

## A shared research journey

Stephanie Xerri Agius and Daniel Xerri

<https://goo.gl/yMVtjY>

### Introduction

The metaphor of the journey is often invoked when describing research (Midgley, Trimmer, & Davies, 2013). A journey suggests change as opposed to stasis and it is assumed that when one conducts research one not only instigates change in the outside world but experiences change within oneself. Despite having been criticized for the linearity it implies (McCulloch, 2013), the journey metaphor for research is lauded for the transformation it leads to:

Researchers-as-voyagers travel from familiar inner and outer landscapes into unknown territories with new horizons. They progress through an itinerary of developing meanings, both epistemological and ontological. Researchers-as-voyagers are engaged in a process of becoming, and of discovering a voice. The ‘voyage’ tenders experimental possibilities for alternative understandings of who they are, who they could be and what they know. It opens up transitional spaces for the formation of a new sense of identity. (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006, p. 13)

Just as the research journey is described as bountiful for those who embark on it, it is also typified as an experience replete with isolation:

The research path that one takes on never promises to be easy and although many will accompany the researcher and many more will give support, one also has to realize that he or she cannot escape from the feeling of loneliness and the surfacing array of doubts here and there that one encounters. (De Levay, 2013, p. 32)

This brief article highlights some of the advantages and challenges of sharing one’s research journey. As partners in research and life, we have benefited from our distinct kind of collaboration but we have also faced and overcome a number of difficulties in order to ensure that each of our own particular ambitions have come to fruition. We illustrate some of the things we have learnt while working together on research projects, conference presentations, and journal articles. It highlights some of the achievements that were made possible through our shared research journey but it

also demonstrates how, along the way we have had to overcome challenges that have tested much more than the strength of our research partnership.

### **Developing as Researchers**

Our shared research journey commenced at university during our undergraduate studies. We grew accustomed to structured days of studying, attending lectures, preparing for examinations, and writing a dissertation. This continued during our postgraduate studies (reading for an MA in English and a PGCE in ELT). As soon as we started teaching, we read for an MED in Applied Linguistics part-time. Once we got married, this meant juggling work, study and domestic responsibilities.

Following parallel academic paths means being able to discuss research methodology and research topics at length. This also allows us to voice concerns and offer each other suggestions on how to resolve issues. The shared journey provides us with intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation to conduct research. For example, our development as researchers involves jointly researching our classrooms. The fact that we teach the same subject and are interested in similar research areas enables us to collaborate on research. This has provided us with more opportunities for classroom research, which means we pool our resources when co-authoring papers and co-presenting. At times, there is also a sense of healthy competition between us because of different views on how to undertake research.

### **Co-authoring a Paper**

When considering an area of interest, we reflect on the best approach and methodology to research the area. We decide who will be responsible for what part of the research study. We collaborate on gathering and analyzing the data. This work is divided between us, but not necessarily equally. Once this process is completed we decide who is going to be the lead author and begin drafting the paper, each one of us being responsible for specific sections. We review each other's work, provide constructive feedback, and engage in revisions.

Co-authoring a paper entails negotiating roles and responsibilities. It also demands being more self-disciplined in adhering to deadlines whilst taking into account other personal commitments. Whilst we provide each other with encouragement when collaborating together on a writing project, joint publication also teaches perseverance, patience, and sensitivity when critiquing one another's contributions. In this, being partners in life can be both advantageous and a drawback. The former because we have grown accustomed to voicing our opinions freely,

and the latter because we have to be careful not to cause resentment and conflict. Co-authoring has also enabled us to capitalise on each other's strengths and address specific flaws.

### **Co-presenting at Conferences**

The possibility of attending and co-presenting at the same conferences is a bonus as it means partaking in the same continuing professional development (CPD) experiences. This is due to the fact that we share the same academic background and similar research interests, which means that when searching for conferences online we know exactly which type of events interest us. If we come across a conference we think we could both benefit from, we consider whether it would be possible for both of us to attend and sometimes co-present.

Similar to co-authoring, co-presenting has taught us the importance of negotiation and decision-making. For instance, this involves dividing the presentation time, deciding who is to lead the presentation, and who is to present which sections. Being partners in life allows us to negotiate when and how to work on a presentation. The convenience of working so closely together from our home facilitates the process.

### **Benefits and Challenges**

The benefits of a shared research journey include: working in a highly supportive environment; a sense of discipline in adhering to schedules; and the possibility to study and write even during holidays and at weekends as there is mutual understanding and fewer distractions. Throughout the years we have developed our respective research interests and sharpened our foci; sharing these with each other means that we learn jointly. For example, in relation to methodology we have discovered and researched different types of research design, which we have learned about either through our shared collaborations or through our discussions of how we have used different methods for our individual research. This meant exploring both qualitative and quantitative methods and developing our individual strengths whilst counteracting particular weaknesses.

The challenges include: time constraints; managing different responsibilities and personal commitments; reaching a compromise; and switching roles between being life partners and researchers. At times, the tension between life and research commitments tests the strength of our personal and research partnership. The type and degree of challenge can result in conflict and difficulty. So the question is, how does one overcome a challenge? It depends on the challenge. If it is something that we both face, then it requires perseverance, joint effort, and the willingness to resolve it.

For example, to overcome the danger of overfamiliarity that such a closely shared research experience might lead to, we have found it important to regularly collaborate with other researchers. If the challenge involves only one of us, then the other person provides support and a willingness to listen and offer advice. The backbone of our research journey is a blend of mutual understanding, continuous support, and equal measures of patience and compassion.

## References

- Batchelor, D., & Di Napoli, R. (2006). The doctoral journey: perspectives. *Educate*, 6(1), 13-24.
- De Levay, C. (2013). How embracing a particular theory might lead to search for an application: A reversed research journey. In E. Lee, C. Blackmore & E. Seal (Eds.), *Research journeys: A collection of narratives of the doctoral experience* (pp. 32-39). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- McCulloch, A. (2013). The quest for the PhD: a better metaphor for doctoral education. *International Journal for Researcher Development*, 4(1), 55-66.
- Midgley, W., Trimmer, K., & Davies, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Metaphors for, in and of education research*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

