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Main Article:

On Learning the Research Craft: Memoirs of a Journeyman Researcher

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Abstract

The notion of researcher as craftsman is not new. This article takes the analogy further, exploring the similarities between the research student's journey and the artisan's transition from apprentice to journeyman to member of the guild, in the light of the author's own PhD experience. Having completed her apprenticeship with the MSc, she compares her doctoral explorations of the existing literature and the methodology texts with the medieval journeyman's migration from one master craftsman to another, incorporating the knowledge acquired into the eventual masterpiece which determines entry to the guild and perpetuates the myth of a linear research process as against the reiterative reality of the qualitative research journey.

The relationship between journeyman and master is key. Reflecting on her experience, the author suggests that communication and clear expectations have been vital success factors for her. Progress reports and conference papers have been tangible evidence of the distance covered. This evidence, combined with continual updating of a route map, incorporating outputs, due dates, and so forth, has prevented total disorientation. As she nears the end of her journey, she hopes this article conveys something of the hills and valleys along the way, and offers a gleam of light for future and fellow travellers.

Keywords: research journey; qualitative research; bricoleur; methodology

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Reflecting on my PhD journey, I feel like a journeyman craftsman working on the masterpiece which will decide whether or not I will be accepted into the guild. Returning to university, after 16 years in tourism destination management and marketing where practical research is largely survey based, I discovered that the bulk of published academic research in tourism management and marketing is similarly rooted in the positivist and post-positivist traditions. However, I chose to pursue an interpretive research design as I wanted to explore a particular aspect of visitors' interactions in and with destinations. The notion of PhD student as journeyman craftsman first occurred to me as I reviewed the ongoing debate about "qualitative research" in tourism (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Walle, 1997). Proponents (McIntosh, 1998; Riley & Love, 2000) argue that qualitative methodologies offer a richer, more contextualised insight into tourist experience and behaviour, and that while quantitative methodologies are appropriate for measuring what may be happening, they cannot capture the richness and essentially subjective nature of human experience. Hollinshead (1996) therefore argues that the tourism researcher should be a *bricoleur*, using a variety of different methods and techniques to create a research design suited to the research question in hand. This interpretation of bricoleur goes beyond the literal French meaning of handyman to suggest the creative aesthetic of the craftsman. In this article, I will reflect on my own experience to explore the analogy between the postgraduate research journey and the artisan's transitions from apprentice to journeyman to member of the guild. I hope these reflections, although personal and arising from my chosen route, may contribute to our understanding of the doctoral process.

1. Researcher as Artisan

The notion of researcher as craftsman, or artisan, is not new. The German-born novelist, Hermann Hesse (b. 1877-d. 1962) recognised the scholar and craftsman as two sides of the same coin, possibly reflecting on his own personality, as he writes in his novel *Narziss and Goldmund*:

[A] thinker strives to find out the essence of the world by means of logic, and so to define it. He knows that our understanding, and logic, its instrument, are imperfect tools with which to work--just as any skilled craftsman knows very well that no brush or chisel ever made, could give the perfect, shining form of a saint or angel. Yet both these, the thinkers and craftsmen, strive to do it, each in his own way. (Hesse, 1930/1971, pp. 267-268)

Artisans pursue the creative blending of materials, tools, techniques, design, form, and function, often to enable them to realise the vision which inspired them. That vision might not be fully fashioned at the start of the enterprise, only revealing itself fully as the work is completed. Likewise, the academic researcher starts with a question, which can only be satisfactorily answered by blending appropriate data, concepts, research design, research methods, analytical techniques, and so forth. That question may not be fully formed at the start of the journey, but is clarified as the project develops; the researcher learns more about how the concepts and the data respond to the techniques being used.

Whether it is a completely original outcome or a new representation of something familiar, the finished work of both the artisan and the researcher should resonate with their intended audience, as capturing and explaining some aspect of their subject. Although the finished research product must be rigorously informed, the unique fusion of method, data, and the researcher means that it is, in many ways, as much art as science.

Table 1 compares the creative processes of researchers and artisans. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2003) describe the “qualitative researcher” as a bricoleur who puts together different views or voices to create a new vision. Their bricoleur researcher selects from different methods and techniques, within and between competing or overlapping research paradigms and sees research as an interactive process shaped by a myriad of factors including socio-cultural history, personal history, social setting, gender, and so on. The researcher’s philosophical standpoint determines the choice of methodology and research design just as the artisan’s approach to their craft is influenced by their fundamental beliefs: for example, in the [Bauhaus](#) ethos form follows function, or in the [cubist school](#) multiple perspectives are depicted simultaneously in one object.

Table 1. *Comparison Between Researcher and Artisan*

Stage of Journey	Researcher	Artisan
<i>Philosophy/worldview</i>	Both researchers and artisans operate from their own assumptions about the nature of reality and the possibility of understanding and acting upon that reality	
<i>Approach to project</i>	Choice of research tradition and methodology	Choice of style/school
<i>Methods/techniques</i>	What sort of data and how will they be collected and analysed?	Which medium and how will it be worked?
<i>Preparation and practice</i>	Pilot data collection, revision, acquisition of necessary skills, the project plan	Designs, sketches, maquettes, assembling the tools and materials, timescale
<i>Arriving at the finished work</i>	Analysing the data, writing the story, setting it in the context of what has gone before, pointing to future developments, presenting the thesis	Creating the object, working with the chosen material, selecting the final setting, frame, resting place

2. Research Student as Journeyman

In the medieval craft guilds, apprentices lived and worked in the workshops of their masters, learning the simple tools and tasks of the trade, following the masters’ procedures and patterns (Wolek, 1999). The academic apprenticeship for most researchers begins in the undergraduate years: they are introduced to academic writing, literature searches, use of references, learning the accepted models, standard approaches to completing assignments. In my case, this apprenticeship was in another discipline, modern languages, and completed 26 years ago. For me, therefore, there is a sense in which the year I spent studying for an MSc was an advanced apprenticeship, where I refreshed the basic academic skills (appropriate writing style, literature search, and so

forth), adding to them the trade-specific skills acquired over 16 years in tourism destination management. There were also new skills and new tools such as referencing and data analysis software packages. With the dissertation, I took my first steps along the road to crafting new knowledge, adding to as well as reformulating existing knowledge.

My apprenticeship complete with the achievement of the MSc, I set off on my journeyman travels. Medieval journeymen would travel around Europe, spending time in the workshops of different masters to learn about all aspects of their chosen craft: not simply the technical tricks of the trade, but also the commercial and other skills necessary for them to set up and run their own workshops. The PhD student may not travel about physically from place to place in quite the same way (although one research student in our school decamped from Aberdeen to Durham to follow his supervisor), but we still sit at the feet of acknowledged masters, whether in our discipline or in the craft of research itself. The literature review and methodology chapters of our theses are a distillation of these different sojourns and the way they have shaped not only our research project, but our development as researchers.

The journeymen did not work solely on whatever piece or project took their fancy; they were often allotted specific tasks and responsibilities. Similarly, doctoral students do not spend all their time on their research project, but are expected to undergo formal training in research methods, as well as attend conferences, write and submit articles and deliver progress reports for various institutional requirements. The formal training, the degree procedures, and the research methods texts tend to give the impression that the research journey is a straightforward, linear trail, where philosophical viewpoint naturally leads to choice of methodology, which, together with research purpose, dictates the particular toolbox required to address the research question. Indeed, our masterpiece, the thesis, will perpetuate this notion, because we too will take the reader/examiner by the hand, down a linear path from fully fledged research question, through our worldview, via the literature review and the methodology chapters, to our data, explication, and conclusions.

However, in reality, my journey has been much more like that of a medieval journeyman mason: wandering from one cathedral to another and back again, as I sought to understand not only the body of work in my subject, but where I was situated in relation to tourism knowledge and knowledge in general. I knew from the outset that I wanted to investigate the impact of visitors' interactions and encounters with and within a destination on their perceptions and destination image, and to do this by interviewing visitors while they were in the destination, to hear their stories. As a destination manager, I had ensured that my destinations participated in standardised, statistically based benchmarking studies and visitor satisfaction surveys, but was convinced that I had missed capturing what visitors really thought because of the limitations of using a structured instrument (Walle, 1997) and the lack of budget for a more in-depth and interpretive approach. Consequently I spent many hours in the cathedral of qualitative research, puzzling over the different forms and styles, trying to decide which branch of the methodological craft would be best suited to the research question and my standpoint.

I fretted that I did not seem to fit neatly into the categories on offer. I read Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz, 2003) and thought I might have a home at last: having no a priori hypothesis, wanting to allow explanations to emerge from the data, and using categories and coding seemed to point me towards *grounded theory* as a method, and my desire to understand visitors' experience from their own perspective suggested I might belong to the constructivist school. However, I still felt uncomfortable: I feared that interviewing visitors during their holiday might not produce the lengthy interviews (2-3 hours) which seemed to be the norm in the accounts of constructivist studies in the sociological literature. The breakthrough came when a fellow research student in a completely different discipline suggested that I investigate *phenomenology*. Reading van Manen's account of capturing *lived experience*, I had the sensation of coming home (van Manen, 1990). Here was a methodology which chimed with my desire to capture visitor experience before it became overlaid with the accretions of memory, to allow that experience to emerge from the data, and to identify themes which would lead to an understanding of how visitors' interactions in and with the tourist destination affect their image of that destination. I had not arrived, but the route had become much clearer.

Irrespective of actual methodology, the emphasis in interpretive analysis is on the reiterative nature of the process. The journeyman researcher has to learn to move from detailed inspection and interrogation of the data to stepping back to see the larger, conceptual issues, and back again in much the same way that a painter or sculptor might concentrate on a particular detail before stepping back to consider the whole composition, or the mason from the detail of a gargoyle to totality of the cathedral it serves. Creswell (1998) refers to this as the "analytic spiral." My experience is that the journeyman researcher not only circles to and fro between data and analysis, but between all the elements of the research project. At times, it seems as if each journal article or book chapter I read leads me to revisit not only that particular area of my literature review or methodology, but to look with fresh eyes at what I have uncovered in the data. Similarly, new questions or insights from my interview data would send me questing through the literature again, as hearing about new techniques might send an enthusiastic journeyman to yet another craft master. The journey is anything but linear; more often we meander from place to place, craft hall to craft hall, but always with the underlying purpose of acquiring more knowledge, more skill and more experience. After each foray, we return to the magnum opus, look at it in a new light, add something here, chip away at something there, remould it or polish it--always challenging the work with what we have learned.

Some of the stops along the way are imposed from outside. During the first 18 months, research students in my institution undergo formal learning in research methods, with test pieces in the form of assessed end-of-module assignments. The classes brought together research students from across many disciplines, and inevitably some material felt less relevant to my particular project. It can be difficult to remember, in that first flush of enthusiasm and commitment to one's own study, that a large part of the PhD is not about one's own subject, but about acquiring the skills, techniques and understanding to be accounted a qualified researcher. Apart from the passionate conviction that one will be adding in some way to the body of knowledge, tackling a PhD also needs the sheer

stubborn persistence to keep going even when one feels completely overwhelmed by the size of the task, the amount of data, the myriad of different views from opposing masters. The block of marble is recalcitrant, the tools blunt, the brain refuses to function and the route map has been obscured. Eventually one comes to trust in one's sense of direction, but in the meantime it is better to concentrate on mundane tasks like recording references and formatting tables.

Every research student is an individual, and we learn to work in different ways within the bounds of our discipline and the relationship we have with supervisors, our craft masters. Driven by the need for tangible proof of progress, I felt the need to write as I went along. The modules on the research methods course, and then conference papers, all helped me to explore where I was on the journey and acted, as it were, as sketches, early attempts, at sections of the thesis. All these fragments have been built on over time, morphing from half-understood designs into their current state: a number of maquettes waiting to be transformed into chapters and moulded into the final masterpiece offered up for examination. Yes, it can sometimes feel like mere repetition but it is rare indeed to be a Mozart, pouring forth complete works with apparent ease. The lesson that it is better to capture the emergent ideas straightaway, so they can be polished and refined at a later stage, has been a hard one. As a keen amateur musician, it is one I have had to learn with each new musical instrument: I want to be [Richard Thompson](#), [John Coltrane](#) or [Jacques Loussier](#) from day one!

Institutional formalities, such as the research degree registration (i.e., project approval) and procedures for transfer from MPhil to PhD, provided opportunities to take stock of my journey, although these involved tedious procedures. Providing the factual report on what I had done and attaching my first faltering analyses and drafts of tentative chapters demonstrated to me, as well as to the university, that despite all the times when I felt completely at sea, I had amassed a portfolio of pieces through which I could trace my development in the research craft and see that I was a few steps further towards joining the academic guild. Formal recognition of that progress is a great boost to the confidence. External recognition comes in other ways, too. I am fortunate in that I have had little pressure but every encouragement from my supervisors to submit papers to conferences and journals. These papers have given me the chance to follow interesting lines, explore whether they are a possible part of the eventual masterpiece, or just fascinating digressions which might lead to another work. These sketches are added to the portfolio and the material plundered, reworked, for the next chapter, the next building block

What of the other journeymen in the workshop, and the relationship between journeyman and guild master? In my school, the research students have been allotted specific space together, rather than working beside their supervisors. This has its good points: we are all on the same journey, albeit at different stages in different disciplines, and can share moans and magic moments of breakthrough. After years of being co-located with colleagues in tourism teams, however, I have found it difficult that there is rarely anyone in my field in my workspace with whom to share one of those 5 minutes' off-the-cuff subject-specific chats which can be so helpful in threshing out momentary confusion or articulating a half-conceived thought. Update meetings with the supervisor are useful for

this as well, even sending off e-mails as the thought strikes, but these are not quite the same as that instant sharing.

Of course, there must be as many facets to the supervisor-student relationship as there are students and supervisors, it being a relationship between human persons. It can be great; it can be lousy. Some medieval craft masters were criticised for simply insisting on imitation, rather than helping apprentices and journeymen understand how and why their practices worked (Wolek, 1999, p.410) and I suspect there are equally unsatisfactory research student-supervisor relationships. From observation, I would suggest that where difficulties arise, they may be down to unclear or unrealistic expectations. These can be as simple as how often the student is expected to report on progress, have update meetings, or produce some tangible output, or as complicated as incompatible personalities.

Reflecting on my relationship with my supervisors, I return to Hermann Hesse's protagonists, Narziss and Goldmund. Narziss, the scholar monk, subtly encourages Goldmund, the novice, to realise his potential, helping him to study but also to discover his own path, that of an artist craftsman. Whilst I would not claim to be a talented craftsman, my supervisors have both been more mentors than teachers; like Narziss, they have accepted that I may not follow them into the academic sphere once I have achieved the PhD, but go back into tourism management in one form or another. Like the best craft masters, they have offered constructive criticism and unstinting encouragement, and been generous in collaboration.

Embarking upon the research journey after years in industry, I was insecure about my academic ability, but confident in dealing with working relationships. From the outset, I asked what was expected in terms of outputs and updates, and have been open about my progress and about competing demands on my time. I have never felt harried by supervisors about producing written work, although this may be because I am obsessively organised, with project plans on spreadsheets, setting my own (some would say unrealistic) deadlines. I share these with my supervisors and family, so that not only will I let myself down if I do not meet a target date, I will also disappoint others. In reality, this framework (outputs, due dates, and non-research commitments) is vital to my successful completion of the grand project. As the map for my journeyman wanderings, it has prevented total disorientation and allowed me to manage my various non-academic engagements as part of the itinerary.

3. Lessons Learned

In sum, then, my PhD experience has been a journey, from which I have learned much. First, I have learnt that the journey is anything but linear: the path can be erratic, sometimes heading in two directions or more simultaneously, but always encompassing more than imagined. Second, progress is sometimes a question of stubborn persistence and sometimes of knowing when to step back and let the subconscious do its work. Third, the times of doubt before the magical "Aha" moment become less profound, as successive small triumphs, such as a paragraph written, a diagram conceived, or an article

understood, reinforce the confidence that I can deliver my masterpiece. Fourth, reshaping or reworking does not necessarily mean I got it wrong originally, just that I have found a better way to express the idea, in the same way a craft smith might melt down and refashion a piece of jewellery from the same material to express his or her intention more precisely. Fifth, it is legitimate and healthy to express frustration and bounce ideas off colleagues, friends, and family: sometimes talking to someone who knows little about my work has been the most help, because I have had to make explicit some of the underlying assumptions and this has helped to clarify these for me as well as for my audience. Last, but by no means least, without the good relationship with my supervisors and their gentle guiding hand, I would have found the journey much harder.

4. Conclusion

As I said at the start, the notion of being a journeyman researcher occurred to me some months ago, but until now it has remained a vague, half-formed idea. Following Wolcott's advice (Wolcott, 1990), writing it out has begun to crystallise that idea and added another sketch towards the final work. I hope also that in using my own experience to elaborate the metaphor of PhD student as journeyman researcher, I have been able to convey something of the hills and valleys on the research journey, even offer a glimmer to light the way for a future traveller. Writing this article has been itself a distraction from, and a contribution to, the ongoing writing up. It is an exciting and perhaps the most challenging time, as I must now stay at my workbench, however tempting it may be to continue the search for other masters who might have yet more I could learn. All those sketches and maquettes have to be brought together into the ultimate test piece. I spend more and more time wrestling with the task of hewing words and diagrams from the raw material of data and literature review; there are still days when what emerges from the word processor is the equivalent of the first botched lumps of wood from a novice wood turner's lathe, but the end of the journey is in sight. When he finished a piece of work, Goldmund felt that:

The work became the possession of other men, was seen, judged, praised, and he was honoured for it. But his heart and workshop seemed deserted, nor could he tell if all his labour had been for anything of its worth. (Hesse, 1971, p. 281)

Probably, after the first euphoria of completion, I shall also have that sense of anticlimax, but I know it will be transitory, and underneath will be a tremendous sense of accomplishment, of one journey's end and another one's beginning.

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