As far as the panel were concerned, I was "perfectly well-prepared and had a beautiful presentation" – "Why is she so nervous? She's so grounded in this!". It's a bit of a worry, as I was actually much less nervous than I expected to be!

 **22 July 2019**

Claire: Now that I'm getting ready to start data collection, how often should we be meeting?

Martin: I'm not sure that you need meetings at the moment. Get on with your participant interviews and contact us if you need to. We [mentors] should become redundant over time

 **24 July 2019**

Thanks for sending your draft interview questions through, Claire.

Your questions are great, and very open. It's clear that there will be a need for intonation and stress around the word 'excellent'/'excellence'. I can hear your voice intoning it differently in different uses of the term when I read through the questions. This may be worth monitoring yourself on in a reflective log, just as you'll be monitoring how to improve the interviews as you do, learning more with each interview and making tweaks. This is the nature of 'reflective' interviewing. And, yes, you will ask different questions depending on where the interview goes. You'll learn to be comfortable with going with the flow. There will be some key questions you want to ask consistently because that will affect the themes of your data. These 'anchor' questions will help to structure the interview, even though there will also be 'flow' questions. Anchor and flow.

Ngā mihi!
Martin

 **30 December 2019**

Hi Martin,

I hope this finds you well, and that you had a good Christmas – I'm just trying to get back into 'work and study' mode.

I have a query I'm hoping you can help with... and forgive me for 'thinking out loud' as I type.

I bumped into a colleague on the last day on campus and she asked how everything was progressing with my project. I said that I was hoping to "start coding" over the break, but she said something along the lines of 'not coding, theming'. Isn't coding necessary before I can identify themes? I've been doing some reading on this over the past couple of days, and there seems to be conflicting advice. Some texts suggest using research question and sub-questions to guide coding (so, for example, I was envisioning a spreadsheet page for each sub-question, and looking for content that answers/relates to that particular question); others suggest not looking at the questions at all.

I've gone back to Braun and Clarke (2006) and this would seem to be the difference between deductive and inductive analysis (I think). Going with inductive, I look at the data without focusing on my research questions, so coding/theming (?) is data-driven.

I have several other articles/chapters I can read but am concerned I'm not using this time to the best of my ability (I'm not suggesting that reading is not helpful, but feel that I am maybe delaying the start of data analysis because I am nervous about how to begin!).

Hope that makes sense. Any particular advice at the moment, please?

Ngā mihi maioha,
Claire

3 February 2020

Met with mentoring team today. I talked through why I'm doing my analysis manually, rather than using any software or technology, because it means that I become more familiar with the data, the more I work with it. Martin is also an advocate of this; likes letting things emerge using rational processing, and readerly techniques (constant comparison, metaphor analysis, seeking synonyms...), perhaps because of coming from a linguistic background, like me. People with this type of background usually find it much easier to understand synchronicities between words and concepts.

Some of the literature around data analysis is less helpful than others. Martin agrees, and advised me not to get bogged down in anything that mentions axial coding or any other complex types of coding.

Robustness of my work will come from the fact that I'm engaging in the two types of narrative analysis; both the re-writing/re-telling of the stories (so as to maintain as much as possible the authenticity of each participant's voice, preserve metaphors etc), and, at the same time, from a more scientific, social sciences' perspective, I'm picking apart the original narratives and presenting a thematic analysis. Interesting that Martin suggests it's not necessary, strictly speaking, to do both; for a PhD, you could do one or the other. To me, this feels almost like I'd be doing a disservice to the participants; that one or the other wouldn't do people's stories justice.

20 March 2020

I met with Martin today. We talked about us going into lockdown imminently. Lucky that I've done my data collection.

24 March 2020

Kia ora, Claire,

I'm writing to assure you of the plans to keep the momentum going on the DProfPrac at this time.

Let's harness the energy and channel it into the reading and creation of works rather than moping on the Coronavirus Channel.

We have a new Zoom and I'm hoping to be able to leverage this for us. We are aware that technology can be erratic sometimes and will keep open the following options for our 'DPP whānau': Facebook messenger, Teams, and I'm also open to text messages at any time to stay in touch and for those pesky nagging questions that lead to writers' block.

I see this time as an excellent opportunity to get the thinking and writing underway!

Ngā mihi!
Martin

 **18 May 2020**

Kia ora,

My outlook calendar is telling me it's time for an e-mail update, so here goes...

- All draft stories completed; shared with individual participants on 24 April, asking for feedback by 15 May
- As of today, 8 (out of 13) participants have got back to me and are happy for me to proceed. I've sent out a reminder to those I haven't heard from yet.
- I've been working on my methodology recently, trying to decide how best to incorporate reflections.
- Was very distracted this past weekend, and did not achieve anything much; I made a start on my Introduction.

Could you please let me know when you'd like to start our face-to-face meetings again? We have one pencilled in for Thurs 4 June – does that suit? I'm adjusting to being back on campus today – lovely to see some real people!

Ngā mihi nui,
Claire

 **18 May 2020**

Kia ora, Claire,

This progress sounds most satisfactory, and many thanks for reporting it so succinctly and conscientiously. I admire your use of calendar and reminder software.

I went through the campus area today and felt horrified that there were numerous cars where there had recently been peaceful empty spaces. There was a feeling of sadness – the golden age of lockdown coming to a close; for this time at least.

It is true that June 4 is in the diary for you, and I'll meditate over whether I'll turn up in person or virtually. At the moment, it feels so much more real to be virtual.

Ngā mihi!
Martin

 **4 June 2020**

I had a catch-up with my mentoring team today, which was good. It feels like ages (given the lockdown). It was a good discussion, but uncomfortable for me in lots of ways. I'm not demonstrating enough reflexivity in my methodology at the moment, and I need to rethink how to do this. Martin said I looked annoyed at one point, but it was more that I was confused. I can actually feel it physically... the worry of not understanding what they're asking me to do. I said at one point "I'm not having any 'aha moments' here!" and laughed, but it's not funny. I feel like I should understand this. Is this like a 'zone of proximal development' thing – challenging me slightly beyond where I am currently sitting? Of course I need to be challenged; I wouldn't learn otherwise. I need to remember the uncomfortable elements though, when thinking about my own learners.

 **15 June 2020**

Kia ora, Claire,

I've looked at the vignettes and commented on the first one. It strikes me that they do become increasingly reflexive as it moves on. My epiphany here was that the missing part of your thinking might come, will

come, with a tighter investigation of the 'epic'/etic', the insider perspective. I've included a couple of references to focus this and there's a recommended reading (a handbook) too. I think that what puzzled us last meeting consists in the need for a bit more on this. It's the key to the type of reflexivity you wish to achieve.

Opening out your thoughts and the rationales behind your actions/choices/thinking has led to a more reflective sense in the vignettes. In my comments I've added a few thoughts about them too. In short, I think they could be micro-narratives, 'Smithereens' as poet Elizabeth Smither calls her very short but insightful little poems.

On track? Yes.

Ngā mihi!
Martin

6 July 2020

Claire: I'm struggling a bit... It feels like, at the moment, nothing is finished. Everything is in process.

Martin: That's perfectly OK... what you've just described is something I've heard described by just about every doctoral candidate ever! It just means that a whole lot of gems, which might be rough at the moment, all need to be polished... It shows me that you've gone about this project in a very Professional Practice-kind of way, where everything *is* left open, until such time as everything is saturated or crystallised, and it's time to put the finishing touches on.

20 August 2020

Listening back to recordings, I'm noticing how much more I'm speaking up and 'defending' my thinking.

6 November 2020

When I initially shared my model with mentors, I said that it all seemed a bit obvious. Would people look at this and say, "Yeah, we do all of that"?... Martin says that, with almost all the models he's seen (resulting from doctoral research in education), there is always an element of "Is that all I've got to show for all my work?!". I laughed and commented that I had thought "Is that it?!". Sometimes the apparent over-simplicity of a model is part of its beauty. It needs to be accessible.

Also talked about how, when I was doodling draft models, I wondered whether a pyramid model was a good fit (similar to Maslow's hierarchy). Yes, focusing on learners underpins everything, BUT it's not a pyramid because it's not a case of 'You do this first, then you do this, then this...'; you have to look at the whole. I also don't want it to be perceived as something that's unobtainable (the top of the mountain being 'excellence').

1 December 2020

Kia ora,

I think we are thrilled you are sharing your findings and that they are to be shared with Ako Aotearoa, who are, after all a true stakeholder. This is definitely in the spirit of professional practice and reflecting on this 'dissemination' part of the project will go nicely in the last section of your work.

It's quite thrilling when people are fascinated enough to photograph your slides. It's also common for conference organisations to ask you to perhaps share your presentation as part of the shared repertoire of that particular community of practice, but always check that such 'publications' don't preclude you from publishing in a refereed source.

After the thesis is done and dusted, I'll ask you to submit to a journal I have in mind. Your work is a good fit for this and it's a good 'next stage' from local journals and with sufficient prestige factor.

See you soon.
Martin

✉ **15 January 2021**

Kia ora, Claire, and welcome to a fresh year,

I enclose the two documents you've been working on and once again see any stalling as due to issues of confidence but would encourage you to trust your instinct, as instinct is grounded in experience, when that stuck feeling comes. Part of autonomy is being now able to dig yourself out of your own holes. And I do think that the epilogue testifies to the confidence growth and I'd like to reduce references to the nervous old Claire in the epilogue other than as part of the imposter narrative that we all continually tell ourselves.

Your strength is an ability to synthesise multiple voices from scholarship into a coherent narrative. In general, I'd still say that one thing to note going forward – and here I'm thinking of the place you left the epilogue – is to internalise the feedback that there is always more room, no matter how advanced we are as researchers, for more analysis and more criticality, both of which come from a different type of confidence and one still building in your 'becoming'.

I also appreciate the increased ability to think diagrammatically in a reader-centred way and wonder if this newfound sense might translate into a diagram for your frame of prof practice in the Introduction, setting the scene with the three domains of enquiry in the DPP, which may differ only slightly from those you use as focal points. I look forward to further iterations of both documents.

Nga mihi,
Martin

✉ **15 January 2021**

And the findings are a fine blend of reportage and relation back to existing literature. Some may say the latter function belongs to discussions. I disagree. To me that is a very artificial and epistemologically ignorant thing to say (I get it from reviewers all the time). You've made the findings vivid and lively and relevant.

My comments are minor, and related to consistency in form and presentation, but it is a joy to read work that does not require continual corrective feedback.

Ngā mihi!
Martin

The journey to the future ends with the work close to submission.

CONCLUSION

This study has at its centre the trajectory of one learner's candidature, capturing a time-scope of critical moments and key turning points during the journey, to apply the most commonly used metaphor in doctoral literature to describe this process. In light of the metaphors describing the candidature (Gravett, 2021), one we feel is appropriate is Geertz's (1995) *parade* image, knowing that the reader sees part of the story but not what has come before, nor what will follow. Similarly, as mentors and learners, through our own day-to-day behaviour and interactions, we enter others' stories "in the midst" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20) of those stories being lived and told.

Our study serves both to show the evolution of the learner identity towards a confluence of the professional and the scholarly and to exemplify the kinds of eclectic critical conversations that might characterise the mentor-learner dyad. It is eclectic because, as Johnson (2021) writes (this issue) it involves “the unique combination of perceptions and conceptions the individual has, thus drawing upon both subconscious and conscious connectivity within the individual.” Constructive critical conversations, she writes, “allow for individuals’ voices to harmonise in a communal chorus toward a socially constructed overture.”

This selection of eclectic artefacts from our mentor-learner journey show how the relationship evolves and how dynamics shift. As Erikson (1956) famously wrote, “a sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all. Like any good conscience, it is constantly lost and regained” (p. 74). The narrative told through sequenced emails, reflections and conversations shows such moments of loss and gain, disequilibrium and re-equilibrium.

Eschewing monologic approaches to our phenomenon in the spirit of bricolage (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004), we enact a dialogic and ‘praxical’ process where we approach practice so that it becomes research, recreating critical moments of problem-solving in action and practice-as-research. This way of seeing the candidature allows for the doctorate-ness of this journey to be seen as development and change. Workplace knowledge, Lester (2011) tells us, extends beyond any immediate context of research and opens the door to the possibility of existing in an authentically transdisciplinary space. Lester (2011) outlines the reasoning thus:

Complex change-oriented issues...approached with a researching and critically reflective orientation can be a powerful source, not only of contextual insights but of academically and professionally-valid knowledge, giving rise to new concepts, models, theories and critiques as well as different ways of doing things (p. 279).

Our tango through the fluid and messy topography of professional practice lands us here, with this paragraph as our ending. Our contribution to knowing in the doctoral space consists in how we hope readers might identify with the stages in this journey. Only you can tell us if it is, indeed, a mirror of encountering conundrums in the professional doctorate terrain.

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Martin Andrew operates as a creative mentor in postgraduate programmes, including Master and Doctorate degrees in Professional Practice. Prior to his four to five years supporting the College of Work-based Learning in Otago, New Zealand, he had sojourned away from his hometown of Ōtepoti/Dunedin with two honorary posts at Melbourne universities in Creative Industries and Trans-national Education (TNE). His work and research have become increasingly focussed on doctorate education and supporting learners to reach their own personal best through critically reflective practice and writing. A transdisciplinary, he emphasises that his past disciplines have included Education, Drama, Linguistics and Writing, Creative and otherwise. He holds honorary positions in Australia, Vietnam and Indonesia.

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