

The Ed. Doc process: a magical, mystery tour.

Part 1: Learning to balance on jelly

Jo Perry

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(The Ed. Doc., or Doctor of Education, is a professional doctorate involving research into aspects of the education sector. The thesis, which is the final component of the degree, must include the development of new knowledge.)

The email read "If you are interested in hearing about a new Ed. Doc. course call Prof....." I was in the last year of my masters so I did. We made a time to meet, I trudged to the other side of the city...he forgot. Good start!

We eventually did meet and after some discussion about the topic I went away to write what I now know was the D1. No I haven't left out enrolment, that didn't come yet. The D1 is the idea proposal; you have about 2000 words to play with and some 'advisors' to support you. 'Advisor One' felt I should be able to nail the application in 1000 words. It took about a year to develop it to the point of presentation to the Doctoral Studies Board (DSB). I thought I was finished... 'Advisor Two' handed it back with every full stop and comma checked in the reference list. **(Doctoral lesson number 1: Learn to use Endnote! That's an absolute MUST!).**

Advisors One and Two then sent my idea to the DSB and, to my surprise; I gained provisional entrance to the Ed. Doc. programme. This is all you can get until your full proposal is accepted and you have presented to the faculty. That, however, was two years away.

The Ed. Doc. has four compulsory papers to begin with and each has a block course to introduce the main ideas. They were described as: unpacking the ideas, looking at theoretical backgrounds, the methodologies, and gradually developing questions, hunches and a thesis. The first paper was to really examine the 'big picture' and is the point at which you leave solid ground and for the next two years gradually learn to balance on jelly. The pathway I followed had one paper in each semester, each ending with a 10,000 word report, presentation and oral defence with external examiners, advisors and peers. 'Oral Defence?' I asked in hushed tones. 'Yes, you present the work you have done and we question you about your stance and suggest other things to think about. We have an external examiner as well'. At that point the equation looked like:

10,000 word report = six months, not weeks.

and

Presentation = PowerPoint = black hole = end of my doctorate.

Advisors One and Two started chanting something about 'follow the process, you will be fine'...I was in such a state of shock, panic, terror etc that I couldn't have asked 'what's the process' if I had tried. By the time of the presentation my heart was pounding and I had practically learned the presentation as a speech. I got one sentence in and the external examiner stopped me and disagreed with my main stance for my idea. Words were gone, presentation was gone, Ed. Doc. was gone; I went home shattered.

I don't remember hearing I had passed; just received the dates for the next block course. Paper two was the theoretical base for the research. 'Pick one theory' Advisor Two said. 'One?' 'I actually need bits of several, one doesn't fit'. 'Just one.' Frustration was vented in tears and it was the most alone moment for me in the first two years. No-one seemed to listen, or if they were listening I wasn't explaining right because they weren't hearing what I was saying. It felt like a journey through growing quick sand, no firm ground in sight and the jelly wasn't quite set yet.

One of the things that had come up in the 'follow the process' mantra was 'its your project, you know it best'. 'O.K. then, I want bits of several theories; I can't do it with one.' "It's your project," Advisor One pronounced. This sounded like it was the worst decision I had ever made and the end of all was looming...

I survived...report, presentation oral defence (which seemed considerably less in magnitude and was followed by a good lunch).

At this point, I should explain that unless you are an I.T wiz you should understand that the second doctorate that you will also be commencing and battling with at the same time as the first is the technological support one. More directly, all the tricks that the computer knows that will help you work smarter not harder. Advisor Three (all hail Advisor Three!) walked me slowly at first but with gathering pace through this. End Note is a wondrous thing ...a trick I will mention here is one Advisor Three (all hail Advisor Three!) suggested...write down the key words you use in the end note programme. It helps to be concise across the study as a whole. (If you don't you end up like me with a far more 'fluid' situation). Do the 'long documents' course or check out Lyn Lavery's support notes. If you are feeling really brave, Inspiration and NVivo are brilliant programmes. (There are others ...but this is my pick.)

Year Two commenced, paper three was the methodology. This was the best, here was where I found I could completely loose myself, here is where I found myself stopping several times a night on the way home to write down ideas; here is where I had to ask the supervisor in the supermarket for a paper bag to write down new ideas before I forgot them. **(Doctoral lesson number 2: travel with a notebook! They come in a variety of colours and they make smart fashion accessories.)**

At the paper three point, I encountered two new parts of the Ed. Doc. process: 'outputs' and 'professional enquiries'. The first is where you take the interesting bits of what you are doing and present them at symposiums and conferences. Presentations are a continued source of terror-filled adrenalin bursts (but that's just me). Professional enquiries, where you try out little bits of the ideas you have, are a small, manageable and utterly fascinating journeys. I've tried several; they were engrossing and allowed me to see what I might need to 'tweak'. (If you are going to engage in "thick description" and not used to writing this level of description and evaluation of events, these are to be recommended as you might need some practice, I did and still do).

Report-> presentation-> oral defence -> lunch -> unbelievable head cold-> couldn't have cared less about passing and failing that day.

Paper four was drawing together everything to get an idea of what the D9 might look like. Actually it doesn't do that at all as the D9 (which is the full proposal) has lots of very specific categories. Paper 4 drew everything together at that point and looking back I think I started to feel some much firmer ground under foot. At this point, of the original six people, three were still in the Ed. Doc. process, one had changed to a PhD and two had re-achieved sanity and gone back to their lives.

From this point to the D9, the presentation to the faculty and that magical moment when the letter arrived saying I had full entrance to the programme, took another year. It is this year that I think is the most vital in the Ed. Doc. process. Planning each part, knowing each part well (though, even now, not totally) was time well spent.

The Ed. Doc. is good if you like deadlines. It has more structure initially but that probably means the stress is more constant throughout than a PhD. The Ed. Doc. has been seen as the 'lesser' alternative in the doctoral stakes....I beg to differ. It's just structured differently and

as professionals the excitement of developing and applying new knowledge almost from the beginning is not to be passed up lightly.

To be continued...more lessons to come. Feedback and discussion welcomed.