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## **Teaching Research Scholarship: A field school model as a developmental approach to the mid-point of the PhD.**

### **The challenge**

Postgraduate development and the strengthening of postgraduate research capacity is a key issue in South African higher education. Whereas there is a plethora of institutional support initiatives in the initial stages of the PhD (which range from methodological training and proposal writing for students and the training of supervisors) very little exists at the mid-point of the PhD. Perhaps the challenge lies in the way in which the PhD is possibly viewed – as an end in itself. Hence the scaffolding of postgraduate development options often ends in the initial stages after the proposal is approved. Attrition rates are highest at the mid-point of the PhD where many students grapple with their identity and in defining their research contribution in university spaces that are often still sites of exclusion for students at the top of the student hierarchy as well as those at the bottom. In many university spaces very little is channelled during the PhD into thinking about scholarship beyond the PhD as students become members of a research community and a peer supporter, as opposed to a student. In addition, there is little in the way of training for the ethical practice as it occurs in the field, yet the field work encounter is littered with everyday ethical challenges.

The objective of this project was to build greater postgraduate research scholarship and capacity among PhD students across the social sciences and humanities at the mid-point. This stage is the post-proposal and post-literature review phase in which students embark on archival and fieldwork research, navigate the complex fieldwork encounter, interpret their fieldwork, construct their voice and discourse and begin writing and thinking about publishing. For students embarking on a PhD by publication this is a critical phase. It is also the phase in which most attrition occurs both for students pursuing a traditional PhD and those doing a PhD by publication.

Doctoral attrition rates in some disciplines are as high as 50% (McAlpine, 2006). These figures often do not feature in the throughput figures of South African universities. Whereas there is substantial literature on the early stages of the PhD, very little is written about the mid-point phase – the point at which doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences enter the field, begin to construct their knowledge project, begin writing and think about publishing. This is also the phase in which there is substantial

attrition. It is in the humanities and social sciences in which doctoral students took longest to complete and most frequently dropped out (Kyvik, 2010). There is thus the need to reframe our approach to doctoral programmes (Mobray, 2010).

In some countries organised research training models have been introduced (see Bleiklie, Høstaker, and Vabø 2000). Most of these take place in a supported workshop environment on university campuses in the first few months of the PhD. In South African universities the predominant mode of support has been through training to postgraduate supervisors, induction programmes to new graduate students and research methodology modules in classrooms. The PhD is also changing (Park, 2008). Since the introduction of the PhD by publication for humanities and social sciences students in some South African universities there has also emerged an array of private consultancies offering training to doctoral students and young academic staff – at a premium - on writing for publication (see Chris Kapp). Despite this, there is little that conceptualises the mid-point of the PhD.

### **The Larger Significance**

The project has larger ontological and philosophical questions. Who will the new knowledge makers be? What will they carry with them? These are critically important questions in South African higher education that speak directly to questions of social and political justice; transformation and in the development of African scholarship that can compete with the rest of the world and in the global political economy *on its own terms*. To support a global objective for African scholarship requires moving students from being knowledge acquirers to being knowledge makers as change agents in the global knowledge economy. As such the scaffolding of institutional research support and development should not end in the initial stages of the PhD. The attrition rates of PhD students at the mid-point means a substantial loss of potential contributors to the global knowledge project.

### **The Project**

This project attempted to grapple with the complexities of postgraduate training for PhD students at the mid-point through the creation of a field school for scholars at the mid-point of the PhD. The field school consisted of 14 days in the Southern Kalahari in a San (or first nations) community. The students came from a variety of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences and were not my PhD supervisees. The Kalahari as a site for the field school was purposively selected for a number of key reasons. First, the Kalahari is the site where global contradictions are sharpest. These comprise contradictory imagery and representation, the coexistence of tradition and modernity, literacy contrasts with poverty in a site of

restitution but brutality. Second, the San of the Southern Kalahari are one of the most marginalised communities – ideologically, politically, economically and socially. The narrative of first nations communities in Sub-Saharan Africa is one of exclusion, marginalisation – the edge of the periphery. These factors meant that the field site was one of discomfort and was disarming for everyone, no matter their own historical trajectory or narrative. Thus it is an ideological, political and historical hook through which students with multiple identities and social and economic contexts and from multiple disciplines can communicate. It is a ‘safe space’ for all students from different social and economic contexts but also one which challenges comfort zones because it is within the context of a first nation community. In addition, the field site was also one which was fluid. Despite the area being projected as a success story in terms of it being one of the first successful land restitution cases brought by a San community, it really represented the chaotic and fluid nature of the fieldwork encounter.

### **The Field School**

The Field School comprised a 10-day programme with two days of travel either end structured around morning workshops, afternoon field work and evening writing tasks. The first two days travelling comprised a political historical discussion around a reading pack provided to the participants about the historical development of the region and the position of the San within it. Each day on site was structured around a theme. There were 10 workshops in all, around different themes, followed by field work, problem solving and writing tasks. At the end of the field school each participant completed a reflection on the experience as it related to their development as a scholar.

We covered 10 topics. First we examined the theme of - why do we write? This included a discussion of different types of writing such as writing for peer review, writing to construct meaning, writing as a way of thinking. The fieldwork comprised a walkabout and discussion about what each participant could see and not see, hear and feel followed by a writing component. The purpose was to think about the environment in which the research is taking place and the way in which a multidisciplinary approach brings different theoretical lenses, perspectives and narratives to a conversation. A second theme was focused upon – how do we situate ourselves in our own work? Following the same structure as the previous day we considered questions about ‘self’ and ‘other’, within a bigger ideological frame that goes beyond a simple research paradigm. A further theme comprised – differentiating and interpreting voices in your research. This we addressed through a series of challenges posed from the fieldwork that on the surface appeared contradictory. For example, participants were told that there was no school in the community, but later that there was a school 20km away and a bus service was provided. The question to be discussed was how does one write this into the research article or dissertation. What meaning is being

conveyed? Does one understand this contradiction in the way that the community sees you as a researcher and the possibilities that you represent, or could this be understood as a way of conveying that the community feels excluded or marginalised from the school, or something else? One further theme, among others, that we focused upon was that of – ethical issues in a sensitive context. During this workshop we considered what the practice of informed consent and autonomy means in the field through a series of ethical questions that arose organically, and the impact of the choices made by participants on the autonomy of interviewees. The problem solving component of the field school arose organically on site and the problem solving workshops addressed these challenges from a multi-disciplinary perspective as they emerged each day.

### **Key Observations**

The field school was an experimental approach to the many challenges that scholars face at the mid-point of the PhD, specifically to strengthen field work skills, writing and scholarship and also prevent attrition through doing so. In the absence of pedagogies around the mid-point of the PhD and the absence of any guidance in international best practice, the field school has become the foundation from which to build an approach bottom-up. Some key observations exist from this. First, the methods, curricula, active and reflective learning, mentoring and writing components of the field school strengthened postgraduate research capacity. Epistemological access and ontological access was strengthened both through the themes of the field school which were constructed around the students at the mid-point, but also through the context, a site through which students with multiple identities and from multiple disciplines can communicate. Second, the transformative power of the field school is located in the ideological, historical and political context of a fluid and shifting fieldwork encounter. As the field became the driver of what the students were to do and to achieve each day, the bigger purpose of an African research agenda for humanity was the bigger reason for the PhD. The questions asked by the field school participants were indicative of a shift in thinking in embracing their deeper humanity from questions that began with ‘I’ to those that involved ‘they’ and finally to questions around ‘we’. Finally, it is clear that real problem-solving in a socially, economically, developmentally and politically ethically sensitive context builds real agency. As the field school progressed, all participants took an active role in teaching as well as learning in a way which prepared them to be active agents in their own research.

### **The Future**

The approach of the field school and the key pedagogical lessons about building greater scholarship among PhD students at the mid-point that stem from this are to be written into a paper for wider dissemination. The field school will continue in practice, from next year across two universities.