

# **A Journey of Deceptions and Leaps of Faith: Personal Reflections about Undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy Research Project**

Dinah R. Dovona-Ope ([oped@usq.edu.au](mailto:oped@usq.edu.au))  
Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland, Australia

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## **Abstract**

In my reflections on undertaking my Doctor of Philosophy research project, I describe it as an emotional, intellectual and spiritual adventure. Marked by deceptions, it has demanded personal commitment, endurance and persistence to manoeuvre past these deceptions. However, with leaps of faith it has been one of the most valuable and enriching experiences, with opportunities for many life changing encounters and personal growth. I also acknowledge a lot of valuable support that has also been sourced from both informal and formal exchanges of ideas, experiences and interactions with a community of researchers involving supervisors, colleagues undertaking the same journey, early career researchers and past students met online.

I draw on motivational constructs consisting of achievement motivation by Ames and Archer (1988), Ames (1992), Elliot and Dweck (1988) and Meece, Blumenfeld and Hayle (1988), self-efficacy by Bandura (1994) and intrinsic motivation by Deci and Ryan (1985) for theoretical support. Motivational writers have also boosted my morale when parts of the journey became a challenge.

## **Introduction**

In this paper I reflect on personal experiences in undertaking a doctoral project. Describing the project as a journey or adventure and the challenges encountered as deceptions, I delve into personal challenges encountered throughout the adventure, the values that have developed my capacity to achieve my own goals and the lessons that I have learned from each encounter.

## **Where Does It All Start?**

A starting point for anyone's journey in life is often a desire or motivation to attain a goal. For example, Meng (2004) shared about his Doctor of Philosophy journey as part of following his childhood dream. This particular journey was also in pursuit of a longstanding goal. Tracy (2003) points out that goals instil in individuals a sense of meaning, purpose and direction in everything that they do. A goal may be set for one's pursuit of academic, sporting, financial or social excellence. According to authorities on achievement motivation theory (Anderman, Noar, Zimmerman, & Donohew, 2004; Cooper & Tom, 1984; Deemer, 2004; Fay, 2001; Patrick, 2004; Wolters, 2004), students are said to be motivated to engage in academic tasks in order to achieve their goals. These goals represent different reasons that students pursue in different achievement situations and are considered to direct students' behaviour, cognition and affect in their engagement in academic tasks. However, as with many life journeys that commence with well-charted goals, those undertaking Doctor of

Philosophy journeys are often confronted with adversities or challenges. In this paper I share my encounters with my own adversities.

In this Doctor of Philosophy journey I, despite having a high sense of self-efficacy emanating from a successful career and the strong support of family, have initially found it to be a major transitional challenge and a highly emotional and intellectual experience. However, some enlightenment has been obtained from the experiences of others such as Crawford (2003), Gatrell (n.d.), Meng (2004) and Vilkinas (2005) who have completed their own Doctor of Philosophy journeys and the work by Bandura (1977, 1986, 1994) on self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as an individual's perception of his or her ability to achieve personal goals. It is an individual's self-judgment of his or her personal abilities to initiate and succeed in undertaking specified tasks at selected levels, to employ superior effort and to persevere in the face of adversity. Individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy exercise control over their thoughts, emotions and behaviour and approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided.

In this paper I reflect on four deceptions that have threatened my personal goals and sense of self-efficacy at various phases of this academic journey. I also share five lessons about tapping into personal life values and utilising a high sense of self-efficacy or faith to heighten and sustain a personal internal drive to conquer any obstacle that has been encountered along the journey.

## **Deception and Lesson 1**

### ***Deception 1: "This is my own journey"***

With a strong sense of self-efficacy, in the initial stages it was easy to be deceived into thinking that "This is my own journey". This was an isolating contemplation and to entertain it would have resulted in many limitations. A Doctor of Philosophy journey involves more than just one person and it offers many life changing opportunities that a student can tap into with others. It is a journey of sharing as there are so many others also undertaking the same journey.

### ***Lesson 1: Be part of a scholarly community***

In this journey, the deception of "This is my own journey" needed immediate change through the realisation that there were other students who were undertaking the same adventure, each at different phases. Although students undertaking the Doctor of Philosophy journey must take ownership of their own journeys, there are issues encountered throughout the journey that students can tackle with the support of one another. In citing a paper by Heinrich (2000), who advocates a "community of scholarly caring", Crawford (2003) points out the richness presented by those informal interactions with others undertaking the same journey. According to Heinrich (2000, as cited in Crawford, 2003, p. 1), a community of scholars promotes a "group support integral to participants developing a scholarly identity...", and an opportunity that is both "educative and empowering". Membership of such groups unlocks opportunities for students to study the experts and to be influenced by what they do and how they have done it. Successful models assist in developing a similar mindset of expecting successful outcomes. This enhances a sense of self-efficacy (About-personal-growth, n.d.).

Realising that many other students undertake the same journey and the importance of membership of a scholarly community of caring peers and establishing working relationships with supervisors, mentors and Doctor of Philosophy colleagues has made the experience

more enriching and rewarding. The saying that “No man is an island” appears to be true. There are many people in this huge academic journey, but each has her or his own journey.

## **Deception and Lesson 2**

### *Deception 2: “You can’t do it!”*

One of the most intimidating deceptions that I encountered almost halfway through the journey was the “You can’t do it!” thought. Interestingly, it knocked unexpectedly at the height of complacency when everything seemed to be on track.

### *Lesson 2: Stay positive and think positive*

There are several ways of dealing with such an intimidating deception as “You can’t do it!”. One is to revisit goals set at the commencement of the journey. This assists in refocusing on what matters most: the journey and reaching the destination. Refocusing on goals, when faced with major challenges, instils in individuals a sense of meaning, purpose and direction in their Doctor of Philosophy journey (Tracy, 2003). Bandura (1977, 1986, 1994) also advocates that a student’s high self-efficacy beliefs have a powerful effect on cognitive processes where behaviour, being purposive, is regulated by personal thoughts exemplifying valued goals. Personal goals are in turn influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy the higher the goal challenges that a student is likely to set and the firmer the commitment to achieving set goals despite such doubts.

The second is to listen to the heart and to draw from inner strength or intrinsic interest, which is an outcome of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from the pleasure that one gets from the mastery of a task itself or from the sense of satisfaction in completing or even working on a task (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities or self-determination despite challenges. The third is to tap into networks such as the community of scholarly caring. Crawford (2003) also notes from research by Morton *et al.* (2001) the importance of networking and meeting other people in similar areas. Their study showed that encouragement from others, particularly when ‘the going gets tough’, is rewarding. Encouragement from others sows positive thinking. The fourth is not to give up.

From an everyday perspective, motivational writers Kahlefeldt (2004) and Schwartz (1987) point out that we become what we think. If we think failure, we fail; if we contemplate success, we succeed; and if we develop fear we will destroy our confidence in ourselves. The power over the pictures that a student undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy journey wants to see, the words that s/he wants to hear and the feelings that s/he wants to experience lie within (About-personal-growth.com, n.d.).

## **Deception 3 and Lessons 3 and 4**

### *Deception 3: “I am safe”*

As the journey progresses and the pilgrim reaches the peak of the adventure, it is often easy to become complacent and to be deceived into thinking that all is well – that “I’m safe”. However, in a Doctor of Philosophy journey it is impossible for a student to predict what adversaries lay ahead. In this particular journey, one adversary came in the form of home burglars who went off with equipment containing important research data. This may be a one in a million event but the torments and the psychological trauma from such experiences can be slow and tough. So what happens next?

### *Lesson 3: Persistence, persistence and more persistence!*

A student undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy journey has two options from which to choose: either become submerged in adversity and give up or persist. I chose persistence. According to Pavlina (2005, p. 1), persistence is “the ability to maintain action regardless of your feelings...even when you feel like quitting”. Persistence enables a student undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy to continue taking action despite not feeling motivated to continue.

Tracy (2003) points out that persistence is a measure of belief in yourself and your ability to soar above difficult situations. Persistence is the test of character and discipline for action. Like a donkey whose farmer wanted to bury it alive in an old water well, so does a student need to persist and take the same actions as the donkey – “shake it off–step up, shake it off–step up, shake it off–step up” – and not be buried alive in the problem. The student needs to leap over every obstacle and move on.

With a combination of self-efficacy and persistence, students undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy journey can maintain a resilient sense of efficacy under taxing circumstances, set themselves challenging goals and use analytical thinking which results in performance accomplishments. Self-beliefs of efficacy also play a vital role in the regulation of one’s motivation. People form beliefs about what they can do, plan action strategies to realise valued futures and persevere in the face of difficulties.

Bandura (1994) pointed out that people’s beliefs in their coping capabilities also affect the amount and the level of stress/depression as well as their motivation during threatening or difficult situations. Those who believe that they can exercise control over obstacles do not entertain the disturbing thought patterns of those who believe that they cannot manage threatening or difficult encounters. Perceived capabilities have a profound influence on the type of activities and environments that a person chooses to traverse. Gatrell (n.d.), for example, has shared her experience in coping with the adversities that she encountered whilst undertaking her own Doctor of Philosophy journey. Thus persistence is the test of character and discipline for action in the face of adversity. In this journey persistence pays off in the end by permitting a most exhilarating final phase of my journey to eventuate.

### *Lesson 4: Draw from inner faith*

I have realised that ability to leap over adversities does not lie only in beliefs in personal capabilities or persistence but also in sourcing profound faith. Psychologists refer to it as intrinsic motivation and I refer to it as faith. For me, undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy journey has been a faith journey. This faith connotes different things to different people, but to me it goes beyond beliefs in personal capabilities. It is spiritual and this journey has been just been that. Thus, to me, when beliefs in personal capabilities and persistence run dry, the only valuable asset left is my inner faith to leap over adversity. So blessed!

## **Deception 4 and Lesson 5**

### *Deception 4: “Aha, I’m there!”*

“Aha, I’m there!” was a deceptive experience that I encountered upon completion and submission of the first draft of my work. Its return with the feedback, filled with dozens of scribbles indicating a need for further work, attempted to dispirit the pilgrim. However, after that first experience it has become an expected and accepted norm for feedback to return with scribbles. How did it happen?

### *Lesson 5: The more scribbles on drafts the better*

In a Doctor of Philosophy journey it is sometimes appropriate for a student to allow for moments of pause and to allow others to check progressively any work done. These provide opportunities for others, especially some in the community of scholarly caring such as supervisors, to read drafts and offer valuable feedback. As Tracy (2003) points out, honest feedback from a critical friend is valuable as it enables clarification of ideas and leads to progress. This is supported by Schloss (2001, p. 8), who says, "If you aren't making mistakes, you aren't making progress". In the offering of opportunities for others to examine progress and areas that need clarification, an open-minded approach to the possibility that flaws may be present is essential.

### **Conclusion**

If nothing else is drawn out of this paper, there is a sense of understanding that a Doctor of Philosophy journey extends beyond the technical aspects to the emotional, intellectual and spiritual experiences. This journey has for me been a journey of deceptions, leaps of profound faith, the discovery of belief in personal capabilities and values, and life changing experience. Membership of a community of researchers within the university where I am a student has promoted formal and informal exchange of ideas and interactions. These have been educative and empowering given the nature of deceptions encountered. Feeding my mind with positive thoughts and assurances has assisted me to stay positive. I have needed much persistence in the face of challenges and there have also been moments of pause for inner faith to bring sparkle to the battered spirit and the appearance of scribbles has indicated a journey in progress.

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