

Fencing Off the Black Hole

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My doctoral thesis was a black hole into which years of my life and millions of words of writing disappeared. I took the long route to doctoral status. That had never been my plan, but then little of my time as a PhD student went to plan: I struggled with the shift from a highly structured masters degree to the blank page of my PhD; a lot happened in my personal life, none of which aided thesis completion; and eventually I had to return to full-time work. While I continued to chip away at my doctoral thesis it never seemed to get closer to finishing – until, finally, I had to bite the bullet and just do it.

Perseverance is key

My PhD took a long time. Targets I set for one year soon became goals for the following year. Some early goals were even pushed out years beyond my original finishing date. The goalposts seemed to continually shift on me, away from wherever I was at. Some of my difficulties were to do with the content. I had picked a sub-discipline to study that I had not studied before. I soon discovered, to my horror, that I intensely disliked the relevant literature. It and I were not a good fit. I spent much of my time feeling completely lost and uncertain about my ability to grasp what was required of me. Some of my difficulties were to do with the nature of the PhD process: couple a large, individual project with deadlines that were beyond the horizon, and add in the intellectual challenge of learning to write and think and be original, and it is not surprising that so many PhD students (myself included) struggle. Many of my difficulties were to do with the distraction of work and my personal life, and it is the challenge of dealing with these that I want to focus on here.

Despite all of these ‘distractions’ – life, actually – I continued with my thesis, passed, and retained (well, regained!) my sanity. A number of my peer group gave up. One gave up because she was offered a good job. Others gave up because the thesis became too hard. Others still, because life got in the way. What kept me going was the advice of a dear friend who had completed her PhD some years earlier. She had had her fair share of dramas and difficulties along the way. A PhD, she told me, is a degree in perseverance. It does not mean superior intelligence – many very intelligent people never begin PhDs, while others begin but quit. The people who get PhDs are the ones who don’t give up. So I hung in there, knowing that perseverance was key.

Deadlines can motivate, but, with a thesis-only PhD, they can be ignored, too. For nine-tenths of my thesis deadlines were essentially arbitrary. They were set in good faith initially, and when I didn’t meet them, I was philosophical. Missed the deadline? Set another one. Eventually, the whole concept of deadline lost its power. The longer I was enrolled in my thesis, the more I was comforted by the thought that ‘they’ wouldn’t kick me out. Too much had been invested in me and my project. The university had a strong

incentive to have me finish. So although failing to meet deadlines created a sense of unease and mild dread, deadlines did not scare me enough to motivate me to stick to them. I was, nonetheless, dispirited by my lack of progress. For years I was always about one year away from completion.

Two things happened that were central to me finishing. First, I took time out. I needed a break to sort some issues in my private life; the pressure of the thesis was adding to my stress, while the stress was taking away my ability to do the thesis. Second, when I returned to my thesis after this break, I set myself up to succeed. I took the new deadline seriously, and I set about removing from my life all obstacles to thesis completion.

Time out

I suspended my enrolment. While I still had the thesis albatross hanging around my neck during the suspension period, my time clock was frozen. I was able to attend to personal issues guilt-free. When the suspension ended, I was still in a fragile emotional state, so my supervisor again suspended my enrolment. I was away from my thesis for a full nine months. This extra suspension was crucial to ensuring that when I reactivated my enrolment, I was truly ready to focus on completion, and not be distracted by non-thesis issues.

At the start of the time-out period, I had counselling from a psychotherapist who worked in a university setting. My thesis stress and non-thesis stress were intertwined, so it helped to see a counsellor who understood not only grief and anger, but also something about the functioning of universities, the challenges of research, and supervisor–student relationships. Sorting out my emotional health was a prerequisite to being able to focus on my study.

Time out had the additional benefit of enabling me to view my thesis with fresh eyes. I had been away from the project for nine months. When I returned, my perspective was more dispassionate and objective. I was better able to see my thesis as others would and to craft the writing for the reader – my examiner – instead of for myself. No longer so close to the writing, I was able to edit out passages that represented much work on my part but did not advance the overall argument. As well as the greater distance from the writing, I was also more detached from the huge emotional investment my thesis represented. The result was less ego in the editing and writing decisions I made and more attention to doing what I needed to do. Time out aided my clarity of purpose and thinking. It bolstered my ability to view the thesis as an entire entity that required cohesion and a single purpose, rather than a collection of chapters written independently of each other over a very long time frame.

Setting myself up to succeed

I analysed all the distractions and habits that were getting in the way of finishing and set about dealing with them. Eliminating distractions was possible because it was only for five months or so. I could not have maintained this level of discipline, isolation and neglect of my other commitments for the entire thesis period. The contrast between the final five months and the previous eight years was that for the first time, for a sustained period of time, my thesis was my only significant priority.

Previously, my thesis was near the top on my Priority List but it was invariably near the bottom on my Action List. The mundane and the prosaic and the urgent, the things with the most immediate deadlines, were done first: marking student assessments, writing lectures, doing domestic chores. Only when everything else seemed under control did I turn my attention to my thesis. But too often my attention never got there because something else would arise, an interruption with a more immediate time frame. For weeks, even months at a time, I would devote only a few scant hours to the beast. For people with busy lives, it is easy to defer work on your thesis. It even makes sense: the thesis deadline is the furthest-away deadline, and there is pressure to attend, right now, to what needs attending to now. The thesis can wait while I deal with more urgent obligations. Of course, it can only be relegated to the bottom of the Action List for so long. At some point, it has to be elevated to the top. Persevering with a thesis only has a purpose if you are going to finish the thing.

Setting myself up to succeed meant a deliberate change of approach. Everything else, anything else, came a distant second to my thesis. Five months was long enough for me to get into the swing of writing and editing and to make significant progress. It was also short enough that I felt I could delegate or postpone or opt out of all the other things that usually took up my time and head space.

Previously when I put my thesis near the top on the Action List, significant progress was undermined by two features. First, it was only at the top of my Action List for short spells, a few days or weeks at a time. Second, although I promoted the thesis to a top position, often I was still juggling other things such as teaching. These other things represented thesis avoidance opportunities and interrupted the momentum I might otherwise have developed. Each stop and start created inertia that needed energy and time to overcome. These short spells of focus I did have were long enough for a single milestone to be reached, such as finishing the draft of a chapter, but they weren't long enough to develop the overview I needed to conclude the entire project. A large proportion of these short time spells was taken up with remembering where I was up to and reminding myself what I was supposed to be doing. With the longer time frame of five months, the 'downtime' of a couple of weeks – how long it took me at the beginning to find my feet – was a small proportion of the time overall. The remaining five months were almost as productive as the previous five years.

Removing obstacles to success

Setting boundaries: I put a 'do not disturb' sign on my door at work. A few people still disturbed me. They were well-intentioned, wanting to know how it was going, but I found myself, on several occasions, having to explain what 'do not disturb' meant. I explained that I would ask for the help that I needed, and that 'do not disturb' meant exactly that. It was a necessary strategy. On the home front, I explained to my family what I needed from them. I was explicit in this. I needed my partner not just to take responsibility for *making* dinner, but also for all the *thinking* that went around this. I needed to concentrate on one thing and one thing only. My head space had to be clear of the usual domestic clutter: I didn't want my writing to be stopped so I could answer questions such as, do we have any tomato paste? I bought a whiteboard for the kitchen and wrote up, every week, what everyone was doing each day and who had responsibility for what. If anyone had any questions about what was happening, they should address the whiteboard, not me. Writing commitments down on the whiteboard meant I didn't have to keep track of them in my head.

Study space: my desk was in a public, open-plan part of the house, making it hard to concentrate. Family assumed they could disturb me: the publicness of the space created the impression that I was available. What I needed was my own space, with a door I could close. This meant evicting my son from the front porch, which had been set up as his playroom. It now became my office. I needed a long extension cord for my internet connection, but I had privacy. Because the room was small it was easy to heat, so the cold of a large open-plan living area during the winter was no longer an issue.

News: I'm a news junkie. I listen to the news on the radio in the morning and watch it on television at night. I watch current affairs programmes. I read about the news on the internet. As a political scientist, I justify this as Retaining Currency in My Field. It is, of course, also a great source of thesis avoidance. I returned to my thesis in June 2008, just months before change elections in New Zealand and the United States. For the first time since 1984, I largely ignored a New Zealand election campaign. The election carried on without me. I survived being cut off from proceedings and the New Zealand electoral process survived without me.

Television: I stopped watching television. It's easy to turn it on at 6 p.m., watch the news, then hang around for the 7 p.m. current affairs shows, and then just keep watching for the rest of the evening. I've probably lost years of good productive time to unwinding in front of the TV screen. So I didn't turn it on. Is my life really the poorer for having missed one series of *24*? Or the Sunday night plays? Movies I could always rent and watch later, in my new post-PhD life? I read the story outlines for *Coronation Street* in advance: I spent a whole evening on the internet reading, in detail, everything that was going to happen on New Zealand screens for the next six months.

Email: for the first part of my finish time, I was working from home. At home, my internet access is ultra-slow dial-up. It's painful to use. This made weaning myself from the

internet easier to achieve. The key was not to log on first thing in the morning to see if I had any email messages or to read the news. If I started my morning on my thesis instead of on a distraction, it made sticking to the thesis task easier. Despite it being the run-up to an exciting American presidential election, I cancelled my email alerts from the *New York Times*. I put this in perspective: yes, I was missing out on something I would normally revel in, but the election would happen without me, whereas my thesis would not. I could always read about it afterwards.

School crossing supervision: one morning each week, I supervise the pedestrian crossing used by local schoolchildren. It's not a big burden: I turn up at 7.55 a.m. and arrive back home around 8.30 a.m. I didn't sit down to write each morning until 9 a.m., so continuing with this community activity while I finished my thesis didn't appear to pose any problems. Nonetheless, I bailed out. It was a symbolic act. My thesis was to be my only commitment. I excused myself from all other commitments and potential distractions. I was also keeping my head space as clear from non-thesis things as possible.

The post-thesis life list: I started a list. Every time I found myself daydreaming about something I would rather be doing, I added this thing to the list. Every time I thought of something I needed to do, I added it to the list: buy a digital camera; write to my aunt in Melbourne; plan Christmas shopping; get a haircut; learn to swim; plan a family holiday; copy some old photos; trim the hedge; see a dentist; renew my passport. I wasn't to do any of these things until I had submitted. The list was a way of keeping track of what I was deferring, while also making it possible to defer; I had a record of the idea, and I would do it, but I wouldn't invest any time doing it (or planning it) just yet. The list, incidentally, was invaluable in helping me construct my post-thesis life.

I also kept a list of thesis things that needed doing in order to submit: write the introduction and conclusion; write the abstract; come up with a title; find pithy quotes to headline each chapter, and so forth. What I didn't do was put any sort of deadline next to each of these things. I worked away solidly at what needed doing next and tried (*tried*) not to focus too much on the way time was running out.

Work: I work full-time as a university lecturer. My thesis was my research project, and in theory, there was time in my week, most weeks, to do research. In reality, this free time was highly fragmented because I was also coordinating a large, team-taught first-year paper. There were twelve lecturers and around 300 EFTS worth of enrolments a year to manage. I received a reduction in teaching and an increase in my pay as compensation for taking on this role. However, it was completely incompatible with finishing my thesis. Unlike teaching, which ebbs away at the end of the semester as marking concludes, the paper coordinator's job just kept on flowing. I had to check the marking, write reports about the results, deal with student complaints about their treatment or their grades, and then start planning for the next iteration of the paper in the next semester. While

there was space here and there to work on my project, there was no mid-year inter-semester break long enough to develop momentum in thesis writing. For me, writing takes long periods of time, uninterrupted by other things. I find writing, and the thinking that it demands, a difficult task. Unless I'm editing, or on a roll with a piece of work, writing is not something that I can progress within an hour here or half a day there. The situation was similar over summer: although I was not involved in summer school, much of my summer break between semesters was taken up with paper coordinator responsibilities and annual leave. It was hard to take any leave during the year because the paper coordinator role was ongoing. There was some time for writing that was completely free from the intrusion of paper coordinator duties, but this only amounted to a week or two in December and a couple of weeks at the start of January. The major distraction for me to accommodate or eliminate, therefore, became work.

My first approach was to be organised and try to segment off time for writing. I drew up a timetable of the six weeks from when semester one teaching ended and semester two teaching began. In amongst the other commitments, I found a whole six days I could set aside for writing. Part way through the six weeks, it was apparent that I wouldn't even be free for those six days – new meetings were scheduled, reports requested, or problems arose that needed solving. So I resigned as paper coordinator. I'm not indispensable, it was time to be selfish and put my own interests first and take the financial hit on the chin. I then scrutinised my semester two timetable. The bulk of my teaching was on Mondays. On a Tuesday I was timetabled to give a two-hour lecture from midday to 2 p.m. For one semester, I was sure that I could be excused from the meetings that were on Wednesdays. I was free to write on Thursdays and Fridays. All in all, it looked a lot better than my previous workload when I had been paper coordinator: I could start writing on a Wednesday and keep going through until the end of Sunday. But the two-hour lecture on Tuesdays bothered me. It was right bang smack in the middle of the day. I knew I wouldn't get any writing done before it and I probably wouldn't get anything done after it. So I offered to buy myself out of my Tuesday teaching. I wasn't sure how I would afford this, but I thought I would start by using up all my annual leave and perhaps go interest-only on my mortgage. Because my focus for the semester was on the finishing of my thesis, I wasn't going to go anywhere or do anything that required the spending of money. This would make a lower income more bearable. Three years earlier, I had been a single parent living on a student allowance, so getting by on a shoestring was not foreign to me.

The decision to scale back my work was, once I realised it, an obvious one. Did it matter that my income dropped for a semester if it meant I could finish my thesis? My thesis had been hanging over me for so many years. I desperately needed to complete it and move on with my life and my career. I needed this freedom to move on more than I needed the salary.

The reaction of my manager was: leave this with me, I'll see what I can do for you. And when she returned a few days later, the news was better than I could have dreamed – she had found the money to buy me out of *all* of my teaching. I essentially had one semester off teaching, on full pay. This would not have happened without her determination to help me succeed. It also would not have happened had I not identified, clearly, the kinds of obstacles that were preventing me from succeeding, communicating effectively my seriousness about succeeding (for example, by resigning from my paper coordinator's role), and offering to take responsibility for the trade-off I was requesting (the drop in pay, using up all my leave). I identified what I needed and asked for help getting there; I am very grateful that my employer was willing and able to help me as they did.

I fenced off the black hole by making sure I was ready to finish – dealing with the family issues and the emotional stresses I was under. Professional help in the form of counselling kick-started this process. I then analysed the impediments to finishing and took practical steps to minimise them. I asked for help in a very explicit way: this is what I am going to do, this is what help I need getting there. Patiently (sometimes, sometimes not) repeating 'do not disturb' and 'can you please deal with this yourself'. In having conversations about what I was doing and what support I required, I realised how poorly I had communicated around the thesis process in the past. I had assumed that people who had not been through this experience had more understanding of it than they actually did.

I was cognisant that any sacrifices I was making would be only short-term and *very* much worth it. This made the requisite discipline easier to achieve. And then, taking that final deadline very seriously, chipping off the various tasks one at a time, conscious that when it I had finally completed, I would be free to read books for pleasure and do all those other things I had denied myself for years.

Having a terminal deadline – for my time had finally reached its limit – helped enormously. At last, here was a deadline that was quite soon and I couldn't extend. It was within view. My supervisor told the graduate office that I was going to submit on a given date and would not be requiring further suspensions or extensions. She set about lining up examiners. This was all very final, absolute, conclusive, unambiguous and inarguable. I had no choice but to respond with a finished project that ticked all the boxes that needed a tick.

Concluding thoughts

My thesis experience was characterised, at times, by a lack of clarity. This was an integral part of my learning process: finding my intellectual feet, discovering my own voice. My thesis experience was also characterised by interruptions from a myriad of sources and growing expertise, on my part, in procrastination. This does not mean that

the distractions of having a baby or losing a parent or needing to work full-time to pay the bills are not very real. They are real, and they are important. They can't be ignored. They are not thesis avoidance in the way that surfing the internet can be, but they do make it easy to relegate the thesis to the bottom of the Action List and drag out the time frame required to complete. Doing a thesis is hard work. It is tempting to put the thesis to one side and attend to easier things, more urgent things and things that offer more immediate gratification. But eventually, you need to bite the bullet and finish. When you do bite that bullet, be ready and set yourself up to succeed.