

‘Out of anguish, incredible things can emerge’

Mick Cooper describes how the devastating experience of almost failing his PhD has shaped his life and his career

My PhD viva* was 25 years ago, on Friday 6 January 1996. I'd read through my thesis a few times and felt fairly well prepared. It was a somewhat unusual topic: 'Facilitating the expression of subpersonalities through the use of masks: an exploratory study'.¹ During my undergraduate studies, I'd gone to a mask workshop and been amazed at the power of masks to bring out different 'sides' of my self (or 'subpersonalities'). I researched it for an undergraduate paper and then, in the early 1990s, applied to the University of Sussex to do a PhD on the topic. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do as a career, either journalism or academia, but as I couldn't find a way in to media work, I thought I'd do the latter, particularly when I was awarded a grant from the University of Sussex to support me. That's when I also started counselling training, as I thought I'd better do something practical alongside the PhD.

The internal examiner for the viva was a tutor of mine from my undergraduate days and someone who I knew fairly well. The external examiner was an academic in humanistic psychology. I didn't know much about her, but I had read a couple of her books and they seemed interesting. The three of us sat that Friday in the internal examiner's office, dark and small, with his bike leaning against the bookshelves.

I remember more about after the viva than the viva itself. But the questions came quickly and they felt pretty intense from the start. 'Why was I writing about

subpersonalities?' 'What evidence was there for them?' 'What made me think they were a legitimate basis for a PhD?' I answered the questions as best I could, wondering if that was how a viva was supposed to be, anxious that, perhaps, this was more critical than normal. After about 90 minutes, I was asked to leave, and sat in the department common room. I felt a rising anxiety from the pit of my stomach. I'd done my best, but something felt wrong. One of my other undergraduate tutors passed by and asked me how things had gone. He said he was sure it would all be fine - no one got failed for their viva. I wasn't so sure.



I was called back into the darkened room. It was like receiving a death sentence. They had, indeed, decided to fail the thesis. Well, not quite fail it, but they were proposing that I resubmit for an MPhil, the next to lowest outcome. The main thing I remember was crying - I think it was an armchair I was sitting in - in a corner of the room, sobbing away. I went to see my supervisor to tell him the news, then I walked and walked and walked. Bought some cigarettes for the first time in years.

I came back to campus and went to see my supervisor again. He said that the examiners had decided that, in fact, I could have another chance to resubmit for a PhD, but it would require a complete rewrite - four years' work down the drain!

That weekend I hardly slept, thinking over and over again what had gone wrong and what I would do. I remember walking with my then partner along the Brighton seafront, trying to make sense of things and work out ways forward. Back home, moments alone were the worst, when my partner went to sleep, and my thoughts turned to suicide. It wasn't just failing my thesis, it was where I was in life. I was almost 30 and had been struggling for years to work out what I wanted to do. I had been watching so many family members and friends succeed in their careers and, although I was starting to teach psychology, I felt like I was going nowhere. The one thing I had was this PhD and the possibility of being an academic, and now even that was in tatters. It was the last closed door in a series of closed doors, the last possibility I'd been hanging out for.

What went wrong?

So why had things gone so badly wrong? Had my supervisor let me down? Was it that the examiners had been unfair, or had I just done a really poor piece of work? It took me months, maybe even years, to work out. But now I'd understand it something like this. When I started the work, I was doing it in the field of cultural studies. It was about masks, and with a fairly eclectic method - I was drawing on literature, ethnography, drama therapy. There was no stringent design, but that seemed fine for that field of study, and others who had submitted a thesis in a similar way had done fine.

But then, about halfway through my programme, we'd shifted my registration to psychology. My supervisor, I think rightly, wanted me to come out with a doctorate in psychology so that I could use that if I wanted to go into that field as a profession, in teaching or clinically. But the problem was, the focus or content of my thesis hadn't really changed. So my examiners, who were relatively traditional psychologists, thought the whole thing was just off the wall - far too a-methodological.

Professional learnings

As a psychology thesis yes, they were right, it didn't meet expected standards. But, somehow, my supervisor had not seen that coming, and I hadn't either. There were warning signs - for instance, I presented at my psychology department's seminar series and I could see that they weren't too taken by being asked to wear masks, but I hadn't wanted to see the problems.

One thing I did that was really wrong was to isolate myself from any academic community while I was working on my PhD. I never went to conferences, engaged with departmental seminars, or submitted to journals. And the one time I did present, as described above, I didn't stay open to how people were responding. I was in my own little bubble, and that wasn't shattered until my actual viva. I think I did that because I was scared: worried that others wouldn't be that interested in my work or feel it was good enough.

But I made the classic mistake of avoiding, rather than facing up to, the thing I was afraid of.

As a supervisor, I really try to be straight with my students if I think there are problems. If I don't think the work is at the right level, I'll do my best to say so. It's much better they hear it from me than from their examiners.

These days, most universities have a minimum of two supervisors for doctoral work, and that's absolutely key to ensuring that it's not dependent on just one academic's views. We do our best, but our blind spots are, by definition, blind spots. Really getting an honest second opinion on students' work - triangulation - makes it much less likely that things will go off track.

I'm still angry at my examiners. Fair enough, they didn't like the work and didn't think it was at doctoral standards, but they were so critical and so personal about its failings. When I'm a doctoral examiner now, even if I feel more work needs to be done, I try to say it supportively and warmly, with kindness, sensitivity and empathy. There's also something about acknowledging the multiplicity of perspectives on things. As an examiner, I have to give my perspective on what I think is doctoral standard - I can't ever be entirely objective, but I can acknowledge it as my perspective. You can criticise something without criticising the person behind it.

Personal learnings

It took three years to resubmit my thesis (which finally passed), but somehow, within 10 years of that first viva, I was a professor of counselling at a prestigious university in Scotland. I guess one of the best things that came out of this whole period of my life is that I've never taken a job for granted. I feel incredibly privileged to have had a chance to work and teach - lecturing, meeting students, researching and writing. It's amazing to have this role and this opportunity to connect with others. There is still part of me, deep down, that doesn't believe that I should have it.

The downside, which has not been so great for relationships and, perhaps, as a father, is that I'm still so focused on work. If I don't do a set number

of hours each day, I start to feel almost shaky and that I'm letting myself and work down. I've worked, maybe, 55 hours a week for the past 20 or so years, and rarely taken my full annual leave. And that's in part, I'm sure, because my 1996 self still regularly tells me, 'You'll always be a failure and outside of things.'

I feel unsettled, and then some relief, reflecting on this time - perhaps there's still more to process in therapy - that sheer, devastating sense of failure and shame, a sense of hollowness at my very core. But there's also something profoundly uplifting about it: how you can be right at the very bottom, utterly hopeless, but if you keep going, it can get better and amazing things can happen. I'd love to say 'trust the process' or that, in some way, it was always going to be OK, but in many ways I think I was just incredibly lucky that things worked out. Part of me, maybe that 1996 part, believes I could still be struggling away.

Out of the storm, chaos and anguish of life, there's still the possibility of some incredible things emerging. Things can change. Even when we've totally given up on hope, hope and possibility may still hold out for us. ■

*The oral test during which a PhD candidate defends their PhD thesis in front of examiners

REFERENCE

1. <https://mick-cooper.squarespace.com/s/1995-first-PhD-thesis.pdf>



About the author

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