

## **Blogging PhD Candidature: Revealing the Pedagogy**

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### **Abstract**

The pedagogy of the Australian PhD has not been well theorised to date. Most published material has focussed on managing the supervision process rather than on the learning of candidates. The transmission of knowledge is essentially textual, but while attention has been focussed on the processes of text production necessary for the completion of the disciplinary project (the thesis), candidates generally do not report or often write reflections on their development as scholars/researchers - a key aspect of doctoral development. This paper explores current discussion of PhD pedagogy and proposes the use of blogs to enhance scholar/researcher development, through the foregrounding they make possible of the pedagogical relationship implicit in the PhD process and consequent revelation of some of the hidden pedagogical practices that underpin it.

**Keywords:** Doctoral; PhD; supervision; postgraduate; blogging

## Bloggging PhD Candidature: Revealing the Pedagogy

Pedagogy and pedagogic practices in relation to the Australian degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) have remained 'largely unscrutinised and unquestioned' (Johnson, Lee & Green 2000) since the degree was established in Australia, following the Second World War. Before this, Australians wanting to do doctoral work usually enrolled in the UK or the USA. Unlike some other countries, the Australian PhD still does not routinely include coursework: 'Australian post graduate research education continues to rely almost solely on the production of a dissertation [thesis] by the student after a period of extended [solo] study' (Johnson, Lee & Green 2000, insertions ours). The dominant pedagogical practices in Australia are therefore those of individual study and supervision of the individual by a more-or-less experienced academic who has themselves completed doctoral studies. The relationship between supervisor and student is arguably, therefore, the most crucial factor in the development of the 'autonomous scholar'; it is a relationship that has long been privileged and remains largely unexamined. In this paper we look at some of the discussions about the development of researchers in Australia, and then at some ideas about how blogs are being used and might be used to enhance that development, and finish with some blogged accounts of PhD candidates' initiation into the cut-and-thrust of academic life, that reveal some of the hidden pedagogical practices that underpin the PhD process. We are using the word 'pedagogy' throughout this article in the sense that it is used by Lusted (1986: 3) as 'a concept [that] draws attention to the process through which knowledge is produced'. We would also like to add that we don't think that blogging can solve all the problems that arise during candidature; we are not 'blogging evangelists' – a term that has become common in marketing circles for someone who thinks blogging will answer all problems. What we do think is that blogging is a text-based social practice that can be useful to both candidates and supervisors in the co-production of knowledge within PhD candidacy.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) mandates that a 'research doctorate ... is primarily achieved through supervised research' (AQF 2002: n.p.). Although most institutions still consider the thesis as the chief examinable artefact, recent developments in institutional requirements for the PhD degree include the addition of coursework early in some PhD programs, although such courses are usually 'research methods' subjects that are often seen as remedial, 'making up' for deficits in candidates who do not already have a strong research background when they apply to enrol in a PhD program. (In the last ten years, professional doctorates – in which coursework is a key feature – have also been developed in many practice-related disciplines. However, these are not the subject of this paper.)

Another development in PhD practice at most Australian universities is the provision – sometimes mandating – of 'supervisor training', along with the formal institution of an apprenticeship system in which inexperienced supervisors act as associate supervisors with more experienced colleagues. Supervision by committee is another recent innovation, along with the development of annual (or more frequent) reviews, at which the candidate and their supervisor(s) attend a meeting with other faculty staff to discuss progress. These policy changes and their implementation, however, are patchy – for example, at our own institution both the context and content of these annual reviews vary widely between faculties. The point that all of these measures have in common is that they have virtually all been imposed without the development of a strong pedagogical framework, either within institutions or in Australian higher education more widely – they are pragmatic and managerial rather than pedagogically based.

The national picture of PhD study in Australia has changed very rapidly in the last twenty years. For example, candidate numbers more than doubled between 1990 and 2000, when

a total of 37,374 enrolled candidates was reported (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003). Although no detailed current figures are publicly available, the number of candidates can be reasonably estimated to be presently at around 40,000. Numbers of employed academics who are able to supervise PhDs have not, of course, doubled. Accordingly, in the last ten years some attention has been paid to PhD candidature by both academic researchers and bureaucrats. (In Australia many full-time PhD candidates have their fees and sometimes also a scholarship for living expenses funded through Federal government or industry-linked scholarship schemes, so completion rates and time-frames are a matter of high interest and mandatory reporting to government.) This has led to some research (for example, McWilliam, Singh & Taylor 2002; Neumann 2003) into the institutional frameworks that support the degree.

Discussion of supervision pedagogy has been pursued by a few researchers (for example, Brew 1998; Brew & Peseta 2004; Sinclair 2004), while others (for example, Lee & Green 1998; Lee & Williams 1999; Johnson, Lee & Green 2000; Macauley 2001; Lee & Green 2004; Boud & Lee 2005) have explored both supervision practices and what the experience of individual candidates reveals about both supervision pedagogy and the dominant discourses within academia concerning this highest rank of examinable degrees. However, the vast majority of papers presented since 1994 at the biennial Quality in Postgraduate Research Conferences (QPR) cover issues of management, quality and standards; very few refer directly to pedagogical framings of research training and development.

The pedagogical discussions that have been published are generally framed in terms of measuring the pedagogies being reported against a constructivist ideal. Johnson, Leigh and Green (2000) explore the development of the 'autonomous researcher' in the terms of the traditional model of PhD pedagogy, which Leder (1995) refers to as having an 'apprentice-like' quality and to which Lee and Green (2004) assign the metaphor 'cultural-discursive apprenticeship' (p. 56). The fundamental aim of this pedagogical approach is to assist candidates to discover the autonomous researcher within themselves, using techniques that could be described as experiencing varying degrees of abandonment often characterised as 'benign neglect'. Some academics even report supervision practices which precluded their supervisors reading their thesis, in case it was suggested that the thesis was not all the student's own work (Lee & Williams 1999; Johnson, Lee & Green 2000). On the other hand some supervisors, having challenged these practices and attempted to undertake a more pastoral supervisory role, often basing their attempts on a feminist pedagogy, report being overwhelmed by the needs of their students. Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) suggest that it may be more helpful for supervisors to understand autonomy as being *developed* in candidates, rather than *revealed*, and point out that 'new modes of knowledge production' (p. 143) and the current trend toward more collaborative production of knowledge within universities, will require that researchers have greater skills in collaboration supported by joint process, than in more traditionally conceptualised notions of isolated original work. More recently Boud and Lee (2005) suggest that

a more appropriate pedagogic discourse should draw on the familiar notion of 'peer' from the world of research. It argues that peer learning, appropriately theorized and situated within a notion of communities of research practice, might be a productive frame through which to view research education (Boud & Lee 2005: 501)

If the process of becoming a 'Doctor of Philosophy' is the process of becoming an autonomous researcher – someone who is able to develop, communicate and defend ideas that have grown from their research – how can these skills be most effectively developed?

Lee and Williams, in their compelling 1999 article 'Forged in Fire', make the point that the PhD process will almost certainly involve 'distress' – that is its nature. Most PhD candidates are forced at some point to confront the fact that they are undergoing a life-changing experience – termed by one supervisor as 'permanent head damage'. Lee and Williams suggest that this 'distress' should be recognised, expected and understood as necessary and productive.

Common metaphors for candidature include becoming, baptism of fire, journey of discovery, process and metamorphosis. The process of PhD development should, presumably, be one of growth in intellectual confidence, independence and originality of thinking. It would be fair to expect it to result in empowerment and ultimate entry to an elite community. These attributes – that we presume are valued by all the participants in the process – by definition are not, and should not, be easy to achieve. Our experiences as a researcher in the field and as an experienced supervisor lead us to claim that the process may involve measures of intellectual conflict and uncertainty, doubt, indecisiveness and fear – but also the beginnings of a sophisticated understanding and the pleasure of finding the voice to speak what we have learned. Supervisors (and faculties) can and should take seriously their responsibility to provide the environment where these things can happen, in a way that will assist candidates through a process of learning to claim their own knowledge.

In response to the 'messiness' reported by many candidates, the metaphors suggested by Lee and Green (2004) as being used for the supervisory relationship are cultural-discursive apprenticeship (discussed above), project management (the common institutional, managerial response in which the 'problems' with the process are seen as organisational issues rather than as personal ones, or as personal ones that require an institutional response), and co-production. It is this last pedagogical framework for supervision, expounded in more detail by Boud and Lee (2005) that we would like to suggest can be supported by blogging.

As Richardson (1998) has pointed out, research and the production of knowledge are 'profoundly textual'. We now accept that language 'does not "reflect" social reality, but produces meaning and creates social reality' (Richardson 1998: 936). However, the act of writing is still often considered a distinct and frequently problematic part of the research process (the 'writing up' of the thesis or research report) rather than something that is an integral, organic part of the knowledge creation process itself. In this view the research process creates as its visible tangible outcome the thesis, research report or article, the creation of which occurs after data analysis is completed. One of us recently attended a workshop on writing for PhD candidates in which it was emphasised that the writing that is done as a part of the research (writing up of interviews, field notes, notes from reading and so on) is only indirectly related to the final research report. The impression was conveyed that when you're ready to write the report you must think deeply for an extended period of time, and the words you need will somehow come to you. There was no indication that the report (or thesis) is something that grows from and is deeply rooted in earlier writing – that all the writing that is done in the project, beginning with the initial research proposal, grant application and ethics proposal – is part of the thinking that the researcher is doing, and is indeed changing and developing the thinking of the researcher as it is undertaken.

Lee (1998) helpfully unpacks the 'complex relationship between the production of knowledge through the practices of writing, and *subjectivity*, the production of a particular kind of knower/writer' (p.122, emphasis in original). Looking at earlier work on non-completing candidates, she also points out that a 'strict demarcation' (Lee 1998: 123) between the data collection and the 'writing up' may prove fatal to the project: the PhD candidate, having

completed the tasks of planning the collection of data and completing its analysis, may stumble at the hurdle of making the meaning of the data clear by 'writing it up'. Candidates are often discussed as having created new knowledge which must now be made manifest by writing. Rather than this cognitive approach ('think then write'), Lee suggests, it is more helpful to understand the 'writing up' of a research project as transforming existing knowledge through the cognitive action of the writer into new knowledge, and at the same time transforming the subjectivity of the writer, who must 'construct and position themselves as legitimate knowers and text producers' (Lee 1998: 127). This point has been recently expanded by Kamler and Thomson (2006) throughout their theoretically interesting and essentially practical text on supervision and student writing.

PhD candidates, like all researchers, have of course always kept notebooks, lab books and field notes (Halavais 2006). These documents have generally been used to record the development of the disciplinary project that is the subject of the thesis, not to record the process of the PhD itself, the project of the self – just as the thesis has not often been seen as the product of and part of the process of the subjectivity of its writer. However, in the last few years, increasing numbers of PhD candidates have created a new kind of text: weblogs or blogs, to record their lives, their thoughts, and their own process. Some of the uses that we have observed are:

- to record quick ideas, insights, reading notes, lists, useful web-links and to hyperlink these together
- to store important documents (drafts, administrative materials...)
- to record events soon after they happen (along with their emotional load) for reflection and possible later discussion with a supervisor
- to 'put ideas out there' and receive comments, thus creating an informal international online community of practice for both product and process

Blogs are a new kind of text, with their ability to link both internally (between ideas created by the same writer) and externally (between the writer's ideas and those of other people), and may have the potential to influence candidates' development as academics in ways that the more traditional research documents do not. Mortensen and Walker (2002) argue that 'blogging influences the way you think about thinking' (p. 254), and Rebecca Blood (2000) records that regular blogging raised her awareness of her own thought process. Jill Walker (2006) describes how she has developed her thinking between and through the reading of blogs. It is no accident that renovation, knitting, sewing, gardening and child-rearing have proved popular genres for bloggers: all involve constant change, movement and development toward a goal, whether that goal be near or far. PhD candidature, also, is about change, development and movement toward a goal. Jill Walker describes blogs as having '...no whole; they are not objects. They are processes, actions, sites of exchange' (Walker 2006: 137). This description closely mirrors constructivist understandings of PhD candidature, such as those discussed by Boud and Lee, who argue that "peer learning, appropriately theorized and situated within a notion of communities of research practice, might be a productive frame through which to view research education" (2005: 501).

Despite the differences in epistemologies that have often been categorised across disciplines (for example, Becher & Trowler 2001), the shared blogging by individuals of the common ground of their struggle (which may, in any discipline, involve 'distress' as Lee and Williams (1999) suggest), has the potential to create shared narratives of development. In a current research project in which PhD candidates keep blogs and share their insights into their

process, participants have reported a wide range of common PhD experiences. They have used their blogs to think their way into the meaning of these experiences, both positive and negative, for themselves. Contemporary Australian PhD candidates are much less likely to be part of an academic community than earlier candidates (they are older and more likely to be part-time and off-campus), so blogging holds out the possibility of increasing their contact with a research community. However, candidates who are full-time or who are junior academics and feel part of an academic environment, have also expressed feelings of both aloneness and loneliness in their blogs. A commonality of the trials of 'becomingness', has the power to bind, whether between virtual strangers or virtual friends. Learning, as Boud and Lee (2005) point out, is now understood to be socially situated, but this understanding is not generally evident in either policy development or provision of services for PhD candidates in academic institutions to date. With the exception of postgraduate support programs (for example, writing or language assistance), there has been little or no attempt within Australia to formally situate learning for PhD candidates outside the supervisory relationship. Despite the commonalities that candidates identify among and between themselves, communities of practice (Wenger 1999) are not widely discussed as providing a useful pedagogical framework for candidates. The blogs that candidates have created can be seen, perhaps, as an attempt to construct their own communities of practice.

As far as we are aware, the uses of blogs as tools for supervision has not been discussed publicly, except in unpublished conference proceedings. We would like to suggest that, following Boud and Lee's model of 'co-production' of knowledge and in the absence of other institutional models of supervision (such as supervision teams), the pedagogical partnership between supervisor and candidate can be used as a partnership for shared development of knowledge, with an understanding that the thesis is developed from the knowledge created within and through the pedagogic partnership. We accept that this partnership is continually being negotiated and rebalanced, but we do not claim that it is, or ever can be, equal in terms of "power and authority and expertise" (Boud & Lee 2005: 511).

This constructivist approach to postgraduate pedagogy proposed by Boud and Lee (2005) has echoes in theories of how people learn online. Most successful online learning is associated with constructivist pedagogies (Maor & Zariski 2003). The well-known and often-repeated advice to teachers going online that they will have to move from their position as the 'sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side' implies the pedagogical position that students learning online are constructing their own knowledge from the available information, rather than accepting their knowledge whole from 'the master'.

The development of blogs and wikis as tools for collaborative knowledge creation has the potential to reduce the role of the 'guide on the side' even further – perhaps online teachers, like the absent supervisors reported in so many stories of PhD candidate development, now feel they are becoming 'the ghost with no post'. While those words are ours, the expressed fear that teachers will largely disappear from education is often related to the development of educational technology without an attendant pedagogical framework (for example, McWilliam & Palmer 1995; Taylor 1995). Students working online can be left to share, discuss, problem-solve and develop their own knowledge from sources of information that are now vast – indeed, they seem almost limitless. The (often misunderstood) role of 'guide on the side' is crucial to the success of this kind of educational setting (Salmon 1999; 2002). If the pedagogical background to learning online is not well-developed, students working in these online environments may be left to judge the validity of what they find for themselves and to try and develop the skills necessary to defend their ideas within and through a group of people whom they may never see face-to-face. This is another manifestation of a

pedagogical abandonment, like that of the absent supervisor discussed earlier, which could also be called 'benign neglect'.

Economic pressure within institutions, rather than the pedagogical preferences of staff, is often the driver for institutional movement toward online teaching. It is also economic pressure that has raised the interest of both bureaucrats and academics in postgraduate supervision in Australia: pressure to lift the completion rates of PhD candidates and to shorten completion times, conflict with increased time pressure on academics and an expressed wish by some academics for a more cooperative model for PhD supervision (Johnson, Lee and Green 2000).

As online tasks move from academic engagement in reading material that has been placed online, through the social engagement of chat rooms and social networking applications, to the more thoughtful and reflective work that can result from reading and contributing to asynchronous discussion, participants move toward emotional involvement in their learning (Salmon 1999). And it is this involvement of the emotional dimension that has been identified by Lee and Green (1998), Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) and Boud and Lee (2005) as the most under-theorised part of PhD pedagogy.

Apart from the (generally) single-use blogs discussed earlier, joint blogs kept between candidate and supervisor(s) can be a useful tool for co-production of knowledge. Depending on how they are being used, these blogs can be closed to the world, or open for passing readers to comment. (However, it would seem rather naïve to operate an open blog in which drafts of a thesis were held.) Some of the more common processes of PhD supervision that can be assisted by blogging include:

- implementing a research plan through joint negotiation
- reflection on meetings and shared readings
- creating an agenda, topics, action list for supervision meetings
- the encouragement of peer and expert contact (invited readers can be given access to blog posts for comment)

All of these tasks can be carried out through the use of a joint blog between candidate and supervisor(s). For example, audio recordings or text-based notes of supervision meetings can be stored, mulled over and discussed asynchronously, important dates and deadlines recorded or negotiated, reading notes can be shared and discussed. Links can be made between ideas, between sources that converge or diverge in their thinking; "tiny texts" (Kamler & Thomson 2006: 85) or "chunks" (Kamler & Thomson 2006: 90) or larger pieces of writing can be shared and dissected and linked to earlier writing by the candidate or to other pieces of writing outside the blog.

It is not a new idea that regular writing makes writing easier – every PhD advice book in the over-crowded market of such texts suggests to candidates that daily writing will help them to become more proficient at expressing complex ideas as text. Blood postulates that 'The blogger, by virtue of simply writing down whatever is on his mind, will be confronted with his own thoughts and opinions. Blogging every day, he will become a more confident writer' (Blood 2000: n.p.). Conducting this regular writing on a blog, rather than in a private notebook, has the extra benefit that others can read 'whatever is on your mind', and react to it. Even in a private blog space between candidate and supervisor, or in a small closed blogging community, these benefits can be seen and appreciated. The enhanced clarity of the supervisory voice (through use of either comments or separate blog entries) also assists

in foregrounding the pedagogical framework within which the participants are working. Such foregrounding allows re-examination of assumptions and imperfectly shared assessments of progress and decisions made on the basis of less than perfect consensus.

Apart from the personal blogs of candidates (private or public) and blogs specifically created for supervision, there are other possible uses of blogging in the PhD process. Supervisors can keep a personal blog throughout a project or projects, and reflect on what it revealed about their development in skill. A group of supervisors can keep blogs about their supervision experiences, shared only between themselves. Groups of candidates engaged in similar projects can keep shared blogs – a group of candidates at The Open University who have done this, report that their blogs created a community, acted as memory repositories and encouraged collaboration (Ferguson, Clough & Hosein 2007).

### **Extracts from the Blogs of PhD Candidates Which Reveal a Hidden Pedagogy – Learning Through Performance**

One of the pedagogical assumptions about 'becoming a doctor' is that you will be able to present your ideas to an audience. However, even experienced presenters find that 'owning their knowledge' in this way can have unexpected pitfalls (see Chapter 2 of Kamler and Thomson (2006) for an excellent discussion of the pedagogy of performance within PhD process). What follows are extracts from candidates' blogs on the subject of presentations to academic audiences. In each we can see a reflection on a painful but short period of time and how the candidates' discussion and reflection created a turning point in their understanding of what they were doing and why they were doing it.

#### **Debra – A Social Science Candidate Reflecting on a Conference Presentation:**

My presentation went okay. I drew from audience response, wrote their answers on a board, had visual overheads, knew my material without having to read it, and I played a recording of transcripts from my data collection .... So, I thought my presentation was pretty exciting for my audience. But the comments at the end from the audience made me feel the people had no clue what I was talking about because the comments didn't even seem related to my presentation. ... Anyway, one lady was going on about how schools should all have dance and painting and music ... blah blah blah - and I was like, how is that comment relating to what i just presented? Of course, I was only thinking that in my head - but anyway. You know, I have an international conference and a publication now to add to my CV - so in the end, it was all worth the time, money, and struggle to get there.

#### **A Comment on Debra's Reflection from a Fellow Candidate:**

When I watched your presentation, I understood what you were getting at, and was amazed at the audience members that seemed to have missed the point. But I think you made sense, and I'm sure that the LOOOOOOOOOONG PhD thesis will give you the chance to explain the complexities properly for those who can't comprehend the 20 minute version ;)

#### **Dawn's Reflection on Presentation to the Faculty:**

My first PhD presentation was at a formal event where PhD candidates present to the faculty. You have to do this at least twice while you are enrolled. I was the third in a session of three presenters. I was surprised that there was no audience

for the first two, except for each other and the chair. A few people wandered in for my presentation, but they gave me no feedback - no questions, no comments, nothing. I'm still not sure if this was because it was so dreadful that no-one knew what to say, so boring they had all switched off, or so high quality that no-one felt they could approach me. This experience was in the first few months of my enrolment. It was an eye-opener for me, as I had assumed that faculties (especially education faculties) would understand the need to support and nurture PhD candidates.

**A Comment on Dawn's Reflection from a Reader:**

I vividly remember my first conference that I had to travel to get to....all that way and I was rescheduled parallel to the keynote speaker and had 4 people listening, two of whom were from the conference organising committee and had to leave before the end to set up a stall.

**Catherine's Report in her Public Blog on a Faculty Presentation (Catherine is a Successful Novelist as well as a PhD Candidate):**

With a sense of failure and a fair degree of crankiness, I announce my withdrawal from academia. I attended the Colloquium – which went quite well but for some offensive, un-called for and aggressive comments from a Senior Lecturer. These were about my creative work. He had an agenda to push and he pushed beyond my limits.

I walked out with a shredded belief in the process, no happy confidence in what I was doing and growing anger that a single person had been allowed to dominate the process.

I'm in a cleaning frenzy - that doesn't make me happy either, but it does make me feel useful.

**After some Discussion and Questions Catherine Added this Reflection:**

...no heads of departments or deans present, my supervisor was there. No one attempted to ameliorate comments at all. I sent around a robust email of complaint to each member of the colloquium and the Head of dept. I've actually been away for a week, but it took my supervisor a week to get back to me after the email. She quite possibly got my dates confused. I can't actually be bothered to complain further. I'm not that anxious for academic work and there are a few good reasons for me to give it up. But I'm nursing a bruised sense of self. Which I will get over with time

These 'breakthrough' learning moments and the understanding that grew from them were made visible through the process of blogging – the process of writing, sharing and further rewriting – of a painful exposure of the self. Blogging has the potential to break the hegemony of the 'invisible' pedagogies – the unspoken assumptions of learning that underlie the tension between 'liberty and regulation, autonomy and restraint' (Johnson, Lee & Green 2000) – that are fundamental to PhD process.

Blogging can foreground the pedagogical relationship implicit in the PhD process by making the relationship between supervisor and candidate transparent. It can be a tangible record of the 'becoming', of the project of the self that candidates are undertaking in their journey. But it also forms a part of that journey, as a place for recording, reflecting and redeveloping our

understanding of ourselves as we grow through the process of undertaking or of supervising a PhD.

Halavais (2006) bases his discussion of academic blogging around three things: the notebook, the coffee house and the editorial page, and looks at how blogging can fulfill and enhance the traditional roles of each by enabling linkages to be made and thus new ideas seeded. We would like to suggest that blogging can also fulfil these roles (and possibly some others) for both the trainee academic – the PhD candidate – and the supervisor within their pedagogical partnership. Contemporary PhD candidates, like contemporary academics, use the internet continually in both their academic and private lives, but the specialised use that PhD candidates make of blogs has the capacity to increase their awareness of the PhD as a 'project of the self' – a self that they are 'writing into being'.

One of us likes to conceptualise her blog as a cyber desk where thoughts, random jottings, detailed notes and important documents are all stored – some accessible to the world at large (so commenters can drop by and leave messages) and some kept privately. She has used her blog to reflect on and learn from both academic readings and more informal writing, and through her blog she has made contacts with PhD candidates and other researchers in many places around the world. (The link to the article by Ferguson, Clough and Hosein was left on her blog via a comment from one of the authors, who had found her blog in a Google search.) The other uses blogs in a more focussed way, as private ongoing discussion spaces with her research students. This method of re-envisioning the supervisory relationship as a partnership in which all partners are creating knowledge by writing together in a shared space, makes blogging a useful tool in a postgraduate research pedagogy that is based in co-production.

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