

32. Time is waiting in the wings

Mark N.K. Saunders

INTRODUCTION

In 1973 David Bowie released his album *Aladdin Sane*. The sixth track, titled 'Time', opens with the line 'Time, he's waiting in the wings ...', conjuring an image of time being present but not always visible. The accompanying stride piano style builds upon this, suggesting a continuous regular movement of time, which, even if out of sight, marches on regardless.

For all doctoral students I have supervised or worked with over the years, time as an actor plays the unstoppable clock counting down to the final submission deadline. For each student, this clock has appeared to run at a varying speed, sometimes even appearing to stand still or be invisible to them. As someone observing, it seems to me that students either do not even acknowledge the clock or, particularly in the early days of their studies, feel it is running slowly. This creates an illusion that they have plenty of time to complete their doctorate. Yet, as their research develops and their thesis (dissertation in some parts of the world) submission deadline draws closer, the same clock moves to centre stage in their lives and the speed at which it counts down appears to become quicker.

In this chapter I begin by reflecting on my own doctoral experience, which, despite being a fair number of years ago, remains fresh in my mind. I then turn to what I refer to as co-managing time, focussing upon thesis research and writing. Within this I integrate my own experiences with those of doctoral students I have taught, supervised and advised, considering those activities and associated realisations that have been of particular value. I summarise these as six time-related lessons for keeping your doctorate on track.

REFLECTIONS ON MY DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE

When I started my doctorate, in 1982, there was no formally assessed research methods training and no prescribed time limit or deadline for submitting the thesis. Then, the proportion of UK full-time doctoral students submitting their theses within four years was approximately 30 per cent (for those of you who are interested, it is now approaching 80 per cent). I was aware of this somewhat scary statistic, but it did not worry me particularly; I was going to submit well within four years! I developed a plan with my lead supervisor, which included the targets I would need to achieve within each of the three years. These were my milestones. Within my life I would treat my doctorate as a full-time job, with a working routine of 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday but not at weekends. If there were days during the week that interrupted the routine of working on my doctorate for whatever reason, I would make up the 'lost time' by working in the evenings. Whilst it all seemed eminently feasible, looking back there was also naïve optimism.

In my first few months, I engaged with the literature and developed my research questions and a conceptual model, summarising the main arguments to support both in note form. My space in the doctoral students' office was surrounded by journal articles and books that often covered my desk and the surrounding floor. As I finished each aspect I was working on, I, almost ritually, tidied the articles and my notes into vaguely neat piles before moving on. I found that these piles, and in particular their growing number, reassured me that my research was progressing. To test parts of the conceptual model, I designed a large-scale multi-organisation survey, pilot tested and amended a questionnaire, and collected my first dataset. I also wrote and submitted my first academic journal article. This was based on my master's dissertation and, following revisions, was published in a nationally respected history journal. To earn extra money, I tutored undergraduate students for their research methods practical classes. The journal article writing and tutoring took days away from the routine of my doctoral research, but I rarely thought about time. Although working occasionally during the evenings, I easily kept on track and time was firmly in the wings.

During my second year, I also kept to my plan and achieved my milestones. By the end of that year I had collected data from four case-study organisations, coded, entered it into the computer and checked it. I became familiar with the statistical software I was going to use and undertook my initial analyses. I now knew I had the data I needed to answer my research questions. I also worked with faculty members on a

couple of their research projects that were, at best, only tangentially related to my doctorate. These ‘side projects’ were enjoyable learning experiences and resulted in a co-authored book and two journal articles. However, they had absorbed a fair amount of ‘doctorate time’. I had needed to work throughout some weekends. As my final year approached, I began to realise that, although time had been waiting in the wings, ‘he’ had become centre stage, the clock was clearly visible and the hands moving more quickly around the dial.

The final-year plan involved completing the data analyses and drafting my findings chapters, drafting my introduction and conclusions, finishing the remaining chapters, and submitting my thesis, alongside publishing two journal articles based on my doctoral research. Yet, although I had already made numerous notes and had partial drafts of the literature review and methodology chapters, I had underestimated how long it would take to work these up into complete chapters. They had to be good enough to give to my supervisors to review. Then there were the remaining chapters to draft from scratch. As I began to write, my findings chapters and my ideas became clearer, my research questions more precise, and further questions that needed to be addressed became apparent. The associated analyses and hypothesis testing took far longer than I had expected. In addition, I still wanted to have the two journal articles published from my thesis before it was examined; and I needed to find employment. The clock hands were moving still faster and my, albeit self-imposed, submission deadline approaching.

I resolved to focus on writing one article and completing job applications at weekends to try to enable me to keep to my time-plan and submit the thesis before the studentship money was spent. Completing over fifty job applications and the few interviews that followed took ever more time away from my thesis writing. Despite this, by the end of my third year, I had one paper accepted in a top international journal, a job (not in academia) and the first draft of my thesis completed (other than the appendices and references). Then, disaster – my job involved moving to a new town and I had to pack up everything related to my research and try to recreate my reassuring piles of articles in a new place! The job was also somewhat pressurised, and I was unable to devote much time to finishing my thesis during the week. Despite my initial plan, weekends became the only real option. My numerous statistical appendices took ages to format, there were numerous references that I had forgotten to include and needed to find; and then I had to address my supervisors’ comments. Eventually my thesis was submitted, three years and four months after starting. Phew – later than the initial goal, but close!

CO-MANAGING TIME

Reflecting as I write this chapter, there is no doubt that my own doctorate experiences still impact on the advice and guidance I share with doctoral students about managing their time when researching and writing their theses. These have included full-time and part-time students and both traditional PhDs and professional doctorates such as DBAs. Some have been on programmes that involve completing research methods training before formally starting their research, whilst others have commenced work on their thesis like I did, on the first day! Over the years we have talked and worked together to, in effect, co-manage time in ways that work for them. From the students' and my own perspective, certain activities and associated realisations have been of particular value at what, in some countries, is referred to as the 'thesis stage'. These include developing and maintaining realistic time-plans, using target setting and self-rewards, establishing patterns of working that enable, re-estimating the time needed and, when needed, seeking help early on. It is these I now consider.

Realistic Time-plans

Without exception, my doctoral students have found it helpful to develop and discuss a realistic time-plan. This outlines what needs to be done to meet the final thesis submission deadline, how long each task is likely to take and when it needs to be completed. We work on the basis that, as the expectation is that a UK doctorate is completed in three to four years full time, or six to eight years part time, our overall plan will be to complete in three years full time or six years part time. This means we have built in some unallocated time to cope with unforeseen circumstances and things going wrong. Conversely, if we were to plan for completion in four/eight years and unforeseen circumstances occurred, we could have major problems.

The time-plan we develop is a living document, so when things change so does the plan. Within all but one of the universities where I have worked, developing such a plan is one of the tasks that need to be undertaken as part of the annual progress review process. However, this is only of real help where students and supervisors discuss what needs to be done and the tasks are broken down into constituent activities. In one progress review, I remember asking a student to explain their Gantt chart, which comprised six or seven activities such as 'Read literature and write review' and 'Collect data'. He looked somewhat surprised. When I asked what was involved in 'Collect data from three case study organisations',

he talked about how he needed to obtain a sampling frame, select the sample, design his questionnaire, pilot test it, revise it, send it out to potential respondents, send follow-up requests and so on. This raised the question as to how this could be completed within two months, especially as he was working with three different organisations. As we discussed in detail the activities involved, his plan became more realistic in terms of the time required.

Target Setting and Self-rewards

From what you have read so far in this chapter, you will probably have guessed that one way my students and I often co-manage their study time is by using each task that needs to be completed as a target for which we agree a deadline date. Usually we break down a task into smaller sub-tasks with clear deliverable outcomes such as a piece of written work by our next supervision. This generally works well, and we have found that, over time, the negotiated 'deadlines' for pieces of work become more realistic as each of us becomes more knowledgeable about our ways of working. However, it is important to recognise that not all students, including some of mine, like to work this way and there has to be mutual engagement if such target setting is to work.

It is also worth relating that some students, particularly those studying part time, are extremely innovative in setting themselves targets or self-imposed deadlines. One undertaking research in her own workplace when collecting observational data set herself the target of at least one observation per week. Another, when transcribing interviews, was determined to transcribe each within a week of its having been undertaken. Yet another set himself the target of writing at least 267 words per day, as by doing this he calculated he could write his 80,000 words thesis in 300 working days! These and other students often talked about rewarding themselves when they met their targets. 'Rewards' have ranged from a bar of chocolate to a visit to the gym to going out with family or friends. However, for each student, the target is achievable by the deadline, the associated reward is meaningful and, crucially, achieving the target within the deadline moves them closer to completing their doctorate on time.

Patterns of Working

Although I treated my own doctorate as, in effect, a Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. job, I recognise for many this is neither feasible nor appropriate. Today, many doctoral students have other commitments

that prevent this approach, whether studying full or part time. When I was a doctoral student, one of my contemporaries' body clock operated on a 26-hour day, so each day he would start working on his thesis two hours later than the day before. Another preferred to work mornings and evenings, keeping her afternoons free. Yet another worked afternoons and evenings. Part-time students also have varied patterns, some preferring to spend a few hours studying every day (normally early morning or late evening), whilst others reserve weekends for their doctoral research. However, these students' differing patterns of study encapsulate three important principles. First, their pattern made sense to them and their lives; second, they were able to maintain their pattern consistently over a long period; and third, their established pattern meant they were working on their doctorates virtually every week. Every pattern, whilst being personal, avoided a need for the student to refamiliarise themselves with the intricacies of their research, as it remained an integral and ongoing part of their lives.

In my doctoral classes on qualitative data analysis, we create data to analyse that also offer insights into students' patterns of working and associated rituals and routines. To prepare for one of these classes, I ask students to undertake a short piece of free writing about how they study. I explain that I am interested in details such as where they study, the time(s) of day, whether or not they make notes and so on, rather than academic theories about learning and the like; and that we will use these data to learn about ways of analysing data. This exercise is not my own, but adapted from one of my favourite books, Becker's (2007) *Writing for Social Scientists*. Analysis of a class's responses usually highlights a series of routines and rituals that need to be undertaken before their studying can commence. However, as Becker indicates in his book, it is our subsequent class discussion that reveals how these can become barriers to using available time productively.

Students find having a routine is, in general, helpful. Yet our discussions reveal how sticking too rigidly to the routine can mean that time can be wasted, and things not done. I recall one student explaining that they were unable to make much progress because they needed full days to work on their doctorate, stressing that anything less was a waste of time. When others in her learning group challenged her to try to use the hours between classes that week to work on her doctorate and report back to them the following week, she was sceptical. Yet she tried it anyway, and found she was able to use periods of less than one hour productively.

Many students, like me, associate a particular location (or a few locations) with studying. These often include a desk in the graduate

student offices or library, a favourite table in a coffee shop, or their dining room table. Our subsequent discussions reveal how associating these specific locations with studying can make it more difficult to work elsewhere. Whilst for many this does not create a problem, a change in circumstance, such as in my case a move to a new town, can mean additional time is needed to create a new productive study space. It also raises a question that I have asked myself – can you study equally productively in a variety of places? Although I now know the answer for me is ‘Yes’, I had to first believe and then prove to myself that I could, rather than use the need to be in a particular place as a reason not to study.

Finally, my qualitative data analysis class reveals many students, particularly those who study at home, find they cannot start studying until they have undertaken household chores, particularly cleaning and washing up. Others talk of needing to go for a run or to the gym. Still others need a mug of hot tea or coffee or to tidy their desk before starting. Whilst varied, these precursors to starting study are obviously important to the individuals, appearing to take on almost ritual-like significance. Whilst you may feel such rituals may not matter to you and take up very little time, I offer a word of warning. During discussion, students sometimes reveal that these rituals have become, or could easily have become, displacement activities. This is particularly likely where activities are being extended and taking up more and more time – a full spring clean or a 10-mile run!

Re-estimating Time

Despite some learning from my own doctorate and numerous subsequent research projects, my research still often takes more time than I expect it to. Sometimes this is due to my own optimism, combined with an inability to estimate (guesstimate?) how long aspects such as data analysis will take. However, for me, the most frustrating delays are those outside the researcher’s control. Fortunately, these can be kept to a minimum with careful planning and building in unallocated time.

In my experience, doctoral students also nearly always underestimate the amount of time required by a university’s processes, in particular those aspects which require submission to a committee or review board with a predetermined cycle of meetings with associated deadlines. One such process is that of obtaining ethical approval. Here it is crucial to ensure the submission is made in time for the required committee meeting and all the requisite paperwork is in place and in precisely the right format. Where research is being undertaken negotiating more than

one set of ethical approvals, such as both university and medical ethics, remember, forewarned is forearmed.

Gaining access to collect data can also take longer than expected. One of my current mentees is researching the resettlement experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children. Gaining access to children who want to participate and ensuring this is undertaken ethically and observes agreed protocols has proved exceptionally time consuming. It has been particularly frustrating when a participant withdraws after consenting. For another part-time student, access that had originally been promised by a large IT company was withdrawn when his gatekeeper departed to work for a different organisation. This was problematic as, at that time, he had no plan regarding what to do where access was not granted. Fortunately, he had extensive networks, meaning the considerable time and effort required to develop further contacts elsewhere were avoided. However, despite these and other such methodological setbacks, alternative ways forward or solutions were found, and the research able to continue, albeit having been delayed. The learning here is, wherever possible, to have an alternative plan in place.

For all but one of my doctoral students, the aspect where the time needed has been underestimated has been in ensuring that their writing is at doctoral level. When talking about my own writing, I often comment that I do not begin to get my thoughts really clear until I try to put them in writing. Seeing my initial words on the screen reveals the inconsistencies and logic leaps in my argument; addressing these necessitates reworking the prose. In other words, we need to allow time to both write and re-write. However, the presentation of such arguments in writing has not been an issue for all my students. One from the start of her doctorate wrote exceptionally clearly and succinctly. I wish I had her language skills.

Seeking Help

Before summarising the realisations I have come to, it is worth highlighting how often doctoral students try to carry on despite what is 'happening' in their lives. As my father used to tell me: 'No one said life has to be fair.' A doctorate is undertaken over a long period and life can appear unfair or, as one of my students told me, it can 'get in the way'. Your current job may become more intensive or, as in my case, you may be offered and accept a job that takes up more of your time than you expected. You may become a parent, with all the additional commitments that entails. Someone you love may become ill and need your care, or

you may become ill. These and many other ‘things’ are the realities of life that occur alongside your doctorate and all will take time to deal with.

In such situations, I believe it is important to keep your supervisors informed about what is happening and listen carefully to any advice they offer. They should be able to suggest whom to talk to and to indicate the professional support likely to be available. If they cannot, please find someone who can. Universities have advisory services and welfare or wellbeing teams who are trained to advise and support students, and this can be helpful in keeping your doctorate on track and, if necessary, requesting additional time. Often there are specialist teams to help international students navigate these processes and associated implications for their study visas. If you are unsure about what you need to do, find them and ask them. They will be able to advise from a position of knowledge regarding what is and is not permissible. Finally, remember, a request for leave of absence from studying, or for an extension to your registration period, remains a request until it is approved by the university. To be approved, it will need to be both permissible within the university’s regulations and supported by a well-documented and justified case with clear evidence. Therefore, although you may wish to assign time to ‘waiting in the wings’ remember, ‘he’ is marching on regardless until the university confirms otherwise!

TIME-RELATED LESSONS FOR KEEPING YOUR DOCTORATE ON TRACK

I began this chapter by talking about time as continuous and regular whilst appearing otherwise. Time, even when it is not visible, is ever present. All doctoral students, albeit with their supervisors’ support, have only a finite amount available within which to complete and submit their thesis. Recognising this, I offer six time-related lessons for keeping your research and thesis writing on track:

- Develop a time-plan and ensure it is a living document that you update regularly.
- Agree achievable targets, either with yourself or with your supervisors, that move you towards thesis completion. When you meet each target, reward yourself.
- Establish a pattern of working that makes sense to you and can be maintained over a long period, allowing you to study regularly and

often so you do not have to keep refamiliarising yourself with the intricacies of your research.

- Beware of rituals and routines becoming displacement activities.
- Recognise research often takes longer than planned, and build unallocated time into your time-plans.
- If things ‘happen’ in your life, talk to your supervisors, seek advice and, where necessary, ask for help.

REFERENCES

- Becker, H.S. (2007). *Writing for Social Scientists* (2nd edition). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bowie, D. (1973). *Aladdin Sane*. Recorded at Trident Studios, London, RCA Studio, New York, NY and Nashville, TN: RCA Victor.