

Rebecca's PhD

1 Introduction

My experience of university life was typical. Middlemarch University was a run of the mill establishment. I had gone to Middlemarch because I had not achieved the necessary grades to be accepted by Barchester; despite me having more A level points.

I am one of two children. My elder brother was at University too and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. My mother was Head Teacher of a Secondary School and my father worked in the property industry. Mum had been to University and Dad has always regretted not going.

In the third and final year of my first degree I had two obvious career choices; becoming a solicitor or doing a PhD. I had always taken my degree with the intention of becoming a solicitor, but, during the course of the final year I realised how much I had enjoyed the opportunity to do a dissertation relating to the work I had been doing for a firm of developers during the summer vacation. Law seemed to require a wider knowledge of issues that I would not be interested in.

Despite my applications to do a Law conversion course I also made one application to study for a PhD at Barchester University and one application to do a taught Masters at Middlemarch (who offered me a one-year University scholarship).

My PhD application was to a good department - the one that I had wanted to go to as an undergraduate. I suppose I wanted to prove my worth, after all I had achieved the right number of points at 'A' level, but not the grades, despite a grade A in the chosen subject. Just after Easter I was invited to interview with two potential PhD supervisors. They talked through my ideas and suggested that I write an ESRC proposal. These two men were to become my supervisors.

It was all a bit daunting really. They spoke to me and quizzed me about my ideas, they then offered some suggestions about the potential of the research and finally left me in the room whilst they went out into the corridor to talk about me. One of the potential supervisors returned suggesting that 'we could do something'.

I returned home excited about the prospect of going to such a prestigious university. I followed the supervisor's advice and made a formal application to ESRC and to the University. I also applied to the Graduate College. I waited for my degree results.

On my graduation day my Head of Department presented me with the ESRC results form - confirming that my 2.1 had been in the upper bracket. Surely this gave me more chance of getting ESRC money.

2 Arrival

3 The First Term

As the first term progressed I attended as many training courses as possible and made a few acquaintances in other faculties. In college I had one good friend - the others were either Greek (and, although very friendly, had a suitable mass to enable them to speak Greek and have Greek parties) or 'girlies' who had never been self-catering before and enjoyed cooking Sunday lunch, baking cakes, going to church and watching Songs of Praise - not my scene! Unfortunately my friend's Dad was dying from cancer - she wasn't around much. I would escape to my boyfriend's house at weekends. I had moved away with the intention of leaving him - now he was my lifeline.

Supervisory meetings continued once a week on a Thursday at 2pm and lasted precisely one hour. I would write a review of some aspect of the literature and hand it in on a Tuesday and get it back on the Thursday. It all seemed very organised. Indeed my supervisor gave me more attention than any other first year student was getting. He seemed unsure about my ability (why did I have to do a third year undergraduate option?). He seemed to want me to do a lot of writing - was I really up to this? Did he want to see more of me because I was no good?

4 The Conference

After Christmas there was a three-da

6 Opportunity Knocks

Out of the blue in March my supervisor telephoned me - how would I like a full time teaching job in the Department? It was just up my street and an interview was arranged for me for the following week. He told me that I should get the job. After a nail-biting afternoon I decided to go for it. The PhD could wait. Before the interview another member of academic staff congratulated me on getting the job. All I had to do was give a paper for 20 minutes - All! I had to do - what a nightmare - what did I have to say?

I had a panel interview, amongst the six were the Head of Department and the Dean. Luckily the questions related to my research and history so I could answer most of them. I think I was rather confident and certainly not nervous.

The presentation was a different matter. All the staff from the department were there, some had wished me luck before hand - it all seemed so competitive. I felt out of my depth - surely my fellow interviewees had already achieved their PhD and certainly had some experience of presentations. Whilst I was talking I was thinking about the kind of questions which the audience may ask in response.

I never got the job - what had I done wrong? Had there been a better candidate or was it something to do with internal politics? I'll never know.

Later in the term I was invited to be a temporary research assistant for my supervisor on a project based in London. This was a great opportunity to see the master at work - he even let me attend his interviews. For the two weeks we were away together I learnt so much about research. I also began to realise just how strange this man really was. He was obsessed by time management - both his and mine. I did however try to tell him how miserable I was. I think he began to understand how hard I had been working and how run down I felt. I then had two weeks in London doing research on my own - this was brilliant, this was what it was all about!

Q1 Discuss Rebecca's current situation.

Q2 Should postgraduate research students take on additional research or teaching?

8 The Second Year

Year Two was far better. I was living away from the University. My boyfriend's job necessitated me taking him to work each morning. Hence I worked 9 to 5 in my new office. There were just 3 of us in this office which, although being small was cosy. One chap never came in and the other was a third year family man who was busy writing. We even had a computer, which, although not networked, enabled some data analysis.

This year I did some part time teaching and helped with a couple of field courses. For one of the field courses I was able to organise a whole day of activities. At last I felt confident about something -

9 A new wave of confidence

I was beginning to know more people in the department now - in this way I felt more satisfied socially. They were beginning to ask how I coped with my supervisor. Slowly realised that I was not the only one with communication difficulties. Most people felt the same way - I think? I became friends with a younger member of academic staff - he explained about PhDs and how this supervisor relationship was important - he assured me that my work was of a good standard and told me to persevere without my supervisor.

I continued to go to the weekly meetings (2pm on Thursdays for an hour) - but I also tried to slow down a bit. I was working seven days a week and still no holiday.

In the summer term I went to a one-day conference with James and my supervisor. At the bar afterwards, James and I were called over and introduced to one of our supervisor's friends as "here are my two ESRC students" and then ignored. Were we just his prize, something to show off about?

As the end of another year loomed I knew I had to continue to gain my PhD - for my

10 Third Year Writing

Year three and writing. We came to an agreement, or he came to an agreement. He was writing a book and had set himself a target of a month per chapter. I would do the same. We would both finish on target.

So I wrote a chapter (still seeing him at 2pm on a Thursday for about an hour). James was off doing fieldwork so I felt lonely again. I handed my chapter in a month later, then started Chapter two. The following week I went for feedback. The chapter hadn't been read. So I sat there whilst my supervisor corrected punctuation and typing errors

swearing and cursing. I cried and cried and explained how I felt to James. I turned around and my supervisor was stood listening at the door. I think that he finally realised how run down I was and how hard I was working. I was embarrassed that he had heard me say all those things about him. Nevertheless I handed the chapter in at midnight and met my deadline. Surely he could not shout at me now.

From that point on I went to meetings - but said nothing. I avoided him and hopefully he realised that I was not happy - I kept thinking of my job - soon it would be over.

Q1 Discuss strategies for assisting students with writing a thesis.

Q2 Have you any comments on Rebecca's time management skills?

12 The Viva

The viva a date loomed. I was told it would be easy - you don't need to prepare. It was in the middle of term so I had little time for preparation. Anyway what could I leave the students to do whilst I was away for a few days?

My supervisor didn't want to see me beforehand. I arrived at his office half an hour before; he wasn't in. I waited and eventually he arrived and took me to the classroom where the viva would take place. A big room with exam desks. He put a chair on the opposite side of one of the desks and suggested that I sit there and left. I waited for half an hour for the viva to begin. No one had explained to me that the external's train had been delayed.

I was by this time petrified. I knew my work was not good. It had been written in a rush, my supervisor had always doubted my ability - was he just humouring me?

The first viva question was about the title - what did I mean by it? I hadn't written the title, my supervisor had given it to me as the one he had submitted to central administration. I suppose I had never thought about it before. Surely, if the thesis didn't answer the title, I would automatically fail. I panicked, waffled a garbled answer and excused myself whilst I went out for some air. I had never been so pathetic before. Outside the room I bit my lip trying not to cry and convinced myself that I had to go back in.

When I returned the debate continued and we went through the thesis chapter by chapter. I actually began to enjoy myself and had a new determination not to let them get the better of me. I would not let them take any prisoners.

I was asked to leave the room - why? I had obviously failed at the first hurdle. I went into the car park and cried and cried and cried. If my car had been there I would have got in it and driven away. I rang my Mum on her mobile (she was on her way to pick me up) I told her what a disaster it all was and that I had failed. Luckily she realised that I hadn't officially been told this and persuaded me to go back and find out what happened next.

I went to my supervisor's office and he took me back to the room. I was told that I had to insert 3 paragraphs to chapter one. No one said congratulations - no one seemed happy. The external excused himself and dashed for his train. So, had I passed? What would happen now? No one told me. I dare not ask!

I left the room, walked down to meet my Mum. My supervisor welcomed her and had a chat. I got in the car and drove away down the motorway - had I passed or failed? Surely I hadn't failed, had I? That night I went for a meal with my parents and my new

boyfriend - it was a hollow celebration. I thought, but could not admit. Tm [(i)9.0(t)]

14 Graduation

In July I went to the graduation ceremony. Mum, Dad, my (by now) Fiancé and me. My supervisor wanted to meet my parents so he invited himself for lunch with us. I bought him a book to say thank-you. I don't really know what I was thanking him for, but I felt like I should do something. You never know when you might need a good reference. He duly thanked my parents for it. He ate lunch and chatted to Mum and Dad. Not a word was said to me. He never thanked them for lunch. I was embarrassed of him.

At the ceremony he waived and smiled at my parents. He never once looked at me. He was celebrating his achievement and showing off to my parents. I had just been a troublesome student, which he thought would never succeed. All I did was give him the opportunity to be proud of his achievements.

He didn't award the PhD. It was the examiners who decided to award the PhD, not him. I have got a job and am now doing well. But, was it really good enough for a PhD? Is my work really worthy of publication?

I still have little confidence. Yes I have a PhD and call myself Dr., but is it good quality academic research work which will stand up to rigorous academic criticisms. I present lots of conference papers and convene lots of sessions. Generally I get very positive feedback, but I am scared of other academics reading my work. I can not punctuate and my work is scruffy. Will they reject me as someone incapable of the appropriate level of debate? How will I ever get a new job if my peers see how poor my PhD really was?

Q1 What should Rebecca do with her thesis now?

Q2 Have you any suggestion about publication?

15 Epilogue

I have a filing cabinet full of written papers but I don't have the nerve to submit them to journals. Is it too late now; is my work out of date?

I recently read some of my supervisor's book. About a third in based on my PhD. It is referenced, but I am not acknowledged. James of course is. So, was my work really that bad?

I still wake up in the night thinking about my PhD viva, or that I haven't done some work for my supervisor. Whenever I try to concentrate on research all my insecurities come flooding back. Will it ever be good enough? What do I need to do to make it better? I feel like I need to get away from the subject matter - but this interests me and is my area of expertise. I feel trapped but know6Ta8.0(0 7.0(c)8.0(t)-2573