

Edited by

Donna Lee Brien

Craig Batty

Elizabeth Ellison — Alison Owens



THE DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE

STUDENT STORIES
FROM THE CREATIVE ARTS
AND HUMANITIES



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Craig Batty • Elizabeth Ellison
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Editors

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Student Stories from the Creative Arts
and Humanities

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Editors

Donna Lee Brien
School of Education and the Arts
Central Queensland University
Noosaville, QLD, Australia

Craig Batty
School of Communication
University of Technology Sydney
Sydney, NSW, Australia

Elizabeth Ellison
School of Education and the Arts
Central Queensland University
Noosaville, QLD, Australia

Alison Owens
Learning and Teaching Centre
Australian Catholic University
North Sydney, NSW, Australia

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*This book is dedicated to all creative and hard-working doctoral students
and their supervisors.*

Foreword

Doctoral learning journeys have, as their expressed aim, the completion of the highest form of education: the doctorate; and yet they are so much more than cognitive, intellectual journeys completing a significant project and producing a thesis or series of connected publications. These journeys are also life and identity journeys, and it is refreshing and insightful that this book intertwines the several strands—personal, ontological, learning, cognitive and intellectual—because at the heart of every doctoral journey there is always a person learning and changing, and there is often a range of supportive (one hopes) invested others circling the seemingly lone intellectual traveller. Recognition of the unique intertwining of people and learning, community and the individual, new learning and knowledge construction in the discipline or inter-discipline, lies at the heart of this rich and diverse collation of stories from the doctoral candidates themselves, and their supportive others. As Chinua Achebe comments, ‘storytellers are powerful’ (1987), and the construction of one’s own doctoral learning journey as a story is clearly evidenced in this book as powerful, challenging and enabling for the candidates who have been invited to intertwine the strands of their physical, intellectual, emotional and imaginary lived experience as they journeyed through the doctorate.

A unique contribution of this book is its focus on the student voice, more commonly written about and researched in empowerment terms among school students and undergraduates. Here the doctoral candidates are telling their own stories, and this offers an authenticity often missing from research articles which thematise and select what the authors deem important. Personal, creative, critical views are often themselves formed through the process of that writing. The students here interweave strands of importance, and the editors explore, theorise, contextualise and offer guidance on the journey in its broader context of institutions, supervision, discipline orientations and the processes of the doctorate. The felt, lived experience in the doctoral student voice is both personal and intellectually oriented, located in self; in struggling, facing challenges and systematically working forwards, occasionally recovering from a backward slip, and breaking through with new discoveries and revelations. This is formed here into their own work and their own writing. Bringing together the student voices is enabling and very rich; they empower themselves as they express their experiences, in their own way and their own words about their own journeys.

However, this book is not just a concatenation of competing voices—it is a carefully curated live piece. The authors have drawn the student stories and voices together into well considered sections which emerged from those stories, so that rather than the more familiar doctoral study piece which offers a clarification of the research process—of methods of data collection and analysis—the students' voices and the stories lead.

In earlier work on doctoral learning journeys (Morris et al. 2011), we discovered those vital interconnections between the personal, learning and institutional dimensions of the doctoral journey, finding, for example, that the personal, domestic dimensions could so influence the progress on the learning journey that sometimes it completely halted. Latterly, working with creative doctoral students and particularly students from Indigenous origins (specifically a Maori and an Aboriginal student whose work I examined), and an Aboriginal graduate who I interviewed, in those interviews the supportive role of family and community emerged as essential to that journey. Much recent work has surfaced issues which

show the relationships between wellbeing, mental health, the emotional damage or support provided by supervisors, and successful doctoral student journeys (Johansson et al. 2013; Wisker and Robinson 2012, 2015). While research on academic identities and work on impostor syndrome often concentrate on the emerging and sometimes stultified academic identities of doctoral candidates as they meet challenges and face hurdles, some of the positive, as well as some negative, interactions between personal worlds and learning worlds are also acknowledged by doctoral students (Wisker et al. 2017).

For some students undertaking creative doctorates in particular, the intertwining of the creative, the personal and the intellectual lies at the very core of their work. This can be a further element of complexity leading to potential paralyses in the work, or struggles with institutional requirements while pursuing something highly creative, or/and a rich intertwining of the intellectual development alongside the creative and the personal. Latterly, workshops I have facilitated have focused on the intertwining of ontology and epistemology, and more straightforwardly, a concern that the doctoral candidates' creative questioning, confusions, contestations, changes, risk taking, intrigue and questioning are inextricably intertwined with the research journey. In these workshops, candidates and supervisors remembering their own journeys have told of the breakthroughs into new understanding which lead to valuable contributions to knowledge and, much more, breakthroughs in ways of learning and understanding which fundamentally affect and enrich the learning journey through, and beyond, the doctoral project.

The student voices in this book's curated stories articulate such intertwining at all stages of the doctoral learning journeys. This is a very valuable, essential companion piece to journal articles and handbooks, and the book's focus on humanities and arts students offers a particularly rich and in-depth look at those intertexts between the personal, the learning, the creative, experiencing the researcher self, the development and contribution of research, new knowledge and understandings, and the invaluable new changes in both the intellectual and the personal journeys.

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Centre for Teaching and Learning,
University of Brighton, Brighton, UK

Gina Wisker

What is most personal is most universal.
—*Carl R. Rogers*, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of*
Psychotherapy

Acknowledgements

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Notes on Contributors

Craig Batty is Head of Creative Writing at the University of Technology Sydney. He is the author, co-author and editor of ten books, including *Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches* (2nd ed.) (2019) and *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* (2018). He has also published over 50 book chapters and journals articles on the topics of screenwriting practice, screenwriting theory, creative practice research and doctoral supervision. In 2016, he received an Australian Award for University Teaching (AAUT) Citation for his contributions to PhD supervision in creative writing.

Virginia Birt is a former DFAT officer with wide-ranging policy experience including as executive officer for the Australia-New Zealand Foundation and South Pacific Cultures Fund. A freelance writer, editor and script consultant, Virginia's research interests include screenwriting, screen production, visual art, children's and young adult literature, and promoting literacy in the community.

Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, Australia. Author and editor of over 30 books and exhibition catalogues, and author of over 200 book chapters and journal articles, Donna has completed major nationally-funded research projects on doctoral degrees, has successfully supervised almost 50

research students to completion and has examined over 100 Masters and Doctoral research theses for Australian and international universities. In 2014, she received the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research Higher Degree Supervision.

Lisa Brummel is an Australian multi-award winning, and internationally exhibited, artist. Her work is held in numerous private collections worldwide, including in Australia, Singapore and Paris. Lisa is currently researching an alternative firing technique for the raku kiln at Central Queensland University, Australia.

Margaret Cook is an Australian historian, cultural heritage consultant, a Post-Thesis Fellow at the University of Queensland and an Honorary Research Fellow at La Trobe University. Her PhD, completed in 2018, explored the history of floods in the Brisbane River and her findings have been published in national and international journals and in a book, *A River with a City Problem*, with University of Queensland Press.

Susan Currie BA/LLB (UQ), MLaws/MArts (QUT), PhD (CQU), has worked as a lawyer, academic, teacher and librarian. The major component of her PhD thesis, *A Prescription for Action: The Life of Dr Janet Irwin* was published by Australian Scholarly Publishing. Susan has also written biographical profiles for *A Woman's Place: 100 Years of Queensland Women Lawyers* published by the Supreme Court of Queensland Library, and co-authored a textbook on legal studies for Queensland schools.

Leanne Dodd is an Australian author and lecturer in creative writing at Central Queensland University. She acts as a mentor for emerging writers at Queensland Writers Centre and facilitates writing for well-being community workshops. She has published and presented nationally and internationally on writing about trauma in fiction. Her practice-led PhD explored the therapeutic potential of creative writing and the novel produced was longlisted for the 2018 Richell Prize for Emerging Writers (Hachette Publishers).

Elizabeth Ellison is a Senior Lecturer of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University in Noosa, Australia. Her research focuses on Australian writing, film and television, with a special interest in the Australian beach. She has ten years of teaching experience across all tertiary levels, and specialises in teaching and supervising in postgraduate creative industries programs. She coordinates the Creative Arts Research Training Academy, and has been involved in two national learning and teaching grants.

Carmen Gray is a visual art teacher at Central Queensland University. She has spent more than a decade creating course content for both online and face-to-face delivery. During this time, she has also pursued her own creative interests including printmaking and drawing. Along with her visual art practice, Carmen writes and illustrates books for middle-school readers. She is currently continuing her postgraduate studies at Central Queensland University.

Peter McKenzie is a lecturer of jazz and contemporary music within the Bachelor of Music degree at Central Queensland University, Australia. Peter is an accomplished woodwind specialist and has focused on being an in-demand saxophonist performing and teaching throughout Australia and the USA. Peter holds a Bachelor of Jazz Studies, a Grad Dip. Ed, and a Master of Learning Management degree. Peter is currently undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy specialising in developing regional jazz communities.

A. K. Milroy is an intra-disciplinary researcher who works in both art and science, publishing in journals as varied as *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* and *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology*. Milroy creates works of art/science and recently produced an exhibition for the Queensland Museum: 'Deep time', a sensory experience of life thirty million years ago using visualisations produced by synchrotron radiation and specimens from the museum's palaeobotanical collection. She is currently Associate Vice Chancellor, Central Highlands region, Central Queensland University.

Justine Newport is a studying towards a PhD investigating revision in contemporary poetry. A moderator for Jamyang Institute, London, in an on-line course in Buddhist studies for ten years, she has also run a counselling private practice. A professional exhibiting oil painter, Justine previously owned and ran Harmony Wood pottery, selling to galleries in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

Charmaine O'Brien completed a PhD in Creative Writing at Central Queensland University. She also holds a Master of Science in coaching psychology. Her doctoral thesis focused on the writing of food, cookery and cooks in Australian history, and the psychology of creativity and coaching creativity. She has published widely on Australian food history including *The Colonial Kitchen: Australia 1788–1901*. Charmaine is also the author of several books on Indian food history and culture, including *The Penguin Food Guide to India*.

Susannah Oddi is a PhD candidate in creative writing with Central Queensland University, Australia. Her practice-led research examines the influence of an online community on digital writing, comparing contemporary digital serial frameworks with Victorian techniques. Susannah has a background in professional writing, corporate research and communications. Her research interests include digital serial narratives and Victorian and contemporary Gothic media.

Alison Owens lectures in the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney, and is an adjunct Associate Professor of Education at Central Queensland University. She has taught university courses in English, education, communications and social research methods for over twenty years and has a special research interest in internationalization of education and curriculum as well as second language learning. Alison has a Doctorate of Education and a PhD in Creative Arts.

Gail Pittaway is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, Drama and Storytelling, Myth and Ritual at the Waikato Institute of Technology, in the School of Media Arts. She is also a doctoral candidate at Central

Queensland University, undertaking a Creative Writing thesis in creative nonfiction—a food memoir. Gail has had both creative work and academic papers published, and has co-edited journal special issues, conference proceedings and a collection of academic essays.

Irene Rogers PhD (CQU), is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at Central Queensland University Australia. Her research interests are in the history of nursing and medicine. She has jointly published articles on the use of drama in nursing education, oral history and Australian nursing in WW1. She has worked extensively in humanitarian nursing in areas of conflict as a clinician and educator.

Bernadette Ryan PhD (CQU), MHPProfEd (JCU), BHealthSc (CQU), RN, is freelance musician, composer, teacher and writer. Her PhD study on Thai popular protest music, completed at Central Queensland University Australia, marked a culmination in her music interests by bringing together Southeast Asian and Western music forms involving classical, popular, and folk styles. Her approach to music—music as social practice—is inspired by art's connection to social critique. She is author of several published articles and has presented her research in Thailand, Singapore, USA, and Australia.

Colleen Ryan is a lecturer in nursing at Central Queensland University. Her research focusses on nursing education for clinicians and students. She has co-authored nine published manuscripts and has presented at international conferences in New Zealand and Australia, and a variety of national nursing and simulation conferences. Currently she is completing doctoral studies around the professional development needs of nursing clinical teachers.

Alison Vincent has qualifications in science (BSc Hons UNSW) and history (BA MLitt UNE), and experience of both the quantitative and the qualitative research journey. She has just completed a PhD at Central Queensland University researching the role of restaurant reviews in the shaping of tastes for dining out. She has published widely both online and in print and regularly presents at conferences both in Australia and internationally.



1

Introduction

**Donna Lee Brien, Craig Batty, Elizabeth Ellison,
and Alison Owens**

The doctorate represents the most advanced form of adult education and qualification. Although considerable effort, research and training has been expended on the process of completing a doctorate, there has been far less interest or focus on the lived experience of doing one—the human, and often relatively veiled dimension that underpins the highest level of formal learning achievable. With this in mind, this book offers a wide

D. L. Brien (✉) • E. Ellison
School of Education and the Arts, Central Queensland University,
Noosaville, QLD, Australia
e-mail: d.brien@cqu.edu.au; l.ellison@cqu.edu.au

C. Batty
School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney,
Sydney, NSW, Australia
e-mail: Craig.Batty@uts.edu.au

A. Owens
Learning and Teaching Centre, Australian Catholic University,
North Sydney, NSW, Australia
e-mail: Alison.Owens@acu.edu.au

variety of personal insights from creative arts and humanities research students into the challenging yet rewarding journey of undertaking a doctorate. Recognising that the doctoral journey is simultaneously cognitive, emotional, spiritual, ethical and transformational, the book presents a range of chapters written by current or very recently completed doctoral students (as well as one intending candidate) that capture the essence of what it means to undertake a doctorate in the twenty first century. Unlike other books that focus on the degree milestones that completing doctoral level study entails, this book is uniquely organised around the themes and concerns that students themselves have identified as centrally important to successfully completing their research degrees—the invisible work of the doctorate. From assessing the self to working with others, from building resilience to developing networks, and considering how ethical conduct permeates a researcher's practice, this book takes its readers—both students and supervisors—on a journey towards successful doctoral learning. Each section is framed by ideas and concepts suggested by the editors, who are experienced doctoral supervisors, but the core content of the book is purposely student-driven and authored. This, we hope, will provide an authentic and user-friendly account of the doctoral experience.

On Doctoral Learning

In the students' accounts of their experiences and journeys, it is not surprising to see them demonstrating sophisticated levels of conceptual, procedural, declarative and metacognitive knowledge, as defined in Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). Constructivist accounts of adult learning emphasise the sequential and developmental process of assimilating new knowledge with existing knowledge, and then applying this newly assimilated knowledge to practice. In his model of the Experiential Learning Cycle, David Kolb (1981) emphasises the cyclical process of theorising abstract conceptualisations, testing these theories through application to concrete experiences, and then reflecting on outcomes to generate further and more refined theorisations. This cyclical process applies very clearly to doctoral study, which aims to develop new knowledge (and/or theories) supported by evidence drawn

from real-world investigations through research, and implying further research through a process of reflective analysis, evaluation and further theorisation. As the students in this book discuss, the challenges and complexities of undertaking a doctorate have been embraced and overcome to produce resilient learners who are not only able to complete research projects, but who are also able to understand the journey they have undergone and fold it back into their ongoing practice—as researchers, practitioners, teachers, and so on.

Other constructivist models of learning organise the development of cognitive complexity as a hierarchical process, for example, Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001), John Biggs' SOLO (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) (Biggs and Tang 2011), and Matthew Perry's 'nine positions'. Perry's model (1975) progresses from a dualistic—right or wrong—approach, to acquiring knowledge through a multiplistic understanding of knowledge as context-dependent and uncertain, to a sophisticated response to relative values and contingent knowledge through a process of commitment to a reasoned position. The doctoral journey represents an engagement with knowledge and reality that is necessarily performed at the higher end of the hierarchy of cognitive complexity. Doctoral students 'theorise the unknown', performing what Biggs (Biggs and Tang 2011) has defined as 'extended abstract' thinking in a sustained and structured process, engaging with the higher order cognitive processes of evaluative and creative thinking (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). With many of the doctoral projects described in this book drawn from students of the creative arts, creative thinking is particularly evident. In this context, each chapter provides an evaluative account of an aspect of doctoral study that has challenged the student-author, whose reflective assessment and subsequent 'breakthrough' can help inform and support others undertaking their own research journeys.

This book thus celebrates the lived experience of undertaking a doctorate—the human dimension of high-level learning—and taps into some of the common personal challenges that students face and, ideally, learn how to overcome. Chapter authors are each at different stages of their doctoral journey (with some just completed), and their stories reflect on key aspects of the journey that had such an effect as to 'stop them in their tracks' and encourage them to think more widely than their specific

research project. The book therefore does not follow what many other doctoral study guides would consider to be the ‘standard’ journey of candidature. Rather than taking readers through stages related to the project itself—for example, developing a literature review, selecting and enacting a methodology, conducting pilot work—this book centres on the often non-linear, iterative and sometimes messy cognitive journey, which we characterise as a transformation that comprises challenges, breakthroughs and reflections on the process. In editing this book, we found that it was sometimes more useful to place chapters by students further along the journey alongside those who were just beginning, because early insights were useful segues into the very issues that the latter students were then writing about. We hope the structure presented is rich and rewarding, and encourages an interactive relationship with the stories presented, rather than simply following them in a preconceived order.

On Doctoral Transformation

The doctoral learning experience is also strongly transformational in both the personal and the social sense (Mezirow and Taylor 2009), in that new knowledge created from an original research enquiry informs and progresses the understandings of a specialist community of practice (discipline), and also transforms the individual through “self-critique of deeply-held assumptions which leads to greater personal awareness in relationship to others” (Taylor in Mezirow and Taylor 2009, p. 5). This process is evident in Alison Vincent’s chapter, which positions identity at the centre of doctoral learning and emphasises self-discovery in what is firmly framed as a process of life-centred learning. It also provides the focus of the chapters from Leanne Dodd, Justine Newport, Alison Owens and Charmaine O’Brien, which explore the personal and interpersonal implications, benefits and risks involved in telling your own and other people’s stories.

A strong theme of self-care and self-awareness emerges also from the student stories. Further evidence of the life-oriented nature of adult learning, and the centrality of formal and informal relationships, is provided in chapters by Peter McKenzie, Susannah Oddi and Colleen

Ryan, for example. Empowering experience-based guidance is drawn from chapters by AK Milroy and Carmen Grey, which speak to tactics for achieving university approvals, recognising and realising the role of creativity in doctoral research, and developing personal resilience for unplanned outcomes. Gail Pittaway and Bernadette Ryan further demonstrate the personal, professional and intellectual transformations that are a direct flow-on from doctoral study. Transformation, therefore, permeates the entirety of the book's content, as well as its structure.

On the Creative Arts and Humanities Doctorate

Despite the various paradigms of doctoral degrees that exist internationally (with such features as coursework, numbers of milestone review points, the *viva voce* and the ways examiners are asked to report varying from location to location, and sometimes even within individual universities), the human experience of doctoral study—our research, and this book, suggests—is much more universal. As such, while the focus of this book is on PhD students from the creative arts and humanities, we suggest that all of the aspects written about by the students—personal and cognitive—are applicable across disciplines and doctorate types (for example, PhD, Doctor of Creative Arts, Professional Doctorate, Doctor of Education). The fact that this book concentrates on the creative arts and humanities is a testament of sorts to its focus on unearthing the personal and human facets of doctoral study, given that many creative arts and humanities research topics relate to people, cultures and personal processes.

The Development of This Book

The foundations for this book emerged via a two-day workshop with current or newly completed research students as facilitated by the editors. Throughout the two days, the students were invited to share their