This book records the stories of doctoral study experiences of the twenty-two writers. These research degree experiences are embedded in the lives and careers of the writers and the twenty-two distinctive projects draw from those individual lives and careers. The authors write about meeting the continuing demands of older and younger family members and of their struggles with ill health and work place demands while working through their studies. There is also the joy of coming to see themselves and being seen as research scholars and supporting and celebrating with others as they move through candidature proposals and ethics applications to graduation.

Apart from the stories that bring the writers to their particular projects and that colour their individual journeys, storying methodology is most often selected for the research, all of which is undertaken within the arts, humanities and education. Phenomenology, narrative, ethnography are central to most of the studies and the detailed accounts of each research topic, methods and outcomes locate each of the research projects in rich bodies of knowledge. Valued writers and readers in these fields, Mary Beattie and Elaine Martin have read each reflection and provided in turn a foreword and an afterword which bookend the volume and further enrich these reflections on learning, life and work.
Reflections on Learning, Life and Work
Reflections on Learning, Life and Work

Completing Doctoral Studies in Mid and Later Life and Career

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Like the reflections in this book, these acknowledgements draw together the personal and professional. As educators, our work sends ripples into the future, carried by those we teach and their own students. As well, our work carries the echoes of our families, friends and colleagues. The list below acknowledges the support I have received in editing this book. Equally each writer could draw up a similar list and together we present our thoughts, ideas and feelings for those who follow on to ponder.

My thanks:

To each of the authors for their generous responses to the invitation to participate in the project.

To Dr Chris Perry and Dr Jenni Kamp and my cousin Karen (Kerry) Jennings (who carries the Ryan attention to detail gene) who have contributed so thoughtfully and carefully to the proof reading and preparation of the manuscripts.

To Mary Beattie and Elaine Martin for the guidance and contribution they have provided to this project and through our long careers.

To my sister Anne and to all the friends and colleagues who have followed and supported the development of this book.

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Reflections on Learning, Life and Work is all about making connections and commitment in the context of doctoral research. The authors of these chapters show how they have designed research projects that make significant connections between their personal purposes and passions, professional backgrounds, and scholarly work. Their significance lies in the depth and diversity of the insights and understandings they present, and also in the extent to which they show how doctoral research can be personally and socially meaningful as well as being academically rigorous and significant.

Collectively, the chapters present a wide range of valuable insights into how it is possible to explore human experiences and emotions, societal and structural injustices, difficult ideas and issues – even those that require extreme sensitivity and confidentiality such as oppression, rage, being silenced, terminal illness, dying and death – when these explorations are conducted with sensitivity, compassion, intelligence and imagination.

It is significant to note that these novice researchers bring a wealth of personal and professional knowledge and understandings of real life issues to their doctoral studies, because of their prior experiences in life and careers. Throughout the chapters, they tell of how they made links between existing bodies of knowledge, research methodologies, disparate sources of information, and ways of knowing. The processes involved in approaching the research from various perspectives, and of sifting through bodies of knowledge and research methods, has enabled them to create and re-create their understandings and ways of knowing, and to create a knowledge that is uniquely personal, professional and scholarly. These processes have also helped them to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the intellectual, social, emotional, moral, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of their lives, and in the words of the Irish poet and Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, to make their “hopes and histories rhyme”.

Throughout the chapters we are invited into the lives of individuals who have brought to life their dreams of making significant connections between scholarship that is socially committed and academically excellent. The details present the qualities of the researchers’ and research participants’ lived experiences from their own unique perspectives. They tell of research projects which explore issues of social inequity and injustice, and which give voice to oppressed, marginalised and silenced members of society, by simultaneously creating the kind of knowledge that will help people and communities to realise their own potential, as well as contribute to the relevant bodies of knowledge in which the research is grounded.

Across the chapters, these researchers present a wide range of creative and innovative approaches to research methodology: ethnography, action research,
phenomenology, autoethnography, case study, narrative inquiry, and arts-based approaches that include visual art and photography. They do not shy away from discussions of the difficulties of designing research methods that deal with sensitive relationships with research participants and complex research questions. Nor do they avoid the challenges of choosing forms and language to represent participants’ perspectives and meanings, which also satisfy the researcher’s need for a thesis that will make a contribution to the academic literature, to practice and policy, and to the creation of a better world. Also valuable are those insights provided into the often exquisitely sensitive and complex ways in which researchers with special skills, sensibilities, and expertise have worked to create environments of intimacy and empathy with research participants in order to explore difficult ideas and to co-create new meanings. Collectively, these chapters present a rich array of reflections on learning, life, work and research at the same time as they also present the diversity of the research methods that are currently available, acceptable, and prized in the academy.

Many of the authors describe the difficulties of doing this kind of socially and personally committed research in mid or later life, when the levels of commitment and responsibility to the research can be in conflict with professional and family responsibilities and obligations. They tell of the unavoidable disruptions and delays to the research processes because of personal frailties and illness, the ill health of older family members, and financial concerns. Time and time again, they emphasise the importance of supportive relationships with faculty supervisors and committee members, and of establishing and maintaining strong relationships with colleagues. Within these trusted relationships they have been able to surmount the challenges they have faced rather than being overwhelmed and defeated by them, and have successfully negotiated the uncharted research journey with all its ambiguities and uncertainties. Their stories also emphasise the importance of developing personal qualities of perseverance and resilience, of nurturing determination and persistence, and of maintaining passion for the research throughout the various stages of the project. As they tell of their disappointments and difficulties as well as their triumphs and successes, they engage a reader’s heart and head. Their stories can influence our thoughts and actions, and they can be a force for change in universities, schools, communities and society.

The importance of qualitative, artistically and humanistically rooted forms of inquiry are increasingly being recognised for the distinctive contribution they can make towards understanding the realities of individuals’ lives as they know them. A narrative orientation to teaching and research is now widespread throughout the departments of the university – history, philosophy, theology, literature, clinical practice of nursing and medicine – where it is acknowledged that stories of learning, teaching and of professional practice provide insights into the learning experiences of others, and into the unique meanings they ascribe to their experiences, from their own unique perspectives.

The origins of my own doctoral studies were located in these understandings, learned from my experiences in life and in classrooms, and also from a lifelong love of stories, literature, poetry and music that I pursued through my professional
studies and a Masters degree in English Literature. I recognized that I had learned most of what I knew from stories; I also knew that stories can tell about lives in ways that cannot be told otherwise. My doctoral research highlighted the importance of narrative inquiry and showed how through interacting narratives, where lives meet lives, individuals can become increasingly responsive to those with whom they are in-relation, can re-form themselves, influence those with whom they are in-relation, and can direct changes in their own lives and in the cultures and communities to which they belong. For the past two decades, I have had the privilege of continuing this work and of helping the students whose research I have supervised, to design studies that will benefit the lives of others, and also enable them to make connections between the personal, professional and scholarly aspects of their own lives.

The richness of the insights and understandings presented throughout the chapters, allow the reader to experience the highs and lows these individuals have experienced, and to feel and understand the vicissitudes and the victories of creating knowledge and understandings that can make a difference to what we know, and can also make a difference in professional practice and in peoples’ lives. These poignant and powerful pieces speak volumes about the significance of artistically and humanistically rooted forms of research to explore and illuminate our most difficult and complex problems, to be beneficial for the researcher and research participants, and to be transformative for both.

Graduate supervisors and researchers across the disciplines will find a wealth of inspiration for the creation of research projects that make connections between the researcher’s purposes and passions, and research participants’ ideas, perspectives, and ways of knowing. My hope is that the chapters will inspire the kinds of research that makes connections between practice and theory, between bodies of knowledge and different ways of knowing, between the academy and the various groups within our communities, and also between individuals’ own histories and hopes. Our privileged positions as researchers, allow us to engage in the kind of research that can lead to a world where all people enjoy equality, justice, peace and the benefits of making their hopes and histories rhyme. When we nurture and conduct this kind of research, it allows us in Seamus Heaney’s words, “to be here for good in both senses of the word”.

We all need stories to understand the complexities, mysteries and wonders of learning, living, working, and researching. Maureen Ryan and the authors of these chapters have given us some great stories that will linger in our minds long after the last page has been turned.

Mary Beattie

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INTRODUCTION

Each of these chapters comes from the heart. They tell the stories of the topics that the writers chose for their higher degree studies but they tell much more. While some writers refer to their use of their studies as a stepping stone to new and expansive careers, these reasons tend to be secondary. The strong motivating forces lie more commonly with early life and work experiences and identification of injustices the writers have observed and a desire for documentation, analysis and action around these injustices.

My Ph.D. studies, based as they were around children’s perceptions of changes in families, had their genesis in my experience as a six year old sitting on a window sill, waiting with my pregnant mother for my father to come home from work. He visited once sixteen years later after our moves from one rented house to another, a string of boarders and life on what was then called “deserted wives’ pension”. A pattern was set which continues to make me recoil every time I hear references to “broken families” or similar stigmatising labels. My interest has continued with studies of structural inequities and thoughtless descriptors and with the affective responses to these.

Integral to my interest in families has been my interest in houses. I’ve attended many art exhibitions which take houses and homes as focal points and collected art work representing these. Now, in addition to my continued supervision of research students, I run Gallery Sunshine Everywhere (www.gallerysunshine.com) which has a house as its logo. In this work, I feel I have the best of both worlds: the opportunity to bring to life the vision of a developing university through the socially engaged scholarly work of higher degree students, along with practical involvement in the art exhibitions of pre-primary, primary and secondary school students in a local café in an area where there are no galleries. Interestingly, just these last few months, with my sister I have been researching my grandmother’s family. We have visited the various houses where she and her family lived, found that she and her sister were photographers in the early part of the last century, and even more interestingly that her parents, our great grandparents, established a school in country Victoria in 1871. Families, houses, art and even schools – all there in my background!

As part of my Ph.D. study I collected over 1,000 descriptions of families by young children. To my regret this was in the days when qualitative research had not reached the acceptability it holds today in the academy and these rich beautiful descriptions were coded and the codes subjected to statistical analysis. Today I relish the opportunities for higher degree researchers to draw on artful practices
and to have their qualitatively acquired and interpreted data appreciated for its research excellence.

Before I introduce you to the reflections in this book, it is necessary to establish some context. All but one of the twenty-two writers have studied or worked in the School of Education at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, and many have done both. Only three of the writers completed their doctoral studies at universities other than Victoria University. Others undertook undergraduate or postgraduate studies at The University of Melbourne or other Australian universities. I make particular reference here to The University of Melbourne because several of the writers compare it to Victoria University. The University of Melbourne is the oldest university in the state of Victoria and second oldest in the country, and Victoria University is among the youngest. While one gathers the prestige and elitism that comes with age, experience and considerable achievement, the other, despite making extensive progress since 1990, and being loved by those who know it well, is less well understood by those who do not.

Victoria University has as its mission: Excellence, Equity and Access, and as many writers note, it is located in the western metropolitan area of Melbourne, capital city of the state of Victoria. The western region of Melbourne is among the most ethnically diverse areas in Australia. It also scores high on measures of unemployment and disability and low on measures of socio economic status and school completion. Victoria University has a strong commitment in its teaching, research and engagement strategies to the needs, interests and expertise within the region.

The School of Education at Victoria University was established in 1985 with seventy students in a single undergraduate teacher education course. Today there are close to 3,000 students, over 80 staff and courses from undergraduate through to doctoral programs.

While all but one of the writers studied in the School of Education, their focus is far broader than traditional teacher education curriculum. They have worked in the belief that education is much more than what happens in schools – for both students and teachers. In their research, education is much more than the often sad, narrow definition of schooling, so often today reduced to literacy and numeracy, which is taken as the indicator of success. Instead, the research described in this volume acknowledges the major tenets of education: learning, teaching, motivation and importantly, its social purposes in interactive individual and community development. The educators who write in this book demonstrate their motivation to learn and teach, to share and to change – in all to make the world a better place for themselves and for others.

Commonly in Australia, students complete a Masters degree following an undergraduate degree, before proceeding to doctoral studies. One of my main purposes in putting together this book was to enable the stories to be told of Arts and Humanities higher degree students. Unlike those in Science, where students frequently move directly from an Honours undergraduate qualification to doctoral studies, working primarily on projects already part of their supervisors’ research
INTRODUCTION

repertoire, those in Arts and Humanities tend to be older and to build their research projects around life and career experiences.

As can be seen throughout the reflections, the topics draw from life and career experiences and the research process is also usually undertaken in conjunction with those experiences. We therefore see within the stories, the demands of work places and of families on students’ study time. The stories include references to personal illness, ill health of family members, pregnancy and breaks to travel overseas and simply to take time out. As well, there is the need for students to sustain themselves financially while they study. While scholarships are available, there is competition to acquire these and not all students are successful.

One of the most powerful incentives for study mentioned especially by Lynda Achren, Denise Clarke, Megan Evans and Margi Gibb, is the opportunity to find a space to think and to reflect on life and career.

Many of the writers locate their work clearly within the western region. Sue Buchan, Berise Heasly, Rose Mulraney, Sue Smith, Sarah Tartakover and Denise Clarke worked with schools in the area and Mark Brophy created a study circle with a group of local unemployed people.

Less explicitly, there is strong commitment to social justice within each of the reflections. This is loud and clear in the work of Marg Malloch, Tracey Ollis, Tanya Paterson and Jo Williams, and addressed more gently in the work of Neil Hooley, Julie Gross McAdam, Kerry Ryan and Sue Smith.

The writers are at different stages in their research degree process and this means the reflections have distinctly different flavours. Most have now completed the doctoral process – some time ago: Neil Hooley, Loy Lichtman, Rose Mulraney, Mark Brophy, Megan Evans, Flossie Peitsch, Petre Santry, Lynda Achren, Marg Malloch and Kerry Ryan; more recently: Sue Smith, Tracey Ollis, Denise Clarke and Jenni Kamp.

Some others are very near completion: Sue Buchan, Julie Gross McAdam and Tanya Paterson, while others: Ben Anwyl, Berise Heasly, Sarah Tartakover and Jo Williams are in the middle of pulling it all together, and Margi Gibb is just starting.

Most of the stories document the usual stages students pass through in the process and many make particular reference to the oral candidature proposal and ethics application phases.

Tanya Paterson and Mark Brophy write about their struggles with their candidature proposal and ethics committees. Just starting her studies, Margi Gibb is frightened by the committees' assertion that her project is brave and is discomforted by the frequent need to explain her work to others. Jo Williams writes of a crisis of faith in her project. Part way through, amid structural changes in the workplace that was to be the site of the research, she confronts her awareness that the study is no longer as she envisaged it. With thoughtful reconceptualisation, renewed enthusiasm and an amended timeline, all is salvaged. Struggling near the end of writing her thesis, Berise Heasly has found the development of an autobiographical chart a great assistance.
In further locating the stories it is necessary to refer to the Den, the Cave (even the Cell and the Dungeon). This is the space allocated to postgraduate students in the School of Education at Victoria University. A windowless space caught between two large lecture theatres, it is on the ground floor of the Education building, and interestingly referred to by many students as being in the basement. The most basic of equipment is provided – chairs, tables and computers in small shared spaces. Despite all this, as noted by many writers, strong relationships and supportive networks have developed in this space. Local and international students are brought together in this area and sharing extends beyond thesis writing advice to details about the range of countries from which the international students have travelled to study at Victoria University. As the numbers of thesis completions grow, we look forward to the stories of those students in a later text as they settle back into workplaces in those countries or within Australia.

The self-sustaining support which grows in the Den supplements the formal offerings by the Office for Postgraduate Students which enable students to develop expertise in many areas including theoretical perspectives, research design, academic writing and referencing. These programs run parallel to the regular meetings between students and supervisors. Usually each student is allocated a principal and an associate supervisor and the completed thesis is examined by three international leaders in the relevant field who are unknown to the student. In the case of arts-based doctorates students complete a shorter thesis (exegesis) in addition to an exhibition of their work, and four examiners are employed to assess both components.

I have toyed with the idea of presenting the reflections in this book alphabetically, according to the writers’ family names. Instead I have decided to group them according to four key points highlighted within them. This is not an easy task because as you will note in the richness of the writers’ experiences most traverse each of these key points in the journeys they so eloquently describe.

Most of all, these reflections represent a slice in time, mainly the final decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, in doctoral studies in Melbourne, Australia. This is particularly apparent in the references to technology. Part of the title of Jenni Kamp’s thesis is ‘Threat and Thrill’, referring in part to her growing familiarity with the new technologies, as much as with her research topic. A similar title could probably be applied to most of the theses described in this book.

Four of the students, Megan Evans, Flossie Peitsch, Jenni Kamp and Loy Lichtman, have undertaken arts-based doctorates, but I have chosen to place them across other themes. That way, their wonderful images are scattered throughout the book. As well, as you move through the four categories, you will find the distinctive styles chosen by the writers. Megan Evans has written her contribution mainly from the perspective of *The Project*; Loy Lichtman’s reads as a mystery story; Rose Mulraney concludes with advice to the student contemplating doctoral study; and Tanya Paterson compares the Ph.D. journey to a somewhat blighted love affair.
The four groupings selected are:

Seeking Time Out to Reflect in Doctoral Study: Lynda Achren, Ben Anwyl, Denise Clarke, Megan Evans.


The influence of work experience on research topic selection: Berise Heasly, Tanya Paterson, Kerry Ryan, Sarah Tartakover, Jo Williams.

Ways forward after the Doctorate: Mark Brophy, Marg Malloch, Rose Mulraney, Tracey Ollis, Flossie Peitsch, Petre Santry.

It has been my pleasure to travel these journeys and as you now come on board, let me invite you to enjoy them and reflect on or plan your own journey.
PART I

SEEKING TIME OUT TO REFLECT IN DOCTORAL STUDY
REFLECTION 1: RESEARCHING CULTURE, REALISING SELF

THE IDEA GERMINATES

I was working in Laos when I decided to do a Ph.D. The idea crept up on me and its origins were obscure for a while, even to me. It didn’t seem to have a rational basis and it certainly didn’t have an economic one. It wasn’t a career move – I didn’t want to be an academic and it wouldn’t get me a promotion in my work on international development assistance projects. But if truth be told, towards the end of a three year project with a gruelling pace, I wanted time out. I wanted time to reflect on international development assistance in general and my role in it in particular.

As an advisor on various education projects, I had been working in Laos on and off for more than a decade and had seen big changes in this Marxist-inspired state with Buddhism as its official religion. I was first there in 1990 after I had been working in Melbourne as the coordinator of a refugee youth program. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, my students were Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao, and I wanted to know more about where they were from. In those days, tourist visas weren’t a possibility as Vietnam and Laos were only just beginning to cautiously open up to the ‘West’ and Cambodia was recovering from its ‘killing fields’. So I went as a volunteer and joined the sprinkling of ‘Westerners’ working in Laos amongst the hundreds of advisors from the Soviet Union.

For me this experience offered, for the first time, the opportunity to observe a culture in situ, learn a language in the place where it was spoken, and grapple with becoming literate in another script. Through this experience, I came to understand a different way of relating to people. And, perhaps most importantly, I came to understand that what I saw as priorities were not always priorities for my Lao colleagues. I carried these understandings with me into my subsequent work on development projects, and probably, more than anything else, it was these understandings that brought me ultimately to view ‘development’ as a culturally constructed discourse underpinned by values not necessarily shared by the so-called ‘underdeveloped’.

But I’m jumping ahead – it wasn’t until after much reading and thinking for the Ph.D. that I was able to articulate development as a culturally constructed discourse. In the meantime, I was experiencing a growing disquiet as I worked as a
curriculum and teacher training advisor on a three-year Australian government-funded project. I was one of two foreign (i.e. non-Lao) advisors working with a team of Lao counterparts to develop and implement a national program for government officials who needed English language skills to interact effectively with donors and investors and to undertake their ASEAN-related roles. While in many ways this was a dream job for me, it also confirmed some of my concerns about aid practices: education projects designed by fly-in fly-out consultants with no in-country experience; projects with short time-frames and an emphasis on achievement of the outcomes, on ticking the accountability boxes; projects with little room for flexibility or responding to changing political circumstances.

The other nagging doubt was that we were trying to introduce a competency-based curriculum. From my previous studies, I was well aware of the decades of concern about transferring models of education socially constructed in ‘Western’ advanced technological countries to differing socio-cultural contexts. For some, the concern was that the values underpinning the model would erode the existing values of the culture into which the transfer was being attempted. Others considered that conflicting values were the cause of the high failure rate of education transfers. Such concerns prompted Watson (1994:95) to express the hope that the harsh economic realities of the 1990s would force aid donors to evaluate the relevance of proposed transfers, if high costs and wastage were to be curtailed.

Yet here we were again, this time attempting to transfer a competency-based model of education. This is a model concerned with individual progress that can be accounted for in a transparent and, supposedly, impersonal way; a model underpinned by Western liberal democratic notions of ‘equality’, ‘fairness’, ‘individualism’ and ‘transparency’. In Laos, educational practices, reflecting a different set of values, foster a sense of community while making sure no one loses face (cf. Emblem, 1996; Ng Shui Meng, 1991). Nevertheless, the feedback during the project, from Lao teachers and government officials alike, was that the course and the approach had much to recommend it. But in a culture in which a government official has arrived at his or her position within the hierarchy by dint of karma and is, therefore, automatically deserving of respect, the inherent ‘equality’ of the model’s assessment practices was always going to be problematic.

The erosion of local values by the model was never my concern. Such concerns had abated with growing evidence of teachers’ ability to ‘both filter the method to make it appropriate to the local cultural norms, and to redefine the cultural norms embedded in the method itself’ (Ellis, 1996:213). Indeed, my own Masters research conducted in Laos about the transfer of Communicative Language Teaching approaches had found that while classroom behaviours had changed considerably over a period of time, the teachers had employed a number of strategies to adapt the approach to enable both themselves and their students to work within culturally acceptable parameters (Achren 1996).

No, my concern was more about the sustainability of the work we had been doing. The project team had worked hard to make the new curriculum as appropriate to the context as possible but there was no getting away from the inherent disjunction of a competency-based curriculum in Laos. Geddes
RESEARCHING CULTURE, RESEARCHING SELF

(1994:128) had cautioned against planning development assistance programs that required people who valued hierarchical but reciprocal and interdependent relationships to ‘relate to each other as equal, independent individuals’. To do so, he warned, ‘ensures that the programs will, in the long run, have to be drastically modified by participants or abandoned’. Certainly, I knew of many donor-driven initiatives in Laos that had come to a halt as soon as the project ended. While the failures were ostensibly because there were no longer finances to run the programs, there were also indications that at times, the Lao, in their non-confrontational manner, had gone along with an inappropriate intervention (there’s always something to be gained, even if it’s only a project vehicle) and then simply abandoned it once the project funding had finished and the advisors had packed up and gone home.

I was curious. What would become of our work? Was it appropriate enough for the program to be sustained once we had gone? If it were sustained, would it change, and how would it change? As Giddens (1984:14) has pointed out, ‘knowledgeable agents’ have the ability to ‘make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events’. Who could be more culturally and politically knowledgeable than government officials? What would they do? How would they/could they subvert and convert the ideology inherent in the educational model so that it reflected cultural aspirations and constraints?

These issues, centred around agency and cultural appropriateness, led to the germination of the idea that I might take time out of project work to do a Ph.D. So when I enrolled in the School of Education at Victoria University, my immediate research concerns lay with the appropriateness of the competency-based curriculum model for the Lao socio-political context, and with the sustainability of the work on which I had been engaged for almost three years. I knew I wanted to undertake a qualitative enquiry into the responses of Lao stakeholders to the project. I wanted to ascertain their perceptions of the sustainability of the program, and to find out if their perceptions changed over time and, if so, why.

FINDING THE ROOTS

While this initial focus remained central to my research, the more I read the more I became aware that the findings could have broader implications. It took me a while to find the critical development theorists who were key to the honing of my thoughts. I waded through many ‘mainstream’ development texts which viewed development entirely as an economic proposition that required the uptake of orthodox liberal perspectives. Their non-reflexive belief in the efficacy of their own model and their conviction that it must be universally adopted as a ‘path’ to modernity was disturbing.

My readings led me to a book of conference proceedings whose title, ‘Culture Matters’, I thought, would cast a different light. Instead, I was incensed to find that the prominent development economists at that conference were advocating that development assistance projects should include ‘cultural adjustment programs’, on the grounds that it is the country’s own culture which is to blame for its state of
‘underdevelopment’ (c.f. Harrison & Huntington, 2000). Among the few dissenting voices included in this book was that of Schweder (2000: 158−172), an anthropologist, who vehemently argued against the ethnocentrism of the notion that the provision of the desired ‘modern’ goods and services can only be achieved through the inculcation of the same set of beliefs and values as espoused by the West. Joining Schweder in contesting that to ‘develop’ necessarily implies the adoption of Western cultural values and practices, Tu Wei-ming (2000: 256−266) suggested the possibility of ‘multiple modernities’. Here was a possibility I wanted to explore.

The exploration led me to those who contended that the root cause of the failures of numerous development projects is the inappropriateness of the Eurocentric development discourse for the ‘needs and requirements as well as the visions and aspirations of non-western cultures’ (Sardar, 1997:36). It led me to those who articulated that Westerners have constructed what it means to be either ‘developed’ or ‘underdeveloped’, and equate ‘development’ with ‘Westernisation’ at both the institutional and individual level (e.g. Ang 1998; Escobar, 1995; Munck, 1999; Tucker, 1997, 1999).

I recognised that this was the root of the disquiet that had been growing while I was working on international development projects; that from within the ethnocentrism of this construction, international donors and many development practitioners have little understanding of, or regard for, the cultural values and priorities of the recipients of the ‘assistance’. Thus, while my study originated with my concerns about the appropriateness of implementing a competency-based curriculum in a social context far different to that in which it was developed, over time and through my reading I came to see the Lao responses and the project design as a lens for examining ‘development’ itself.

INTO THE FIELD

Lao responses remained at the heart of my research – their voices, although locally dominant in their multi-ethnic society, are rarely heard from their location on the margins of the global structure of power. I hoped that, in however small a manner, my research might contribute to redressing this imbalance.

But doing research in Laos is not an easy proposition. I knew that if I were to research anything I would need permission – although I didn’t at the time realise from how high up in the hierarchy that permission would have to come. I went to see a senior official in the Ministry of Education whom I knew well and who was known to be keen to foster a culture of research within the Ministry. We could call her my ‘patron’ in this instance. She advised me to write to the Vice Minister of Education outlining what I hoped to research, where I wanted to go and to whom I wanted to talk. Then I should submit it via her office and she would add a letter of recommendation. Even with her support, getting the necessary permission would take a few months, so in that time I galvanised my thoughts about what shape the research would take. I read and I planned my fieldwork.
I identified five Lao stakeholder groups of knowledgeable local agents whose responses to the program could influence its longer-term institutionalisation. These included Ministry of Education officials who had the responsibility of implementing a ministerial decree that all government officials know a foreign language – with priority for English; administrative officials with the responsibility of managing, funding and staffing the program in each location; the teachers who taught the courses in the ministries and in the provinces; the Lao counterparts with whom I worked on the project; and the Government officials who were students of the courses in Vientiane and the provinces.

I decided on a two-phase ethnographic study. The first stage of field research would give me a broad overview of the appropriateness of the program by investigating the commitment of individuals and stakeholder groups as funding drew to a close. Then I planned to return eighteen months later to observe how the predictions of individuals and the plans of stakeholder groups had come to fruition and, moreover, if and how knowledgeable local agents had modified the model in order to render it appropriate. The exact nature of the investigations in the second field work stage would depend on the findings of the first stage. Thus, I adopted an ‘emergent enquiry design’ (Greene, 2000:987) with a ‘funnel structure in which the research [would be] progressively focused over its course’ (Walsh, 1998:230).

I planned to visit each of the locations where the curriculum we had developed was being implemented so I could observe the program and talk to individuals within the stakeholder groups. This would involve travelling to five provinces and visiting the seven Ministries in Vientiane conducting the courses. My intention in so doing was to ‘understand the meaningfulness of human actions and interactions – as experienced and constructed by the actors – in a given context’ (Greene, 2000:986).

Meanwhile my ‘patron’ in the Ministry was working on getting the permission I needed to get out into the field. One evening she invited me to accompany her to a function. In Lao fashion, the details of the function were not explained to me. And I neglected to ask. I should have known better. I found myself seated, next to her, in the position of honour at the centre of the long banquet table. Opposite us, and so also in a position of honour, was a man whose face looked familiar, but I couldn’t place it. He too was looking thoughtful. After a short while, he said to me in slow but perfect English, “I didn’t recognise you at first because you are more beautiful than before”. Western feminist responses flickered in my mind but I acknowledged his communicative intent with a smile, not knowing how to reply to this man I still didn’t recognise. I heard his remark being translated up and down the table accompanied by murmurs of “Gaeng, nohk!” – “Isn’t he clever!”

I knew then that this was a very important man. Suddenly I remembered. This was Mr X who had been my student briefly many years ago when I was first in Laos. This was Mr X who was now Vice Minister for Education. This was the man who could give me the permission I needed to conduct my research. My invitation to the function was now clear. My patron in the Ministry (my primary gatekeeper) was making sure the Vice Minister (a prime gatekeeper) remembered me. To my
relief, he was now busying himself with his dinner, not inviting any more conversation. He had acknowledged me favourably. It was enough.

When his written permission finally arrived, I was precipitated into the field by an invitation from my patron in the Ministry to accompany her on a trip to one of the northern provinces. In effect, she was conferring legitimacy on my undertaking. She was continuing to open doors. She also supported me by agreeing to a former counterpart accompanying me on all my provincial field trips. My Lao colleague smoothed my way and acted as interpreter when interviewing administrators, a situation in which, regrettably, my formal Lao is not adequate. In addition, she played a valuable role in giving me feedback as we later mulled over the day’s events.

My interviews and discussions with teachers (all of whom I already knew) and counterparts (with whom I had spent three years working closely and also socialising) were fairly relaxed events. However, interviews with administrators in each of the five provinces were a formal affair. Some foreign advisors were dubious that I would get anything other than the ‘party-line’, or considered that I would be told what I wanted to hear – particularly as I was a former advisor on the project. It was a situation that required careful questioning, acute observation and triangulating information across multiple sources and viewpoints. Without the official permission from the Minister, of which interviewees were aware, the information I was able to access would have been extremely limited. However, never did I feel that people felt compelled to talk to me, and only rarely did I sense that people were keeping information from me. In fact, some people were remarkably candid.

THORNY ISSUES: WHOSE VOICE? /WHOSE TRUTH?

Planning the research design and carrying it out were relatively easy, or as easy as any cross-cultural research can be in a developing country with a one party state; where permission is needed for everything; personal relationships are paramount; time is flexible; and transport erratic. More difficult was finding a way to write so that the Lao voices were not drowned out by my voice. I was aware, however, that this would inevitably be my interpretation of the Lao voices, my reconstruction of their construction of reality; that the themes identified within the stakeholder narratives would ‘emerge from the researcher’s interaction within the field and questions about the data’ (Charmaz, 2000:522). I was acutely aware of the power relationships between the ‘western’ researcher and those ‘being researched’. As Giroux (1992:26), drawing on Foucault, noted, ‘The question here is the issue of who speaks, under what conditions, for whom, and how knowledge is constructed and translated within and between different communities located within asymmetrical relations of power’.

This of course brings in questions of validity as ‘the ethnographer’s authority remains under assault’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:17). This is perhaps particularly so if we include a third party – the reader – in the construction of reality. Following Goodman (1998:57), I took as my guide ‘the rather old fashioned view that at the
heart of good research lies good description...[to] provide readers with an opportunity to envision the lives of informants and then apply what they vicariously observe to their own unique situations’. As Wolf (1992:5) observed, ethnographers ‘can only convey their own understandings of their observations... The better the observer, the more likely she is to catch her informants’ understanding of the meaning of their experiences; the better the writer, the more likely she is to be able to convey that meaning to an interested reader’. In other words, I resolved the dilemma in terms of the postmodern position that, as researcher/writer, my role was not to claim objective truth for my representations of Lao stakeholder views, but rather, to mediate between those views as I understood them and the imagination of my readers.

I employed a number of narrative devices to enhance the descriptive qualities of the writing, including an annotated set of images illustrating aspects of Lao life, culture and the educational program at the core of the thesis. There are, for example, photos I took of teachers college lecturers and family members supplementing their official income of US$20 a month by preparing and selling food to government official students who arrived in the evening for their classes. Another set of photos depicts an animist-infused ceremony for calling the spirits which is widely held in homes and workplaces, including government offices. While it is usually held for an individual on some auspicious or unsettling occasion in his/her life, it serves to reaffirm the connectedness of the community and the individual to that community. I also included scanned images such as those of the former and the current Lao national emblems which are accompanied by an explanation that, while both emblems depict modern technology, the hammer and sickle of the former emblem was replaced in the mid-1990s by the most revered Buddhist monument in the region, the That Luang stupa. The nation emblem is thus highly symbolic of a determination to forge a distinctly Lao modern socialist state.

Another descriptive device I used was to begin each chapter with a ‘snapshot’ loosely related to the theme of the chapter. A chapter tracing persistent but transforming threads of the ethnic Lao worldview in the history of the Lao path to modernity begins with a snapshot of the life of a Lao colleague who was the only one in her farming family to study beyond primary school level, and whose career as a language teacher mirrored the changing political times of her country and the influences of changing dominant world powers. By the time I met her when her country was opening its doors to the West, she was about to take up a scholarship to hone her skills as an English teacher. It was her third retraining in a third foreign language in a third foreign country. Another chapter, about the changes to the program that I found on my second field work trip, was introduced by a snapshot of my reflections on changes over the years since I had first worked in Laos. It describes changes in the capital, Vientiane, in general and the work practices in the Ministry of Education in particular:

A snapshot of change

I stay in a flat two blocks from the centre of Vientiane. Behind me is one of the poorer districts. Every evening, I see an Indian man bringing his cow home
from whatever patch of grass he has tethered it to that day. There was a time, not so long ago, when the cow didn’t have to be tethered. It would have wandered, along with goats and chickens, through the school yards and along the dusty pot-holed roads, maybe finding itself a shady spot under a flame tree or a warm spot to slumber on the road. There was not much to disturb it in those days – mostly bicycles, some motorbikes and the odd project-owned car.

Now, in front of my flat is one of the major roads streaming with traffic. I’m shocked by the traffic, by the change in only eighteen months. Since I left, all the major roads and drainage systems have been completed. Many of the shady trees have been sacrificed to road widening. To progress. Now there’s an endless flow of four wheel drives, utes, motorbikes and noisy, exhaust-belching tuk tuks imported from Thailand. Nobody walks or rides bicycles anymore except the very poor and foreigners like myself. Here in the capital the changes are stark – the traffic, the shops, the restaurants, the internet cafes. But an Australian colleague insists nothing has changed, really changed, he says, underneath.

I am given a desk in the Ministry of Education. Here in the Department of Teacher Training, I see people busily organising their day. Carting boxes of training materials in or out of the office, working at their computers, getting on with their work. I think about the change from when I first worked in Laos. In 1990, if you walked into an office, as likely as not, nothing would be happening. People sat at empty desks reading the newspaper, chatting – or literally doing nothing, staring, bored. Everyone was waiting for instructions from above. Initiative was discouraged.

Some time later, when I had finally been allowed to go to the provinces, I listen as my Lao colleague from the Ministry expresses her frustration with a teacher. She tells him, “You can’t wait for us to give you everything and tell you what to do. Times have changed. You must think for yourself now. You’ll never move forward if you can’t decide for yourself”. Ah, yes, I think to myself, something is changing – but is it changing, really changing, underneath? (Achren 2007:145).

To add to the description, chapters contain extracts from my field journal and, of course, the words of the Lao themselves. As predicted, the issue of assessment created a dilemma for all concerned. The following quotes and journal extract narrate this dilemma as it unfolded before me on my first field trip. Teachers were particularly conflicted. On the one hand, the competency-based approach meant they had more homogenous classes than before – a pedagogical outcome of which they were particularly appreciative:

If the levels are not the same, it’s difficult for teachers and for students also. In my opinion, the competency-based teaching is very effective for government officials if we do the assessment for them and also if we respect the rules. I think it’s easy for teachers and also for students who study together in the class.
The words ‘respect the rules’ are a clue to the dilemma, as the ‘rules’ — the competency standards — were proving difficult to implement. Teachers were very worried by the ‘strictness’ of the system and the possible loss of face this would cause their students. I was told, for example, that ‘they don’t want to return [to their workplaces] if they don’t finish the three levels of this course. They want to continue to study. If they return to their office, maybe they will be shy [embarrassed]’. In agreement, a counterpart considered that:

Students will be embarrassed when they come back to the office if they’re not successful in learning. When I was in [province X], students said to me, ‘What do I say when I go back to my office and the boss says, “Were you successful?”’ We explain to them before the course, “Don’t be shy if you cannot pass”, but they feel embarrassed when they couldn’t pass. They don’t think about whether their level suits the course or not.

Nobody really wanted to be responsible for the assessments. Some teachers wanted counterparts to travel around the country administering the assessments because they thought their higher position in the hierarchy would give them the authority to more ‘strictly’ enforce the competency standards:

For the last level of the course, talking here about the rules, we would like a committee from Vientiane to work with us. Maybe one of the [counterparts]. They can do it strictly — say for each competency if they can or cannot pass, because we’re talking about a certificate here. It’s a very important one. If they get a certificate but their knowledge is not appropriate for a certificate, well...[laughs]. Who passes, passes. Who cannot pass should not pass. We don’t blame ourselves for what is happening but it should be like that I think.

But counterparts weren’t keen either on being seen as ‘too strict’ and taking the blame for poor course results. One of my counterparts told me:

I think it’s a counterpart job to do but we don’t want to have to do that as our job. We want to leave it for the teachers. The teachers should think about who’s going to attend their course. It’s easier for them to teach if they get the right level for the class. But why don’t they do that? They say, ‘I can’t do that because he’s my superior’ … But for us too, if we do that, the students will think that we are too strict with them. … If they cannot pass their exam they would say ‘Oh, because of the counterparts’ decision’; not because of the teachers’ decision … Nobody wants to do this job. It’s too difficult to explain and too difficult to implement.

And the students? This journal extract captures the views of at least some of them:

Before observing the Level 3 class, the teacher (as always) asked me to say a few words to the students. I told them I was very pleased to be there and was interested in knowing what they thought of their courses. The teacher left the room — perhaps he had forgotten something. At that point a student told me that the class was difficult because not everybody passed all the Level 2 competencies. ‘They don’t have the background’, he said. I asked for
suggestions or solutions but nobody answered. I suggested to them that they could influence how things were done – perhaps they could talk to the committee (they were, after all, senior level officials). But they just looked back at me blankly. It occurred to me that they had raised it with me because they thought I could have an effect, but the project was nearly finished and I was no longer an advisor. Someone changed the subject and asked me about learning strategies. The teacher never returned to the classroom and we spent the rest of the lesson discussing strategies.

It was, in fact, the second time in a second province that a class group had raised the issue with me in the absence of their teacher.

SO WHAT HAPPENED?

Did they solve their dilemma? Did they abandon the competency-based approach altogether? Or did the ‘knowledgeable agents’ adapt the model? Of course they did. In true Buddhist fashion, once the project had finished Lao stakeholders looked for, and found, a middle way that permitted them to ‘base the decision on the Lao side and on the foreign side’, as one administrator explained it. They have effectively modified the program so that it more closely reflected culturally-held expectations of appropriate behaviour while retaining aspects of the model because of its improved educational outcomes. Whether a purist would consider it still a competency-based approach, is an investigation for another time and another researcher!

When the administrator spoke of finding a ‘middle way’, he articulated more than a solution to a pedagogical problem. The Middle Way Solution, as I came to call it, refers to the Buddhist Middle Way story of the musician and his pupil, and so is imbued with the philosophy that appropriateness lies in the avoidance of extremes. The Middle Way story relates to all three levels of analysis with which my study was engaged. As well as being invoked in the solution to the culturally problematic competency-based approach to assessment, it also stood in contrast to the inflexibility, and to use Holliday’s (1994) terminology, the ‘hyper-rationality’ of the project design. In the context of development, the Middle Way Solution, together with the Lao fusion of Buddhism and Marxism, exemplify Ien Ang’s (1998:102) view that ‘traditional “other” cultures do not absorb “Western” culture passively, but actively indigenise and appropriate, negotiate and sometimes resist its forms and practices, contributing to the creation of a “global culture” which is by no means homogenous, but internally fractured and contradictory’.

I came to see that listening to the worldview articulated in the ‘Middle Way’ and attempting to learn how it contributes to such a ‘global culture’ is to accept Perez de Cuellar’s challenge to humanity to ‘promote different paths to development, informed by a recognition of how cultural factors shape the way in which societies conceive their own futures and choose the means to attain those futures’ (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996:7). Accepting the challenge requires funding bodies and practitioners to ‘accommodate a diversity of experiences and rationalities’ (Tucker, 1999:15). In moments of optimism, I dare to hope that my study could contribute to this.
WAS IT WORTH IT?

Reflecting now on my time as a Ph.D. student, I see it as one of great challenge undertaken at emotional and economic cost, but with significant personal rewards. It was a process unlike any other in my life. As an educator, I am used to spending time with other people. My working days are full of students and colleagues. In contrast, a Ph.D. is a solitary endeavour on the whole. I could spend days, weeks, months, alone reading and writing – broken only by intermittent discussions with my supervisor. It is an endeavour removed from the real world, in which people rarely work in such a solitary manner. Even most research is done in teams. I found it dislocating and very lonely.

As it turned out I was not the only one feeling this way, so the research students in the School of Education formed our own support group that met monthly to present and discuss our research. Not everyone came to these meetings but those who did became a close knit group made up of experienced education professionals from not only Australia, but Oman, Lesotho, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, India and Saudi Arabia. The group encompassed extraordinarily varied experiences and a wide range of educational research interests, so that for someone like myself, whose professional interests are in the field of cultural and linguistic diversity, our meetings were an especially fascinating and informative exchange of ideas and cultures.

My dislocation was also compounded, I think, by doing cross-disciplinary research. I initially had a co-supervisor with experience in international development assistance but when he moved out of academia, I didn’t immediately seek another. Eventually, it became very clear to me that I needed guidance and support, not only in education and development, but also in anthropology/sociology. I also wanted someone who was interested in exploring more narrative approaches to Ph.D. writing. Miraculously, the university was able to put me in touch with someone who was not only a very experienced supervisor but who had all these qualities. Moreover, to my good fortune, he was willing to take me on. With his unstinting support, my anxiety abated. Through his dedication to his work, my own efforts redoubled; his professional guidance, editorial skills and enthusiasm for my project were my greatest encouragement.

I have carried a number of understandings and skills away with me from the Ph.D. experience. The importance of good supervision is one of them. If I were to give advice, it would be to be pro-active in finding a supervisor who is right for you and for your research project. Lessons I learnt about providing high levels of support have informed my current work managing a number of research projects around Victoria into the provision of education and training for adult migrants and refugees. The lengthy and in-depth research process of a Ph.D. has greatly sharpened my skills in collecting, analysing and synthesising information. It has honed my writing and editorial skills. These have been professionally invaluable.

But perhaps the most valuable aspect of the Ph.D. process, both personally and professionally, was the time it allowed for reflexion. From time to time, I wondered why, in the post-modern era, successful completion would entitle me to be called a Doctor of Philosophy. Why ‘philosophy’? Why still use this term when studies now branched into every possible field? On one of the days when I was grappling with
what it really means to talk about dominant discourses and cultural values, I realised that through this study I was developing a deeper and far more nuanced understanding of my ontological and epistemological beliefs; of my philosophical framework. To paraphrase one of my guiding theorists, my quest to understand radical otherness was a necessary step towards self-understanding (Tu Wei-ming, 2000:266). It was the time afforded by the Ph.D. for such reflexivity that I consider to have been the most rewarding. Reflexive engagement with my own worldview and how my knowledge has been socially constructed has led to a more sensitive engagement with the cultural values of others. It has led to a constant vigilance, in all intercultural encounters, against making culturally constructed assumptions of how things are ‘done’. Such reflexive practice is at the core, I believe, of the intercultural competence that we all need for living and working with cultural diversity whether overseas or within an increasingly multicultural Australia.

NOTE

1 The name ‘Laos’ dates only from the colonial era, being the name the French gave to the nation state they created. To the Lao, it is ‘Muang Lao’ or ‘Country of the Lao’ which doesn’t necessarily refer to today’s nation state. This became officially known as the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in 1975 when the Pathet Lao took control of the country after the communists won the day in Vietnam and the Americans withdrew from the region. In this chapter, I refer to the country as ‘Laos’ in an attempt to convey the dynamic continuity of the worldview of the ethnic Lao threading through their pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history. It is a worldview rooted in animism-infused Buddhism underpinned by such values as reciprocity, flexibility, collectivity and a respect for hierarchy emanating from notions of karma and impermanence.

REFERENCES

RESEARCHING CULTURE, RESEARCHING SELF


BIOGRAPHY

Before returning to Melbourne to finish her Ph.D., Lynda Achren spent fifteen years dividing her time between South East Asia and Australia. More than half of these years were spent living and working in Laos where she also conducted her research. The resultant thesis, Whose development?: A cultural analysis of an AusAID English language project in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, can be downloaded from http://wallaby.vu.edu.au/adt-VVUT/uploads/approved/adt-VVUT20070917.125308/public/02whole.pdf. It has also been published by VDM under the title: Middle way to Lao modernity: A cultural analysis of development and aid in Laos. With an enduring interest in culture and language, Lynda is currently managing a project to build the capacity of the Victorian adult community education sector to respond to the needs of migrants and refugees, particularly in areas of new regional settlement.
TRY UNI AGAIN: ONE STEP AT A TIME

My Ph.D. journey started with trying University again to reach an unobtainable end goal. If I hadn’t the motivational will I would never have returned to study. My earliest attempts at University failed but eventually I returned successfully much later to complete a degree and undertake postgraduate studies leading to a Ph.D. I first attended Melbourne University for a while following matriculation from Wesley College in the 1980s. I possessed normal aspirations, knowing a world existed and aiming to see it by expanding my horizons through University.

In those days it was an accepted norm to continue straight on to University using your results to get the best course to suit your marks. Your first degree would then qualify you for your desired job. Disappointingly I stopped short of obtaining a first degree. My Melbourne Uni world suddenly ended amid growing turmoil. Not being able to be reinstated, I was knocked unceremoniously out of my favourite Uni and my options for continuing seemed bleak. I could not confidently return to study then, and only perhaps some day in the future when carrying heavier trepidations of failing the whole system again.

One sunny summer afternoon at the South Melbourne beach I put it to myself to retry it all again. I was forced to look someplace else and set out to attend a different Uni in the hope of rekindling what I once started. I wanted to return to study no matter what, and subsequently went further than I ever thought was possible.

My attempt to return to study began again in the late 1990s, when I approached Melbourne University again. I was shattered when, despite my best intentions, I failed to re-enter Arts at Melbourne because I couldn’t get accreditation for subjects I passed previously. I felt crushed again with just broken bits and pieces of partially completed official results on paper. While disappointed, with renewed effort I kept trying to keep some return to study hopes alive. I felt incomplete, and worse, degreeless. I liked international politics, foreign affairs, foreign policy and especially Australian politics. International Relations replaced other studies in importance as my true vocational interest. I did History, Politics and Economics and dabbled in Fine Arts. I had some successes in History and Politics but I wanted International Relations to be my major focus. I thought that universities undervalued it and I wanted to change this when I recommenced my studies.
Feeling confident, I contacted Victoria University and spoke with a very helpful Arts Faculty Coordinator who told me how to apply, and said that I sounded like the right sort of applicant. I was instantly hopeful and back on track. I knew where I was going and couldn’t be disappointed. I was thrilled when Victoria University placed me into an Arts degree and it was all on again. This time I was better prepared. I made sure I got to every lecture on time. I did all the readings and handed in essays on time. I studied hard for exams. I was diligent and keen. I committed to the challenges. Teachers encouraged the good students onward to better results. I felt that I was there at Uni participating again, but wondered how long it would last. I enjoyed returning and it was motivationally the best of fun. I didn’t hate one Vic Uni experience.

I was given credit for my Melbourne University subjects to start Arts in a second year at Victoria University. Universities can be big places, but I soon conquered the mature age student syndrome back at Uni again, getting into study and appraising my pathway. I chose my return through a study setting that was just right for me. I don’t think every Uni is good, I tell my friends. Vic Uni is smaller and more encouraging and it met my appetite for knowledge. I had a great environment of support with friendly teachers and students.

I was lucky at Melbourne University to have studied among very renowned scholars, but it was at Victoria University that I could see my results going somewhere. I picked subjects I wanted and could do and achieved an Arts Honours degree. Having succeeded, I wanted to come back and complete a Ph.D. which I now knew, with optimistic enthusiasm, was achievable. Advice and wise counsel from my professor mentor meant I should specialise somewhere else like Deakin University’s formidable International Relations studies program, before that.

Victoria University helped me join a rapidly transforming world and examine the big picture of the future world confronting me. I wanted to study for as long as I could now. Coming from a computer illiterate world was a difficulty because I was now studying beyond the age of globalisation and having to use a word processor plus internet to comprehend everything.

I consolidated my University life by doing postgraduate studies at Deakin University in the International Relations program, achieving a Graduate Certificate in Arts (IR). At Deakin I was given my second year because I had Arts Honours and plunged straight into the Master of Arts (IR) full-time. I completed a research project developing my new field of endeavour in Comparative Foreign Policy. I worked tirelessly. After Deakin I negotiated and returned to Victoria University to start a Ph.D. I remain heavily indebted to the Victoria University staff and students for giving me that chance to succeed in taking a Ph.D. journey.

THE METHODOLOGY OF “AUSTRALIA AND SEPTEMBER 11”

Many steps inside and outside University create the Ph.D. journey. First came ‘developing a topic’ and getting formal approval to study, and finding a supervisor. My supervisor became indispensable, a mentor and guide. He was air traffic control and accompanying radar plus the guiding beacon showing the journey
towards its successful end. A good supervisor is vitally important and a charismatic influence on the journey.

I had prepared written stepping-stones towards my planned thesis. During my Arts Honours I wrote about the Politics of the Australian Parliament where I examined the effectiveness of the Australian Parliamentary system. At Deakin I then became interested in a research project determining how I could prove whether Australia’s Parliament conducted effective International Relations through foreign policy, and what could be done to assist understanding this. For assistance I had discovered a rare book at Melbourne University’s Baillieu Library on influential comparative foreign policy edited by William Crotty (1991) that was aptly titled *Political Science Looking to the Future, Volume Two, Comparative Politics, Policy, and International Relations*.

The chance discovery of Crotty’s information provided all the essential educational clues needed for what I wanted to do and would go on to do next. I learned how to link this formal study and unique discipline called comparative politics (also known as comparative foreign policy) and learned more about International Relations and Politics through it. Comparative politics was recommended as the bridging discipline for distilling knowledge about International Relations and Politics. This was perfect as now I had a justification and tools to take International Relations and Politics further as comparative politics.

With my supervisor, I undertook a preparation year reading widely and preparing the groundwork and chapters for the Ph.D. study “Australia and September 11”. My first ideas about the prospective thesis were to focus on an issue that could be used to examine the effectiveness of foreign policy and to see therefore if Australia’s foreign policy worked efficiently. During the final year of my Masters the terrorist attacks of September 11 happened. Terrorism as defined by 9/11 became the focal working issue of International Relations in my research.

I started reading widely and found a small-dedicated group of pioneering academic comparative politics enthusiasts, including Rosenau (1966), who led the field in the US in the 1960s. In Australia it remained an uncharted field.

Foreign policy analysis was traditionally viewed as a sub field of International Relations. I wanted to raise the explanatory stakes one step further and use comparative foreign policy (comparative politics) to provide a broader explanation. If, as Crotty (1991) suggested, it could explain a wider phenomenon then it would become rightfully a valuable educational tool to understand international relations as a whole. Essentially this justified the contribution to knowledge of my Ph.D. – to study from this theoretical perspective.

As the focal issue, September 11 provided the potential for my comparative foreign policy work. Midway through my preparatory year I discovered the work that aligned perfectly with my desired contents and changed the outlook of my prospective research planning. I uncovered a 2005 comparative politics work that measured the changing US response to what its author Bolton called the fight against the perceived spreading of the global terrorist hydra. I reported this chance finding to my supervisor and he took one long look and said this would be a great
resource to frame my independent Australian research. Thus my supervisor and I were able to reframe all of the preliminary work I had completed and create a more secure skeleton plan of thesis chapters.

The Bolton discovery quickly enabled me to start my project and added the safer dimension of being able to frame research across a secure landscape already charted.

THE THESIS

Bolton (2005) had produced a comparative foreign policy work titled: *U.S. Foreign Policy and International Politics: George W. Bush, 9/11, and the Global-Terrorist Hydra*, about the forces and factors as a result of 9/11. Bolton wanted to know if US foreign policy had changed significantly because of 9/11 and was genuinely interested in using comparative foreign policy to find the answer.

Bolton’s argument contended that US foreign policy has changed in demonstrable and enduring ways since 9/11. He argued that there have been substantive changes in US foreign policy and international politics at two crucial junctures in America’s history: after World War Two and post-9/11.

Taking my supervisor’s advice, I framed a research question using Bolton’s original question and asked whether, and in what direction, Australian foreign policy has changed in demonstrable and enduring ways since 9/11. Bolton’s methodology would be used in its entirety to create a conceptual framework. In order to assess the question I would be analysing significant changes in Australian government, bureaucracy and society along similar lines to Bolton’s assessment of the US foreign policy changes.

Chronologically arranged articles from three major Australian newspapers provided primary evidence. Email and face-to-face elite interviews became secondary sources.

One of the chief proponents of the development of a suitable method of comparative foreign policy, whose research methodology influenced my own, was Deborah Gerner (1991, 1991/92). Gerner appeared to be the most contactable advocate of comparative politics studies. I liked reading her enthusiastic work and used to wonder what would come next from her pen. I eventually sent Gerner an email wondering if I could interview her by phone about the future of comparative politics. I got a message back from America explaining that she was sorry but was not very well at that time. It was a sad moment because she died soon after. Upset, I told my supervisor what the loss meant to future comparative study. There was a diary of protracted terminal illness posted later on the Internet for all her friends and colleagues to understand. Gerner’s final work supported mine and I hoped I could follow those collective footsteps in the academic world of comparative foreign policy. Later I emailed Bolton and received a very supportive email about my work and his own.
METHODOLOGY IN ACTION

With Bolton’s framework and the focus on ideas about Australia’s foreign policy following 9/11, my thesis now had shape. It took nearly one year to refine the candidature proposal for my thesis, “Australia and September 11”. That gave me time to workshop, bond to other Ph.D. candidates and gain insight into other types of postgraduate research. I learned about epistemology and methodology, and to explain what I was doing to students and supervisors and to learn from their responses. Thankfully the Office of Postgraduate Research ran effective small-group classes and the class leader became a mentor. One of the class leader’s vital and encouraging roles was to invite everyone to explain projects, including epistemology and methodology, in order to help them write accurately – sometimes in sessions in front of a cozy log fire in a restaurant a street away from the university.

I examined data over a four-year period following 9/11. As well, I included information until the fall of the Howard Government in 2007. If three or more articles contained comparable evidence, they were given more weight in telling of the effects of 9/11. There was no shortage of articles relating to foreign policy accounts of the growth of terrorism following 9/11.

Elite interviews with policy-makers and influential experts were used for supporting evidence. Elite interviews allowed me to debate with the interviewee and thus share knowledge on the topic. Along the way I talked to academic experts, foreign policy experts and influential politicians who expressed genuine interest in the thesis.

Two most important interviews fell influentially towards the end of the research when I interviewed former Foreign Minister, The Hon. Alexander Downer and former Prime Minister, The Hon. John Howard. I am enormously indebted to many different interviewee experiences ranging across Australian states and internationally as far as Demos in London and the International Crisis Group in Belgium. Principal findings indicated just how powerfully Australia’s Prime Minister controlled foreign policy after 9/11 and how foreign policy across the world changed. Former Prime Minister Howard was the catalyst for important changes since 9/11. He was in Washington during 9/11 and that initially shaped a vigorous response. Further firsthand experiences of the Washington response shaped his efforts to bolster the US alliance, along with friendship and shared understandings with President Bush. My interview with Prime Minister Howard confirmed for me earlier research which taught me just how politically charged and significant was the 9/11 experience.

I found Australia had, through many various shifts and documented official ways, matched Bolton’s description of processes in the US, confirming suggestions that September 11 had altered the course of Australian foreign policy entirely. The goals, values and approaches of key officials and policy-makers were changed. Dramatic 9/11 responses included changing societal opinion against Muslims, reactions to foreign powers, increasing military spending, anti-terror laws, new US relations and involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq wars.
OUTCOMES

From completed first draft, the thesis went back to be condensed and rewritten into a final format. That was a time consuming process that took longer than expected. When I felt I had time during the last two years of study I became active in student affairs and joined the Victoria University Postgraduate Association (VUPA). I became VUPA’s Vice President of Education and helped others promote postgraduate life at Victoria University. VUPA mixed local and international students and was good at mentoring international students and developing local networks. Without proper funding and with low membership, the rebuilding of the association developed through a core executive into a better-organised and inspiring group on campus, pressing for fundamentally better postgraduate experiences. The hard working executive, through trials and tribulations, formed a deserved and integral part of University life, proving postgraduates really existed. Building membership advocacy we organised some trips, barbecues, badminton games, safety talks, cooperation, and argued for better funding. Talking up ideas for postgraduates and better education was a major part of promoting VUPA’s existence.

Reaching University again started a long time after that High School target. I have now reached my long-term goal before even the journey’s end. What I had always wanted was just to complete an Arts degree. I have since taken impossible journeys and travelled far further than I could have imagined upon returning to study. It has been enjoyable and this education experience has better qualified me for the type of existence I had only dreamed could be completed. Being able to concentrate on International Relations and develop a coherent framework for a thesis that will further educate and develop a field I liked so much, have made a vast positive contribution to my earlier achievements. Taking further studies has made a valuable contribution to my life and enabled me to participate in finishing the journey that I thought had all but ended over twenty years ago.

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHY

Ben Anwyl was born at Mordialloc, Victoria in 1965. Ben has a long list of educational influences. Ben’s father John was Professor of Higher Education at Melbourne University and his mother Jill began as an English teacher. Ben’s older sister Megan practised Law before entering politics. Ben grew up mostly in Melbourne but derived educational experience travelling and studying overseas from an early age. Ben holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from Victoria University, a Graduate Certificate in International Relations and a Masters of Arts in International Relations from Deakin University. Ben’s Ph.D. titled “Australia and September 11” is close to completion.