Lost In The Forest - Finding The Light: Research Students and their Creativity

PHILIPPA MOYLAN AND DAVID BECKETT

Melbourne Education Research Institute, Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne

Abstract

Emotional intelligence is embedded within authentic, holistic and creative human experiences. In the 1990s, Hillman (e.g. The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling *1996) prefigured these, and Goleman has made EQ a best-seller. We explore a pedagogical version of emotional intelligence, taking ontology seriously, that is, personhood and identity formation, in the particular case of postgraduate students' research practices. How are these formed by particular engagements, and to what extent do they generate a person's 'researcher' identity? We develop our analysis with a case study: A student who is in the middle of a research degree and hasn't met the progression hurdles. She identifies the difficulty of being a researcher and of finding a focus in her reading. Through this case study we show the kind of creative learning research students in this situation can undertake to generate 'illumination'.*

Introduction

By any stretch of the imagination, a research higher degree (RHD) is intended to, well, actually stretch the imagination. At the very least, a modest contribution to knowledge is expected, and ideally this is shown with creativity. But, on the way through, many RHD students are 'lost in the forest'; they cannot readily see their work as imaginative, even though universities continue to see RHD work as a research apprenticeship, and the rest of the world accords esteem to such graduates. There is a sense in which the 'apprenticeship' metaphor is accurate: completing a RHD (usually a PhD) is a rite of passage in to certified research practice. But whereas an apprenticeship, in its more traditional epistemological guise, served to inculcate, by osmosis, the neophyte in the arcanae of a trade or craft, the RHD experience is heavily structured, hedged about by formal ethical and methodological requirements. At the centre of such an experience, RHD students are expected to develop their intellectual creativity – and doing so expose their feelings and their sense of themselves, not only as emerging research practitioners, but, more completely, as persons.

In this paper, we explore an holistic approach to RHD students' experiences, developing what we call a 'pedagogical version of emotional intelligence', taking seriously the emergence of a new form of identity – the confidently creative RHD graduate.

Perspiration Before Inspiration

One of the marks of creativity is hard work (the '90% perspiration; 10% inspiration' tag), so it is important to locate RHD experiences in human agency, especially where effort is expended, as in trying to do something, such as a thesis. In earlier work, Beckett (1996) drew upon Thalberg's four-fold analysis of 'trying' (1972):

(1) exertion: using energy (e.g. expending oneself to dissipate stress)

(2) causal: bringing about an effect (e.g. taking lessons to gain a skill)

(3 procedural: going through a process to achieve something (e.g. a pre-test, or enrolling)

(4) initiatory: 'Here no spatial or temporal crevasse divides attempt from accomplishment, as in causal undertakings. If a hiker succeeds in his attempt to scale a precipice, reaching the summit is a terminus, rather than an effect, of his climbing.' (Thalberg 1972: 90)

Initiatory trying is unitary, unlike the other three kinds. More than this, the wholeness of it is greater than the sum of its parts. There will be for any new situation a grappling with the minutae, when the practitioner seeks mastery over the first and perhaps foremost components. The sense of mastery grows incrementally, until the sub-episodic judgements form a sequence, and professional confidence in thus-and-so being the 'right' action is justified. (144)

For RHD students, all four of these are apparent throughout candidature, but our interest is in the fourth, because it is combines 'attempt' with 'accomplishment'. There is a new significance for this 'initiary trying', as Western economies and their associated lifelong learning policy environments, come to appreciate holistic and generic 'employability'. What can this mean?

As the 21st century has unfolded, in workplace and professional learning, the calibration of expended effort through work via 'competence' or 'skilfulness' has moved from its 1990s focus on (usually behavioural) 'performance indicators'. These were hitherto separable from, and prior to, the ascription of achievements – such as a certified threshold of 'competent/not competent'. Now, governments and occupational groups are interested in the notion of accomplished performance in itself – and how one can pick this out. The 'attempt' and the accomplishment' are of-a-piece with the striving, or trying.

Thus we now calibrate 'standards for accomplished teachers', for example (Beckett and Mulcahy 2006), where fieldwork fleshes out exemplary situations of practical professional judgements. The epistemological underpinnings of this are set out here:

Briefly, our claim is that how a person goes on to do something (what 'know how' consists in) is not about something other than itself (like a propositional state, or a product, such as is Given), but rather about what that person finds herself or himself undergoing, in what it is to be human. Frequently, what humans find themselves doing is making decisions (judgements) about what to do next. Workplace learning is increasingly shaped by this sort of fluid experience ('knowing how' to go on), but it needs to be made explicit (as in Brandom's 'expressive approach', above). The 'making explicit' is what the best adult teachers and trainers can do, in facilitating, even revealing, adults' experiences for educational purposes. Mentoring schemes are an example.

Judgements under this latter, inferentialist, model of agency are practical in that they are expected to be efficacious: they deal in what is thought to be good (that is to say, appropriate) in specific contexts in which they are embedded. This contextuality is crucial…' (248)

Accomplishing is shown in successful, situational 'tryings', and RHD students are embedded in research practices where they are building up their expertise, in ways that construct creative confidence. The attempts are part and parcel of the accomplishment. Following Thalberg, there is no 'crevasse' between the journey up the mountain and the arrival at the top – indeed the arrival is the accomplishment which has been evolving all along – through practical judgements.

Notice that this analysis does not rely on a Koestlerian (1964) 'aha' moment, although these moments may be part of the emergence of accomplishment, and may play a significant role in the overall achievement of creative confidence. As Beckett (1996) argued, drawing upon Wittgenstein (1963):

Professional practice is typically just this sort of situation….[As Wittgenstein states]: 'When I raise my arm I do not usually try to raise it.' Wittgenstein's analysis suggests that most human actions are of this kind: it is what we find ourselves doing which illuminates our purposes. This is clearly true of those practice situations where there are strong elements of extemporisation

and extrapolation. Solutions do occur when the hitherto unconnected are linked, and we know that often, and paradoxically, the secret to this is not to try too hard! Creativity steals upon one, it can be argued. (143)

Our RHD students, then, are hard workers: there is perspiration, and some measure of inspiration, but the interest we, and they, have in promoting their creative confidence arises, epistemologically at least, from a theorisation of agency which centres on contextually-sensitive opportunities to do well, to attempt and accomplish incrementally, and to strive for this through holistic experiences – where there is not duality between task and skill, or effort and outcome, or, as we now go on to claim, thinking and feeling.

We approach this next claim by emphasising that how experiences are seen, or regarded, by the student is crucial. RHD work is traditionally located in disciplines, or fields of study, or epistemic 'norms' of some kind. nOur students are to a large extent initiated in to these – much as newcomers to a profession or occupation are enculturated. These practices shape both individuals and the group, and provide benchmarks of 'accomplishments'. In this sense, the loose usage of 'research apprenticeship' as descriptor is apt. Hager and Halliday (2006) argue that:

> …at the bottom of our nests of contexts, there remains an aspect of judgement that is perspectival – that comes down to a particular way of seeing things and that accounts for our distinctive intentions. Those intentions are not detached from traditions and practices into which we are initiated, but they are not determined by them either… (214-5)

We agree with this claim, and wish to expand on how thinking and feelings contribute to perspectival understandings of accomplishment. Something like this is expressed by Wittgenstein, in a note in *Culture and Value* (1994): 'The measure of genius is character – even if character on its own does *not* amount to genius. Genius is not 'talent *and* character, but character manifesting itself in the form of a special talent' (40e). We now explore how character, broadly construed as the 'softer side' of experiences, can play out in what is learned through RHD work. This is our 'pedagogical version of emotional intelligence'.

Feelings-In-Action

Character manifests itself through the successful navigation of the RHD experience, but we mean something more complex than is commonly meant by mastery of the emotions. Daniel Goleman's popular *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ* (1996) elaborates on EQ as including capacities such as 'zeal and persistence' (xii), 'being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope' (34). Most, if not all of these qualities are crucial for postgraduate research students' practice, but, if these are emotions, they are cognitivist in temperament, and signify tenacity, durability and even stoicism of character, with a view to controlling outcomes.

It is remarkable that Goleman's interest is in the emotions as much as it is in the intellect, as his field of interest is science. His analysis of the human being incorporates various temperaments, which is useful for our paper, but because of his scientific background, he tends to limit these temperaments to certain 'types', according to neurological brain function. Our interest is in the perspectival: how thinking and feelings are experienced depends not so much on brain functioning, but on where one understands oneself to be.

Thus, building on a Schonian 'reflection-in-action', we emphasise a capacity for 'feelings-in-action', and we turn to James Hillman for his holistic account of the person. In *The Soul's Code*, Hillman (1996) is alert to the contingencies that make up a single person, that can be depicted in a person's actions and proclivities. He argues that a child comes into the world as an acorn, with a particular temperament and desires that find their 'calling' within the life they are born to, even if their background and experience does not support this

calling. We are interested in Hillman's ideas less for their essentialist rendering of a unitary being and more for their acknowledgment of the richness and particularity of the characters he describes.

Instead, we argue that a RHD student's particular temperament and character is shaped by how her work shapes her, and how sensitive she is to this engagement. This is some distance from a Golemanesque stoicism. On the contrary, 'feelings-in-action' are demonstrated in four ways:

- of seeing research questions such that they are generative amidst hitherto disparate phenomena, rather than merely 'mapping' aspects of the world;

- in mixed-mode methodological approaches which explore causality as well as interpretivist understandings;

- the explicit location of the researcher as part of the narrative (even minimally with a brief 'origin story', or maximally as a co-subject); and

- an emergent capacity to blend the articulation of a research journey with the accomplishment of the destination (Thalberg's 'initiatory trying').

Sensitivity to these four aspects of RHD work is, we argue, a pedagogical form of emotional intelligence, but it is more complex than Goleman's because it acknowledges the diversity and potential richness of the self, and also acknowledges that life's contingencies can shape us, rather than simply that we shape life. In RHD work, the better students are those who can lose themselves in the educative potential of this relationship – who can show a receptivity to these four aspects, in how they go about their research. They are awake to 'feelings-in-action'.

Feeling Confidently Creative

Someone whose work is a precursor to both Goleman and Hillman, and who focuses on the importance on the emotions, or feelings, in relation to thought is Johanna Field (pseudonym for Marion Milner). Field's *A Life of One's Own* was first published in 1936. In her twenties, Field set out over a seven-year period to find the conditions where she could gain happiness and her own personal standard of values that did not merely amplify those of her time and culture.

Like Goleman, she had an interest in the scientific working of human nature, but in the course of her diaries she moved away from science which she believed could not see human beings other than as specimens, and identified her interests within psychology and psychoanalysis. Field's initial plan was to write about the things that seemed to make her happy, but she was shocked on reading the entries to discover things she did not know about herself, which suggested that not all was as it appeared on the surface. This led her to consider: 'But might there not perhaps be a private reality, a reality of feeling rather than of knowing, which I could not afford to ignore? (31).

One of Field's discoveries was the 'internal gesture of the mind' (69), where she found the ability to perceive things in multiple ways, at will. She soon discovered this could be initiated from her body as well as her mind, and it gave her the sensation of both feeling and thinking what she saw. With the internal gesture, Field found she could both focus intensely and stand aside. In an example that evokes Beckett's reading (1996) of Wittgenstein raising his arm without trying to, Field explains how the internal gesture helped her succeed at ping-pong. While aware that the secret of ping-pong was to play with a loose arm, she found the truth of this statement and the ability 'to prove it in one's own muscles are two very different matters' (72). But when she applied this directive to herself she found that her 'arm seemed to know what to do by itself' and was 'able to make the right judgements of strength and direction quite without my help. Here the internal gesture required seemed to be to stand aside' (72).

For Field, such experimentation provided a means of illuminating her enquiry, but, ironically, this illumination came out of a sense of losing her way. She acknowledged that it was a shift in how she looked at things. She no longer believed that she always had to have a purpose. She moved to position which does not insist that something be worked out in advance, but, rather, allows it to find its own form. As she observes:

> So I began to have an idea of my life, *not as the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but as the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know'*. I wrote: 'It will mean walking in a fog for a bit, but it's the only way which is not a presumption, forcing the self into a theory'. (87, italics in original)

There is a parallel in Field's project, her diary, with the RHD student's project, the thesis. Both are enquiries, an experiment of sorts, that requires attention and focus. And, in the process of becoming – of accomplishing, of 'initiatory trying' - they do not yet have the qualities of the finished product, which, retrospectively, exemplifies order, patternings, and clarity. But they do build upon contingencies, and those contingencies can be well-received. Our four 'aspects' of such a stance (above) de-centre a Golemanesque EQ, and centre upon a receptivity to losing one's way. While research students must keep focused on the broad scope of the project, there will always be those times where they will feel as if in a fog. For Field this is the only way we can capture 'the unique qualities of particular experiences'. For Thalberg, striving towards the top is as much a part of the accomplishment of the journey as is arrival at the top.

Clearly, with their deadlines fast approaching, RHD students do not have the luxury of feeling that they do not need to have a purpose. But, following Hager and Halliday (2006), the purpose is perspectival. We may now claim that the intention to make certain research claims is inevitably embedded in epistemological traditions but that these traditions do not determine those claims. What is authoritative, and frequently overlooked, is the pedagogical significance of one's own perception of where one takes oneself to be, as a RHD student.

Just as the overall project should be the context within which RHD students develop character, to that end fast approaching deadlines should be seen as an opportunity to do so. As in Field's project, which was serious, methodical, and deep, there is the opening within the RHD project to make myriad shifts in the way it is perceived. This is an opening for confident creativity: to be more capable of seeing structures and strictures as creative opportunities. How might this play out?

As demonstrated earlier by the four-fold 'feelings-in-action' framework, this more confident creativity can address these commonly-experienced RHD points of tension:

- when merely 'mapping' aspects of the world fails to provide a research question which is truly generative;
- when a single methodological approach excludes important understandings;
- when ignoring one's voice renders the research narrative arid, and
- when divorcing the account of the process from the statement of the outcomes fragments its overall cogency.

More profoundly, in addressing these tensions, RHD students can take the opportunity to build their creativity by moving beyond a Golemanesque assumption that diligence, endeavour, and a strict timetable will always be rewarded with unremitting confidence, equilibrium, and a sense of progress. Knowing this can make the difference between unease (which can be creative) and panic (which is not).

Moving Towards The Light

Unlike more recent self-help books, Field's writing is itself more akin to an RHD thesis. It is subtle and intelligent, and without the dot-point 'strategies' for those who might be in danger of not fulfilling their potential. She does not offer a formula for success, but rather an explanation of her experiments and the insights she has gained.

So, how does one move towards the confidently creative RHD experience, when one is beset by Golemanesque self-help? After all, although within university environments the onus is placed on students to take responsibility for their own learning, there is a set of structures in place to assist research students with staying on track. An inner circle of research management – the student's supervisor, the Postgraduate Co-Ordinator, the Dean of Research and the Student Support Officer – is there to assist the student. A series of progression requirements attempt to ensure that students jump the various hurdles before successfully completing their research degrees. Doctoral students at many universities must first successfully complete a Progress Report, undertake a Confirmation Seminar, complete a Completion Report and then undertake a Completion seminar before being examined and graduating. There are handbooks and PhD calendars offering useful information and tips for passing through postgraduate life in academic style. All this is technical rationality and self-help EQ, rolled in together, and in abundance.

We accept that these structures and processes are useful for providing a kind of cognitivist evidence for whether the RHD student is making the grade, or is likely to make the grade. The Progress Report gives a sense of problems encountered and perhaps overcome, and the student and supervisor have the opportunity to comment on the student's competencies throughout the student's candidature. There is also the opportunity for problems to be addressed. A check and balance mechanism has been placed in motion and, in the process, students come up with realisable research proposals and chapter-plans, and the requisite timelines force students to project-manage their theses. These are examples of Thalberg's first three 'tryings', in that they separate attempt from accomplishment. They are indeed hurdles.

Such accountability is important because there are a number of issues that impede research students from meeting their progression requirements. These include perfectionism – at worst, spending a day on a sentence, and so, over a period of time, not meeting their deadlines; feeling overwhelmed by the reading material; finding their reading and thinking through their topic is taking them away from the original plan; finding their theoretical framework or methodologies are not the right 'fit' for their thesis; personal issues; and a break-down of supervisor/supervised relationships.

Given our interest in the 'initiatory' trying that marks the RHD experience, it is clear that these structures, all of which are aiming to support the students, are not always initiatory. Rather, they are aimed particularly at 'accomplishment'. The Progress Report and the Confirmation Seminar, for example, are interested in marking the stages along the way, but they do not take into account the actual 'climb'. Their focus is on the accomplishment, albeit broken down into parts of the journey. The Progress Report may serve as a safety net for students and supervisors if problems occur, but it cannot, by its nature, take into account the weight or depth or contingencies of those problems. It does not serve as a means to address the problems as they occur. Nor does it contribute towards or assist the student in simultaneously learning and achieving as we have argued in the previous sections of this paper.

In Natalia's Case …

By taking our four feelings-in-action as a framework, we present the case of Natalia, a 30-year-old, international student, undertaking a PhD at an Australasian university, who is facing various 'hurdles' in and around confirmation:

Research questions are generative

It is early days, and Natalia is grappling with identifying the research question. She and her supervisor Bruno have settled on a 'mapping' question where A relates to B, maybe causally, but Natalia senses that this is not going to provoke a creative response in her thesis. She sits with the question for a couple of weeks and reads more widely, and talks to several other students and some other staff about where the implications of the question might ripple. Eventually, Natalia and Bruno graft a third contestable concept (C) on to the A to B mapping question, which transforms it into an open-ended and provocative research enquiry.

The mixed-mode methodological approach

But Natalia is feeling lost in the methodological forest. She cannot find a cogent approach to her newly generative research question. She needs to keep asking herself the 'how' question. How will she answer her main research question? What sites of field work is she drawn to, and once in there, how would she establish findings? She needs to think about how this is affecting her and to locate herself psychologically, with the understanding that there needs to be some kind of deliberate exposure to the uncertainty of the sites. She becomes aware of the need to be sufficiently familiar with her ability to read a research work place and herself within it before she settles the technicalities of methodology.

The explicit location of research

It then dawns on Natalia that while this thesis has to be her story, how much of it is about her? She is concerned there might be too much of her on the page already. She is struggling with a variety of ways to represent herself in the text while not dominating it. So she settles this by employing deliberate allusions to own her authorship, while deflecting attention away from her persona at certain times. Rather than write in a confessional mode or as a form of therapy, Natalia sticks with a prose style where her voice is present with different degrees of prominence throughout the thesis.

The emergent capacity to strive and accomplish

Finally the thesis rolls towards its conclusion and what emerges is Natalia's anxiety about the balance between the research process and the research outcomes. Being a Thalbergian, Bruno encourages Natalia to shape the thesis both as an account of a research journey and as a report of research accomplishments, and to show the congruence of these two components. Like all HRD students, Natalia is subject to the contingencies of the research journey. She needs and wants to reflect these contingencies in the way the research outcomes are reported.

Conclusion

We set out to explore a 'pedagogical version of emotional intelligence', taking seriously the emergence of a new form of identity – the confidently creative RHD graduate. This approach began with an analysis of effort, or striving – a whole-person focus on accomplishment, especially 'initiatory trying'. Here, the journey is united with the arrival at the outcome. What does our RHD person *find herself undergoing*? Simply put, her work generates a series of practical judgements which drive the emergence of a research project. But such judgements involve feelings, not merely the cognitive.

Thus, our argument is that 'a RHD student's particular temperament and character is shaped by how her work shapes her, and how sensitive she is to this engagement'. Our articulation of these 'feelings-in-action' was four-fold. We picked out commonly-experienced points of tension in RHD work, and showed, with the help of Johanna Field, and then in the case of Natalia, how a deeper sensitivity to one's feelings amongst what one is undergoing – mere contingencies - can construct 'creative confidence'.

In all this, we are 'perspectival' (cf. Hager and Halliday), in that the way of seeing we advocate implies establishing the importance of identifying with one's personal problems, and making them part of the solution – so RHD students look for solutions, not outside of their issue, but from working with it. Wittgenstein reminds us that often 'character manifests itself in the form of a special talent'. Without claiming that we can all be geniuses, we nonetheless do claim that progress towards talented accomplishment for more people is possible.

What we have called 'creative confidence' should be what RHD work is mainly about, because undergoing it with perspectival attention to our version of emotional intelligence is more likely to shape desirable character: we can 'find the light' – it has been amongst the darkness of the forest. Creative confidence can show us the way forward, and, more profoundly, illuminate what we, as persons, bring to the journey.

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