

Thinking about a Professional Doctorate?



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In this article I share my thoughts and experiences of starting a professional doctorate with the intention to support occupational therapists thinking about doctoral education. I will provide some insight into the process, the skills required and some insight of my personal experience.

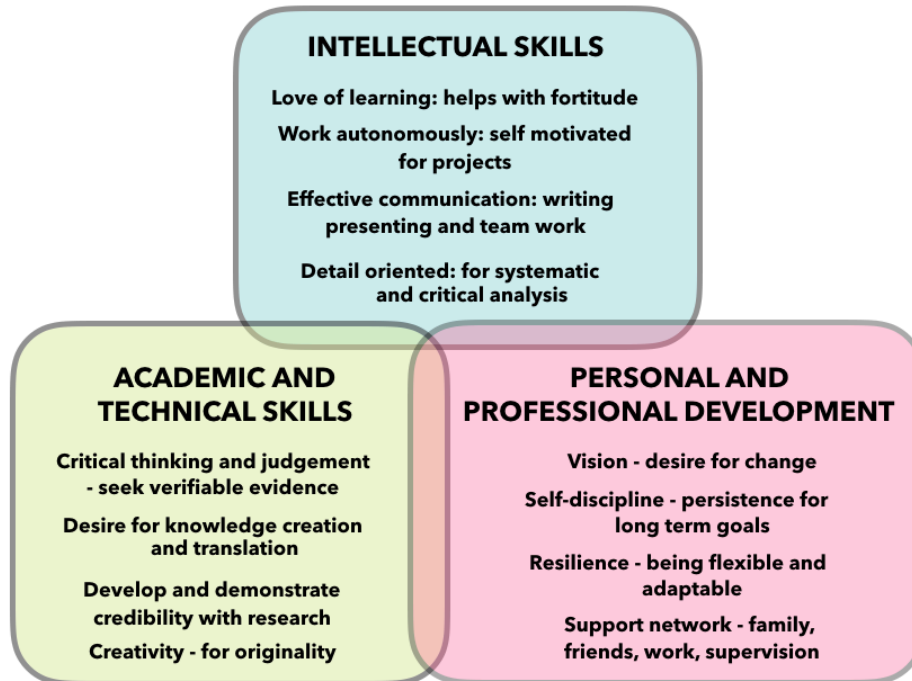
STARTING A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

Doctoral education is considered to be one of the most important steps in educational processes. Doctoral students are seen as sources for innovation, research and development, and doctoral education plays a critical role in the generation of knowledge (Nerad, Trzyna and Heggelund, 2008).

WHAT ARE THE SKILLS FOR DOCTORAL EDUCATION?

It offers an opportunity to advance within your profession to solve new and emerging problems so a combination of intellectual, academic and development skills are required. The research development framework (vitae, 2011) is a good resource to explore the knowledge, behaviours and attributes needed in greater depth.

Skills for doctoral study:



THINKING ABOUT PERSONAL MOTIVATION TO BEGIN THE JOURNEY

The reasons people engage in doctoral studies are broad and include a drive for research, being an expert on a specific topic, enjoyment of academic environment, or to develop transferable skills. Skakni (2018) describes three doctoral paths: the quest for the self; the intellectual quest; and the professional quest.

My decision for doctoral studies was to strengthen my professional identity and for furtherance of the occupational therapy profession. I debated a return to academic study for many years and it was my work situation that was the catalytic action. Despite over twenty years of professional practice, I was left feeling devalued, misplaced and bereft of hope. As an experienced practitioner I was being referred as 'an outlier'. I became a shell of my former self. I have explored this self-positioning and professional perspective as I construct and reconstruct new knowledge positioning and identifications on the doctoral journey.

PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE PROGRAMME

I decided on the professional doctorate programme for the combination of taught lectures and assignments with independent research in professional practice. The programme suggests a focus that is professionally relevant and has emphasis on the development of practical rather than theoretical knowledge (Edwards, 2005). This course structure appealed to me as well as the opportunity to learn part time with a cohort of like-minded professionals.

The application process felt overwhelming for enrolment - deciding on a topic of inquiry, applying for courses, applying for funding, identifying academic supervisors, negotiating study time and juggling life responsibilities. However, I found the UEA application process supportive and encouraging, the tutors engaged in discussions to enable me to explore my project ideas and address the enrolment obstacles. A further benefit was their matching process to link students with academic supervisors unlike some universities which suggests this is the student responsibility.

GETTING STARTED - OCTOBER 2021

The term started with taught material at the University. This was invaluable (especially during the pandemic) to understand the course requirements and competencies and connect with peers on the course. A sense of belonging was established and we were ready to commence our autonomous work for our first assignment in January 2022.

ACADEMIC SUPERVISION

Within the first week I connected with my academic supervisors. I had anxieties and compared the matching process to internet dating hoping for a compatible match for this life journey. I had many questions about function and expectations of supervision which surprised me as a practitioner with over 300 hours of supervision for professional practice.

Supervision sessions are similar the supervision structure I'm familiar with offering support, monitoring and development. I have found the monthly supervision sessions inspiring and encouraging and a platform to reflect on my learning and learning plans. My supervisors have been nurturing and remind me I'm on a long journey when I choose study plans that may not be sustainable in the long term.

PREPARING FOR THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

A useful early activity was completing a SWOT to understand my learning needs for doctoral studies. My SWOT captured my transferable skills, identified learning needs in research methods and application and to explore where am I now and where do I want to be.

Diagram: Thinking about my needs for doctoral studies:



Literature suggests working autonomously is crucial for doctoral studies. I considered my experience of autonomous motivation as a practitioner and learner and my needs to succeed with autonomous motivation as a doctoral student. Ryan and Deci (2017) describe the needs to experience autonomous motivation as competence, relatedness, and autonomy. These needs refer to the need to feel successful and experience mastery, to connect with others, and to experience volition and freedom. Furthermore, focusing on autonomous motivation may avoid some of the reported challenges: PhD students can be very lonely (Wright and Lodwick 1989), PhD attrition rates are high (Jones 2013), or the expected existential crisis with PhD studies (Skakni, 2018).

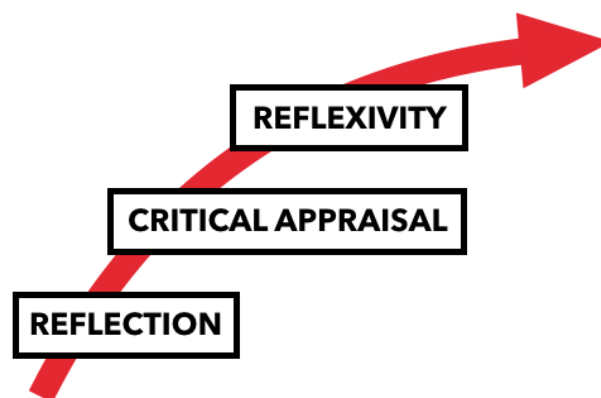
It is widely recognised that autonomy grows with learning / professional development (RCOT, 2021). I explored the conceptualisations of learning as either participation (doing) or acquisition (having) (Edwards, 2005). I created a development plan and a self-reflection tool to track progress with my learning. A more personally acceptable positioning is 'learning is about doing', the professional doctorate experience suggests pedagogical approach of participative learning and reflexivity.



DOCTORAL STUDIES A REFLEXIVE PROJECT

The concepts of reflection, critical appraisal and reflexivity are pivotal for doctoral studies. Literature suggests they can be viewed on a continuum (Finlay and Gough, 2003). This suggests reflection directs to critical thinking and this action enables reflexivity in practice.

A continuum towards reflexivity:



As an occupational therapist I am familiar with reflective practice, and view it as becoming aware of your knowledge base and learning from experience (Schon, 1983). Reflective practice can be further enhanced by reflexive practice in which the implications of learning are explored and how this can impact the broader context (Palaganas, 2017). Reflexivity was a new concept to me and significant for the critical appraisal of my work. For personal reflexivity I will analyse my positionality to bring greater awareness of my values and experiences (Gibbens, 1991). I will also implement epistemological reflexivity to explain and elaborate on the way the research is contextualised theoretically (Engward and Davis, 2015). Studies also suggest doctoral studies can be viewed as reflexive projects.

PERSONAL GROWTH AND DISCOVERY

I have been keeping a reflective journal, it reveals a sense of commitment, in planning and managing my learning needs. Francis (1995) describes value in reflective journals to review learning and to change thinking and doing.

Excerpts of from my reflective journal share transformative learning and the impact on my professional identity:

OCTOBER 2021 'EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE'

Key learning has been exploring my feelings with doctoral studies and the impact of my studies on others. I feel self-indulgent investing in myself. I have also realised the impact of my studies on family and colleagues as they adjust to my absence from activities.

NOVEMBER 2021 'NEW LEARNING'

I have questioned my learning style and economical time use. I have gained satisfaction and a new energised professional identity embarking on doctoral studies. I am thinking further about power and knowledge.

DECEMBER 2021 'ACADEMIC WRITING'

I have been using techniques to develop confidence and fluency in academic writing. Writing has been an important means of developing my understanding, thought and expertise in my studies. Doctoral writing continues to be a learning need on my journey. I intend to build stronger paragraphs and to use university resources to structure and clarify my thinking in my writing.

Evidence supports this professional development: Personal narratives can suggest a process of becoming (Bloom, 1998). Reflection leads to 'transformative learning' and learners gain insights into their own perceptions and responsibilities (Mezirow, 1985). Studies have also explored the positive impact of reflective practice on professional identity (Gibbens, 1991; Wilcock, 2006 and Taylor, 1989). Writing may mediate, promote or even hinder learning (Kafipour, 2018). Foucault (1988) described writing to acquire skills and attitudes.

The research development framework (RDF) has been a particularly valuable resource to understand my strengths and limitations for research and plan future development. The RDF also recognises wider practice skills for example, developing cultural awareness, self-efficacy, leadership, and working relationships (Vitae, 2011).

DOCTORAL LEVEL STUDY AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Doctoral studies offer research and evidence based practice while providing opportunities for continued professional development. Evidence based practice involves managing the volume of research as well as determining what is best practice (Abidi, 2007). Doctoral level practitioners offer an opportunity to meet this culture change. Furthermore, there are recommendations to increase the number of individuals with doctoral studies in health care for effective leadership and service provision (United Kingdom Research Councils, 2001; Burton et al, 2009).

On a personal level, I set out for professional identity and my learning has already provided knowledge and identity transformations. I have constructed and reconstructed new knowledge positioning and identifications. I reflect on my work situation with new insight and believe my practice cannot and should not be separated from me, the person. Professional experience is valuable and quality is not free. I am also striving for furtherance of professional practice and will focus on epistemological reflexivity as I look at conceptual models and knowledge bases for thinking with new epistemological identifications.

So my proposed research questions:

Exploration of identifying and managing sensory processing difficulties within adult mental health services from the occupational therapists perspective

- *To identify variations in the experiences which impact upon the type of responses that occupational therapists provide*
- *To relate the occupational therapist perspectives on sensory processing difficulties to current policy, in order to produce practical suggestions for improving service provision.*

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