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HOW TO GET
YOUR PHD

*A Handbook
for the Journey*

OXFORD





Becoming a reflective professional



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Becoming a reflective professional

Completing a PhD is as much about the process of becoming a researcher as about producing a piece of research. I have seen lots of students spend hundreds of hours developing subject-specific knowledge and skills, conducting research projects, and writing them up, without spending too much time thinking about how effective they are as a professional researcher. This isn't surprising—you probably feel that you have too much to do to take time out, and you may even feel under pressure from your supervisor to get your head down and get your research 'done', rather than exploring whether your working practices are optimal.

Sharpen the saw

The folly of focusing solely on getting research done is beautifully illustrated by this story told by Stephen R. Covey in the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. A person is cutting down a tree, using a very blunt saw. They're puffing away, getting hotter and sweatier, and complaining bitterly about how difficult it is to get the tree cut down. An onlooker stops and comments that the saw looks quite blunt and suggests they stop working for a few minutes to sharpen the saw. The person replies, 'I can't stop! I've got to cut down this tree!' This analogy can be used to illustrate how important it is to look after your own well-being and take time to rest and recover, but it can also indicate the value of time spent evaluating your own practice and how you could work more effectively. Are you using the right tools? Could you get work done more quickly or effectively if you changed your approach? I would like to argue that reflecting on your practice, experimenting with new working methods, and evaluating what works for you should be a core part of your PhD process.

What do I mean by reflection?

The term reflection can mean different things to different people, so I'm going to take a moment to explain how I'm using it in this chapter. I'm focused on a very pragmatic type of reflection, in which you think about what you do and why you do it, and consider how you can work and live in a way that is effective and in keeping with your best self. Essentially, for me, reflection is taking time to consider what you do currently and why, how you might change this in the future, and then experimenting with new approaches. It becomes a reflective cycle, where you then reflect on how successful your new approaches have been, and continue to hone your practice over time.

How should I reflect on my practice?

There's no right answer to this question and you'll find that different tools and approaches work for different people and in different circumstances. Instead, I'll give you a variety of options that you may like to experiment with and see what you find effective. Indeed, you may even need to reflect on, and experiment with, your approaches to reflection!

Development needs analysis. A good place to start is a development needs analysis (DNA). Here you think about what you think makes up an effective researcher and start to assess yourself in these different realms. You may be required to do a particular type of DNA as part of your PhD programme, in which case I would just encourage you to engage with the process enthusiastically and thoughtfully, rather than seeing it as a tick box exercise. If you aren't required to follow a particular model, you could spontaneously identify areas by observing effective researchers in your field, or you can use a framework that gives you domains of activity to think about. I highly recommend the Researcher Development Framework constructed by Vitae, which identifies

four domains of activity (knowledge and intellectual abilities, personal effectiveness, research governance and organisation, and engagement influence and impact), which it further divides into sub-areas. By considering your strengths and weaknesses in the different domains, you can then identify areas that you would like to develop further and construct a plan to progress. Try to avoid the temptation to pick multiple areas of development at once; it's usually best to focus just on one or two areas that you think will have the biggest benefit. Your plan might involve formal training to address a learning need, but it could also include just doing some reading around the area or talking to researchers who are really good at that particular aspect. Try to revisit your DNA every few months to see how you're progressing and to set new goals.

Keep a reflective journal. Gavin has already mentioned the idea of keeping a reflective journal and he's right! It's a great approach to becoming more reflective. Some people worry about what they should write in their journal and whether they are reflecting 'properly'. The short answer is that there is no right or wrong way to do this, but there are some tips that might help. Often people reflect on a 'critical incident' where something particular striking happens. This might be a moment of crisis, an argument with a supervisor, a failed experiment or something similar, but it could also be a moment of achievement. The point is to briefly describe what happened, and then quickly move to exploring how you felt about that, what you were thinking, why you did what you did, what you wish you'd done differently, and so on. All the time, keep asking yourself why—why did you feel like that? Why did you expect something different to happen? If you wish you'd done something different, why didn't you do that last time? Why will it be different next time? If it was an achievement, you can consider why it went so well. How can you make sure that it happens again, or even, how can you develop that strength further or use it more often? I find it more useful to write in long-

hand, because there's something about writing slowly that helps me to think, but you could just as easily keep an online reflective journal. Another prompt for reflection might be a particular process that you feel isn't working optimally, rather than a specific incident. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by your email or you're struggling to keep on top of your reading. You could write in your journal about how you currently do this and why it's not working, and start considering what you could do differently in the future. Similarly, you might choose to reflect on a particular relationship that you think could be more positive and ask yourself similar questions. Don't forget to record what you're going to experiment with doing in the future and then how effective you found your new approach.

Productive procrastination. We all have times when our brains aren't in the mood for deep thinking. This is a great moment to spend some time researching good practice that we might want to try out. One day when you're bored, Google 'how to manage my email' or 'how to keep track of my reading' and see the plethora of advice out there. I would suggest setting yourself a time limit, or it's easy to get lost in the multitude of productivity articles out there, and instead try to identify one or two key approaches that you'd like to try. Write about these in your reflective journal and then have a go! Does it work for you? Do you need to tweak it? Perhaps try something different if doesn't work out.

Communities of practice. We often talk about the benefits of research groups for sharing subject-specific learning, but please don't underestimate the benefit of discussing your approaches to managing the research process. I have a good friend at work who I try to meet with every month or so to discuss how things are going and how we're managing our time and our systems, and to swap ideas that we've found. It helps keep us motivated and open to new ideas, and reassures us that everyone needs to learn

this stuff. Even people who seem super-organised have usually worked hard to figure out how to be effective. Don't feel shy about talking to staff about how they manage to be effective, too. Some may just tell you that they work really long hours or that they're really clever (I have experienced both of those answers!), but many will be able to give you useful tips. Others will confess that they are not currently convinced they're that effective themselves, especially in managing the tidal wave of emails, but they can still discuss approaches that they have tried with greater or lesser success.

Transferring skills from other life domains. I would encourage all students to spend time reflecting on whether skills from other parts of your life could transfer to help you in being an effective researcher. We have all had lives before our PhDs, and continue to have lives outside them, and we all have very different experiences and skills. For example, sports people might be very good at sticking to rigid training schedules and could apply these motivational approaches to keeping on top of the research literature. Parents may be experts in using small pockets of time effectively to get jobs done that can otherwise mount up. People with performance backgrounds might be able to transfer their skills to effective presentations or to working effectively in teams. I had a background in coaching and adventure race marshalling and it is amazing how useful it has been in learning how to move large numbers of students through workshop and laboratory activities! Don't underestimate how your whole self contributes to being an effective researcher.

Conclusion

Finally, remember that being a *reflective researcher* is a lifelong process. There isn't an end point at which you can declare yourself an effective researcher and stop being reflective; indeed, if

there were, that would probably be the point at which you ceased being effective. There are always new challenges, new tools, new people, and new approaches, so learn to enjoy taking a reflective approach and seeing the progress that you make through your journey and, most importantly, be kind to yourself. We can always develop—but remember, you’ve come a long way already, just by being where you are now.