

What a Doctorate does to your brain...

Last night, my thesis assessments came back. There are seven levels of recommendations, the seventh being the worst (major fail) and the first level in reality being unattainable (perfection). My thesis managed the second level with both examiners, which means after insertion of a few minor amendments, the doctorate is mine - wow.

So I have written this short essay to record what the last 4.5 years of doing a doctorate has done to me mentally, as a way of recording my emotions for later on in life, when propped up snugly in a nursing home looking back on this major milestone, probably with pride. It is also written as a guide to others contemplating a doctoral degree.

I had a lot to prove after being moved out (not by my choice) of Moorabbin Technical School during year 10, a year which I failed. The thing is, "Proving" (especially to others) is a poor motivator, and one that only lasts short term. The doctorate (long term) was to prove to myself that one can do anything if you take the time, and devote the resources and the dedication to the task at hand. Challenging myself was the real motivator.

Initially, the excitement carries you, so research is easy. This excitement wears off, though, and the thesis becomes just hard work, reading, reading and more reading on what was once your favourite topic (most doctoral students end up hating their topic), and then the endless writing. At the beginning, you are told that for every word you write, only 10% make it into the final thesis. So I have written more than a million words on my topic - think about it.

When the thesis gets too hard, you think of the pride, time and financial commitments you have made so far (a form of entrapment), and there is no way you are not going to finish. Many don't finish their thesis, and give up at these crossroads, especially when family and career commitments kick in. For me, as a highly motivated, goal-seeking individual, going forward was easier than stopping. What was hard was to keep applying the necessary resources to finish. That took discipline.

The key is that you do get to the end if you keep going; small steps taken regularly, all culminating together (even after accounting for the 90% of work that's discarded) is the secret. Then, when close to a finish, the final kick in the guts comes when your supervisor says, 'I think if we swapped chapters 2 & 3 around, the document will flow much better'!!!

Those who have written a document of this size (and academic standing) will understand how much hard work that "seemingly simple" change involves. You see, the whole document is fully referenced and interlinked, so all the references and literary flow must now be altered. After my editor's effort (special mention to Richard further on), it took four complete readings to ensure all references had been altered (and even then we weren't fully sure).

Probably the most agonising process was being a student. Whilst not critical of the world of academia — it has its place and serves a high purpose, in fact I admire academia for what it is (and most of the people in it) — the crossovers of academia and real life business or investment show huge differences in purpose.

Personally, I am a businessman: the senior partner in an accounting practice, a right wing head kicking capitalistic pig (well not quite), and a financial investor in many markets, but mostly the currency market where things are ruthless. This ruthlessness attracts certain individuals, of whom I am one, but this makes me a square peg being forced through a round academic hole.

To highlight these differences, the student cannot be viewed as a customer, as you would never treat a customer the way a university treats its clients. A few examples follow.

The thesis marking procedure - once you have gone through the agony of numerous minor submits over the years, to the point where your document is ready for independent examination at external universities, you submit your pride and joy to the "student research administration". These apparently overworked administrators (but very caring) then take a couple of weeks to organise the paperwork (when asked why this takes so long, the reply was, 'We have other research papers as well'). Then your thesis goes out for a six-week period to be examined.

If you ring for progress, the administration department informs you that they cannot deal with students directly; you must go through your supervisor. Kindly, they offer the advice that the six weeks is never met, and they will write follow up letters and hopefully a marked paper will then return. After the period of assessment, you, the student (the fee paying customer), are not entitled to know the examiners' comments, as it must first go back to the research committee before you even hear the results. Then, after the research committee, the results go to your supervisor. It is not until they make contact with you, or you follow them up, that you actually know how you have gone. Couldn't help but think: how would my clients react if I processed their financial work in the same manner.

Anyway, I digress. I really do admire most in academia. It's the academic processes that get you down. Beyond a commercial reality, really, but then again, academia is not a commercial venture - it's academia, and for non-academics, difficult to understand.

What gets you over the line are the people involved. Whilst a doctorate is mainly a solo journey and an individual achievement, in reality it is a shared burden, and with many I have shared this burden, and my personal thanks has already gone out to them.

To name a few burden sharers, my staff carried the work load when I was off on doctoral dreaminess. Being self-employed and an employer both make this possible. For those without employer support, good luck.

Richard Millership (editing). In my case, Year 9 Technical School English is not good enough for a thesis, and Richard provided the literary polish required. A highly esteemed author and a very fine editor of technical work he is. Without his services, the floundering would have lasted much longer - at least another couple of years. I cannot thank this man enough for his assistance; sometimes he baffles me with his brilliance.

The family time sacrifices you make are important. Being at work on a Sunday, attempting to meet an academic deadline, requires understanding along with all the mental pressures always present.

I will not attempt to put into words the mental stresses one endures, along with the insecurities and anxieties, as only those who have put themselves through this ultimate academic test will understand. Rest assured, it is a real test of determination, and at times this took its toll. Imagine laying yourself mentally bare, and having just about every ounce of brain capacity shredded from you to the point of emptiness, then only having to recover, get up and do it all again. The 'do it all again' element is the difference, though. Getting up off the mat every time requires the pinnacle of determination; I understand this now, being in the researchers' "brotherhood", and have the utmost respect for anyone who has achieved the initials Dr.

Faith in God, and belief in a followed destiny or life's journey, where I felt certain that the doctorate was part of that pathway, drove me on.

The supervisor and the system finally get you over the line. Your supervisor knows "academic speak" and the traps; it takes time but you have to listen. As another academic said to me, it is

their work as well - their name goes on the document right next to yours. Now, looking back on the earlier “crap” submitted to my supervisor, and comparing this to the final document, there is no comparison.

I had plenty of encouragement both from family (in particular, the “subliminal” support from both my sister and brother, who were attempting their own doctorates) and friends, who all help motivate you to the end. Ultimately, though, it comes from within. You make your own choices, to either go with the excuses (the easier route), or take the hard road and enjoy. It really depends on how much the result means to you.

The reward is — yes, you may call me Dr. Enticott — that I will leverage that name, and aim to retire into academia later in life, when the remuneration no longer matters (low paid, good holidays). No matter what career academics believe, working for a regular pay cheque, good superannuation, sick pay, long holidays with holiday pay, and low contact hours, are a luxury when compared to having your arse on the line every day; where you dip into the mortgage to pay staff wages in lean periods, meet margin calls, and generally run the gauntlet of risk that may sink the ship or snatch away the family home, and sometimes in the blink of an eye. When comparing this to the semi-retirement of academia, academia appears to be a very real luxury indeed.

Relief at the end of the process; an enormous burden lifted; “the monkey off the back”; the fact that you don’t need to prove anything to anyone ever again. “I am smart”, and doing a doctorate proved it, and the title “Dr.” is the badge you wear to show the world.

The true reward lies only in the enormous self-satisfaction you feel; the quiet scotch you drink when you look upon that piece of paper. The pleasantries and the title you receive are only the cream on top.

I feel I can move on now; a new beginning; a new phase begun in life’s journey, and I just want to hug everyone in sight, so be wary of this emotion when near me for a while, until this thing wears off — a great big bear hug may just be coming your way.

Life is good

Dr. Steven J. Enticott – 2006

For a copy of thesis or my contact email, go to:

www.enticott.com.au