

The Present of a Lifelong Learner: How Psychodrama inspired a post-graduate research programme

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KEY WORDS

research, supervision, emergent design, fresh data, application of psychodrama in academia, internal locus of authority, passion, living spirit, inspiration, culture, being companioned, Max Clayton

No one wanted to do it but I was keen, very keen. I saw an opportunity to give our post-graduate students, most of them fresh from overseas, a vital experience of research which would arise out of their interests, work towards their aspirations and build on their capabilities. I volunteered to lead and redesign Research Methods, the foundation paper for our post-graduate students, mainly in Computer Science and Information Systems, with some Maths and Stats students as well.

Unexpectedly the Head of School approved the radical new approach. Go for it, he said, you know it's a poisoned chalice, don't you? He told me that no matter what I did, it would be impossible to please everyone; the different thesis supervisors and lecturers had different requirements. I felt relief. I saw the light in Max Clayton's eyes as he told someone about to embark on some daring and dignified adventure that it was impossible. Thank you Max for that gift of freedom and adventure.

We averaged around eighty new students per semester. The majority were fresh from overseas, a good third from China, another third from India. The original paper was structured like many research methods papers around the world to output a research proposal which consists of literature review, a research question and a research plan and design. My new structure for the paper was inspired by the psychodramatic approach: to be a personal, lived experience. Students weren't going to regurgitate others' research and theories and just make a plan, they were going to do a whole research project. They were going to collect data that was fresh to the world and do their own analysis. They were going to try on the identity of researcher. In psychodrama terms, there was to be the fostering of an internal locus of authority compared with relating solely to an external locus.

Many of my colleagues found supervising research projects very challenging, often having real difficulty completing a research project in one year full time study. How on earth was someone going to do a full research project in one paper in one semester? I had been observing and considering various things relating to this for some time. I saw that no matter how long you have to do a research proposal, once data was begun to be collected, the focus and the method typically shifted. Much of the literature so painstakingly reviewed is no longer relevant and a whole new lot of literature has to be reviewed. This can be especially painful in a PhD where the candidate has almost a year to come up with a proposal.

In the new Research Methods paper, the amount of focus on reviewing previous research and literature could depend on the particular situation of each research project. In most cases, literature review could be minimal. The students could learn about literature reviewing in other papers; it was well emphasised there. In the new structure the aim was for students to get a real experience of research which then sets up a foundation for actually being able to critique other research.

The beginning orientation was that the student identify a topic and question that they were vitally interested in, something they wanted to really find out about, perhaps related to the job and career they wished to obtain or part of the vision they had for the future. Here's some feedback about this that I got from students.

- *I sincerely appreciate your effort and support and thank you for allowing me the freedom to develop my thinking on my areas of interest.*
- *I am motivated to learn because it is a project that I am passionate about.*
- *Your teaching and presence inspired me to select topics in the philosophy of computing technology area, especially the thought experiment about simulated reality, which I wouldn't have thought of doing in my wildest dreams earlier.*

I worked on making the guidelines succinct and precise. I passionately promoted and illustrated things in the lectures, interacting with some brave ones in class. I was informed by lots of practical training and mentoring in psychodrama in leading groups such that the group warmups were identified and produced and worked with.

A common thing was students' lack of confidence. Many saw academic research as some external thing beyond them. I got curious and specific about what research acumen and capability they already had. This strengths based approach is central to psychodrama. I found out that many students were already quite competent 'researchers' in their areas of interest. One student recalled the process of buying a pair of jeans: the sizing up, trying on, etc. There were a large number of criteria of assessment. I emphasised this approach was exactly what will work as a researcher. This was a

revelation for some and an opening up into owning research. The well developed shopping habits could be applied to an academic research endeavour. This transferring of capability from one area of life to a new area is a common thing occurring in psychodramatic productions.

For many, writing is something that becomes judged and assessed. I was very keen to see how writing could become an ally for each supervisee. Perceiving the blank page like an empty stage and writing as a production where it talks back to you and you can move things around and try things out has been very rewarding.

Similarly, beginning with the thesis structure as a way to organise any writing has been highly efficient and has also stimulated the writing. For example, if one is investigating a particular question, then write your thinking down and create a section header and put it in the introduction chapter. If that particular area ends up being investigated, then the writing can stay in the introduction chapter. However, if the focus shifts, then the writing is not wasted or put to the side and forgotten about, but it can be moved to the future work section. This approach is a great way to organise all the thoughts in a fashion that facilitates the final output stage which can be very overwhelming with multiple warmups. As well as efficiency, it also sets up conditions for writing to be an ally. One's ponderings has weight minus any external assessment considerations.

One student in Research Methods said the most important thing in his life right now was to please me. "How come," I said. "To get an 'A'," he replied. "Good," I said, "everything will be geared towards that. My feedback and guidance will be towards excellence. You've made a good start by being honest. Let's carry that on. You could become the subject of your research. Your experience, thoughts, feelings, actions become the data."

Another student didn't know what to do. I said "Start with the most likely, investigate it a bit more, collect a bit data and we'll review it for goodness of fit." He did the first one and after a week knew it wasn't a good fit. I inquired how did he know. Then he tried another one, then another. He ended up trying out several and got to the end of the semester without any being a complete fit. However, he had got clearer about the actual set of criteria and what he wanted. Sometimes coming up with a refreshed set of criteria to assess something is a very valuable contribution to a research area. He got a satisfying grade.

Individual supervision was highly useful and at times, essential. The student needs to be companioned and have a supervisor who can reflect things and lay out the dynamics occurring. This was another principle central to psychodrama: the fostering and nurturing of cooperative working relationships. That is greatly furthered by treating the other as an individuated person and them vice versa. I said to the students, "You are post-grad now. I will not be a school teacher who demands obedience. It is up to you. You must

take the initiative. If you don't, that won't be my business but you may or may not produce work that will get a good grade. Many of you have other things in your life and if you don't put much effort into this paper, I will not take that as a reflection of any personality deficiency."

Being around Max Clayton has been highly beneficial in treating others as sovereign beings at the same time as being a sovereign being myself. I remember Max illustrating how mutuality and reciprocity does not mean we have to wait until there is power equality. This appears very pertinent and useful in organisations and the seeking of wellbeing and social justice. Such new and rich encounters occur between two parties who are different.

- *My sincere thanks also go to Dr Philip Carter who provided me with feedback relating to this project during the study time of his research paper, for enlightening me about the first glance of research and for supporting me spiritually throughout the research activities. His comments and life lessons gave me motivations during this project.*
- *I've slowly realised how much attention you've paid to understanding each one of us because you seem to hit the nail on the head with each comment.*
- *I loved the chat we had yesterday and believe me the words that you said — "I know you can do it"they have touched my heart. Once again, after many years, I felt that yes I can do it...however difficult things might get Thank you firstly for being a wonderful professor and giving valuable insights into the subject and secondly but most importantly for being a wonderful person....I guess had I not taken this decision of coming to NZ, I would have missed out on meeting a person who could rekindle the fire within me to succeed despite any kind of situation.*
- *This is the best gift I ever received outside family. I am grateful for it. I am sad to see the end of this mentorship... I believe that you are the man and I want to become like you, a mentor who can set students free and ignite their spiritual sparks.*

I made myself available, almost always replying to student queries on the day, often within the hour. This was unusual in academia. However, it nourished me. I would often be supervising fifty or more students but the workload was fine. I often relished the interactions. Sometimes I would wake at 5am and a whole raft of email treats were there waiting for me.

All sorts of areas, usually with some connection to IT, were investigated. Here's a sample:

- *A child's experience of web search.*
- *Spur-of-the-moment blogging: A qualitative study of inspiration amongst the users of blogs.*

- *Consumer's perspectives of wireless cardiac monitoring: Results of a small New Zealand telehealth project.*
- *Copyright Infringers: Decent people with no options or indecent people with nefarious motives? (The outcome of this study proposed a new business model to better involve consumers and producers particularly in poorer countries.)*
- *The Pervasiveness of Web Standards. (This study revealed that basic web standards can make a foreign language web page intelligible for users.)*

Some extraordinary work was done. One student was alarmed at the influence of hate speech and false news occurring during elections in her country. She looked at the willingness to question one's opinions and prejudices; whether people verified things. She found many did not because they perceived contrary rewards such as belonging and being liked. 70% were not willing to accept contradictory evidence. There were various reasons. There was no correlation of willingness with educational level. The data indicated that if a person's need to belong to a group is stronger than the need to be in truth, then no amount of presenting evidence will work. We then had a decision about whether to focus on the 70% or on the 30% who were willing and able to update.

She looked for what made a difference towards being more willing to update one's views and beliefs. She found the sharing of personal experiences and stories, ability to make contributions to society, and having commitment to learning were key motivators. We found this a highly stimulating finding. Instead of trying to educate people who were unwilling and won't update anyway, we could see how to set up conditions in which people were invited to share, contribute and belong. We didn't do that work but it was the invitation for others to follow up on.

I was involved by being naïve and asking questions: what's the next thing... what will be most useful... what will set up conditions for what you want? The psychodrama practice of interviewing for role has been highly useful for nurturing that capability in me.

Her inquiry kept moving from one new research question to the next one, flexible and respondent. This is called an emergent design. It is well known and well practiced in psychodrama. Production of the immediate warmup of the protagonist sets up the territory for a relevant response to arise. On and on, the universe as it is, is revealed and lived into.

- *During your supervision in that small research, you repeatedly mentioned: value the data that you've collected. Now, I do believe that I didn't value the data in that project enough. Although I have done that later in my thesis, and look where it got me to. So, Thank you.*

- *I will miss interacting with you Philip as a supervisor. It was a good journey wherein I learnt a lot from my own mistakes and realisation. I used to jump to conclusions before this, now I make that as a hypothesis and research more in it.*

The new research questions that are evoked by a research project at its completion are often very exciting and stimulating to the people in the field. This aspect can be lost to Masters and PhD students who are so busy proving how powerful and solid their research and approach is that they don't highlight and celebrate the new challenges arising. Researchers love new questions to delve into.

There were many beneficial effects from the paper, new functioning that developed in students. There's evidence of the usefulness of creativity in research.

- *I once again wanted to acknowledge your impact on my life. Feeling more inspired more motivated more alive after your classes! I want to express my gratitude for a very enchanting learning experience I had thanks to you with research methods. Not just for the subject, but I believe I received many more important pointers from you during the process in general. I have started to learn how to learn!*

Freedom and kindness can also be an integral part of a research endeavour.

- *I learned about freedom from your teaching. You not only spoke about freedom, but also behaved with freedom, then I am convinced with your freedom. I started to feel freedom when it comes to me from time to time. This helped me to take leadership role for me, as a Chinese living overseas. When I am relaxed, the team can feel it and it helps unlock the team productivity. Then I learned about joy of learning. The learning is no longer boring and tedious. I don't learn with tear and sweat, but with joy. It gives me more knowledge. This year, I learned about love without discrimination. This helped me to grow more confident, not because I think I know better, but I know I care. When I offer my genuine advice, people find them trustworthy.*

Sometimes there was the gift of having a new experience outside of the cultural background.

- *In all honesty, I had never attempted 'research' as it is defined and prevalent in New Zealand universities back home in India. There it was all mechanical, structured, with so many exams and a lot of difference in power dynamics between lecturers and students. After coming here, I understood what it was like to interact with a lecturer as an intellectual — exchanging ideas cooperatively*

to construct something wonderful, something motivated, and not a one-sided dictation of opinions that I was previously compelled to follow.

What a rich time for me, with so many experiences. I had the great pleasure of leading the Research Methods paper for over ten years. I don't recall one complaint from other lecturers. I was able to adjust the outcomes of the paper to suit their students' needs. The application of psychodramatic principles and sensibilities to this endeavour in post-graduate research was a huge success. A deep thank you and gratitude to my psychodramatic colleagues who are the living spirit of the psychodramatic method. You have been a rich source of inspiration and practical guidance for this lifelong learner.



Philip D. Carter, PhD, is a psychodramatist who is also practiced in body work, taiji, group work, research, teaching and gardening. He has worked in factories, forests, gardens, banks, city councils, computer companies, language schools, universities, non-profit agencies and a taxi co-op.