

**PROPOSAL WRITING: A LIVED EXPERIENCE OF A DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
CANDIDATE**

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## ABSTRACT

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) journey is a transition from a candidate to a full blown researcher. This journey begins with proposal writing. The process involves considerable learning and development. The purpose of this paper is to expose, through reflective self- study my process of learning during the first eight months of my long PhD journey, this period was dedicated to proposal writing. In this qualitative self-study I used my diary in which I kept entries of all the meetings I had with my supervisor; the emails through which we communicated; the feedback which I received from him and the personal, academic and professional experiences which emanated from the communications. The findings reveal an academic transformation in my life; changing from an academic novice to a critical thinker and researcher. Proposal writing hardened me for the subsequent phases of the journey. The encounters also show how my previous experiences influenced the learning that occurred during that period.

Keywords: Doctor of philosophy (PhD), learning experience, PhD candidate, reflective thinking, research proposal, self-study

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## About the Authors

In a reflective paper it is important for the reader to have an appreciation of the players in the reflection process. The first author is Claretah, who holds a Master's degree with twenty one years' experience in high school teaching. She is a part time lecturer with Zimbabwe Open University and Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University. Besides teaching she also writes and edits High School textbooks. The second author is Mufunani Tungu Khosa is the principal supervisor of the candidate. In this research his role was that of a technical adviser to the first author whose main role was reflecting on the writing of a PhD research proposal. Another role he played was dialoguing with Claretah about the outputs of her reflection – taking care of course not to stifle her feelings and perceptions.

## Introduction

The doctoral journey which can last up to eight years is a period when candidates learn about research, critical thinking, submit a thesis with a comprehensive methodology, publish articles and contribute to the literature available in their field, (Callary, Werthner & Trudel 2012). During my first year as a PhD candidate, I began to identify with a new role of being a researcher in the making. I faced unexpected difficulties due to major changes in my educational understanding - what a PhD and what is expected of a PhD candidate? I experienced differences in academic demands, peer support and social interaction. Some of the problematic areas and challenges

were(a) self- isolation, (b) time constraints, (c) the need to take individual responsibility for work,(d) the desire to feel intellectual and self-worth including necessity of building a firm professional relationship with my supervisor in terms of mutual sharing of expectations, (e)my rights and obligations as well as those of my supervisor. As someone who had embarked on part-time studies for the first time my adjustment was slow and painful. For instance, I kept on asking the question, “After this PhD what will I be doing in my professional life?”

Swetzer (2009) cited in Everett (2015) puts PhD candidates into two categories: the first group is for those who enter the program intending to become a professor and a publisher in high-ranking journals. These, just like me, they find academic relationships as the only way to success. The other group is of those who are more interested in individual development and learning. Hence, candidates enter into PhD journeys with varied expectations and they experience personal development through their social experiences whilst in the program. In this paper, I analyse and reflect on the first segment of my doctoral journey which stretches from the time I applied for a PhD candidature up to the time my research proposal was approved by the Faculty Board. This segment lasted for 10 months.

### **Nature of reflection**

This reflective self-study covers my experiences as I journeyed in my first ten months of the PhD journey. As I reflected, I could not leave out my advisor who is the second author. He encouraged me to reflect on the first part of my journey. From the day we first met he encouraged me to keep a detailed journal of our experiences and reflect on them as we

progressed. My advisor also provided guidance on how a reflective paper is written. He was at it again sending me lots and lots of reading material. I wondered if he had forgotten that I still had a lot of my core work to do. I had to rewrite the research proposal; master the American Psychological Association referencing style; read the volumes of documents he was sending me and to add on to that I was a part time student. I still had to do my full-time teaching job as well as part time lecturing. Publications were the least of my concerns at that time.

Regardless of all my tasks, as advised in [sacssw.edu.au](http://sacssw.edu.au) (2019) I actually kept two types of reflective recordings; (1) A journal in which I wrote monthly progress entries throughout the ten months. These were based on my reflections on the proposal notes which I received from my advisor as well as my personal research; and (2) A learning diary which was similar to the journal, but it was the place where I kept notes on the discussions which we had with my advisor whenever we held review meetings.

This article is the product of revisiting the journal entries of our meetings, email communications, reading comments my supervisor wrote in various versions of the draft proposal. The revisits helped me refresh my memory of what took place during the first year of my studies.

The first author is the PhD candidate and the findings (reflections) are written in first person to enable me to analyse and talk about my experiences, and more importantly, to assist the readers to better understand what I went through and what I learnt. The second author, who is the first

author’s supervisor, played the role of guiding the candidate in her journey, providing literature on reflective writing, and developing the reflective paper.

Schion (1988) as cited in William, Woolliam& Spiro (2012) suggests a three dimension model of reflection. The model concurs with Jarvis (2009) that the past determines how we react to the present which in turn shapes the future. The model suggests that for reflection to be effective it must look at the past, present and the future. As one engages in the three dimensions of reflection, they should ask themselves the questions indicated in the Table1.

Table 1: Three-dimensional reflective model (based on Schion1988)

<b>BEFORE</b>	<b>DURING</b>	<b>AFTER</b>
What do you think might happen?	What is happening now as you write the journal?	What happened during the experience?
What do you think might be the challenges?	Is it working out as expected?	How did you contribute to its success or failure?
What should you do to be best prepared	Are you dealing with the challenges well?	What lessons did you derive from the experience?
	Is there something you should do, say or think to make your experiences a success?	
	What are you learning from this?	

The questions provided in the model helped me shape my reflections and organise the findings. The theory also enabled me to realise the growth that I was undergoing during proposal writing. This paper combines experiential and reading reflection. These will be discussed briefly.

## **Experiential reflection**

Farrah (2011) views experiential reflection as experiences, ideas and observations you have had, and how they relate to the course or topic or some programme. This type of reflection is popular in professional programmes, like business, nursing, and education. Experiential reflection is an important part of making connections between theory and practice. My advisor encouraged me to engage in experiential reflection to explore the incidents I came across as a PhD candidate. It enabled me to evaluate my experience rather than just describe it based on ideas from my encounters with him (O'connell&Dyment 2006). It enabled me to assess what research is through my observations and practice. I found myself in a position where I would evaluate my own knowledge and skills within the research field. This gave me an opportunity to take time to think on my choices, my actions, my successes, and my failures within the specifications and demands of proposal writing. Abstract concepts became concrete and real to me when I considered them within my own experiences, and reflecting on my experiences allowed me to make plans for improvement.

## **Reading Reflection**

The PhD journey entails a lot of research and focused deep reading. To encourage thoughtful and balanced assessment of readings, the PhD candidate needs the ability to assess the available literature and reflect upon it (Farrah 2011). My supervisor indicated to me that he expected me to reflect on each paper he sent, the general purpose was to elicit my informed opinions about ideas presented in the text and to consider how they affected my approach to research. Reading reflections offered me an opportunity to recognize – and break down my assumptions which were sometimes challenged by the texts which I studied. [Mufu always encouraged me not to just read the literature but to **EXAMINE IT.**] Reading reflection enabled me to be a critical thinker as it is generally believed that the thinking process involves two aspects: reflective thinking and critical thinking. As summarised in Figure 1, the two are not separate processes; rather, they are closely connected (Brookfield 1987).

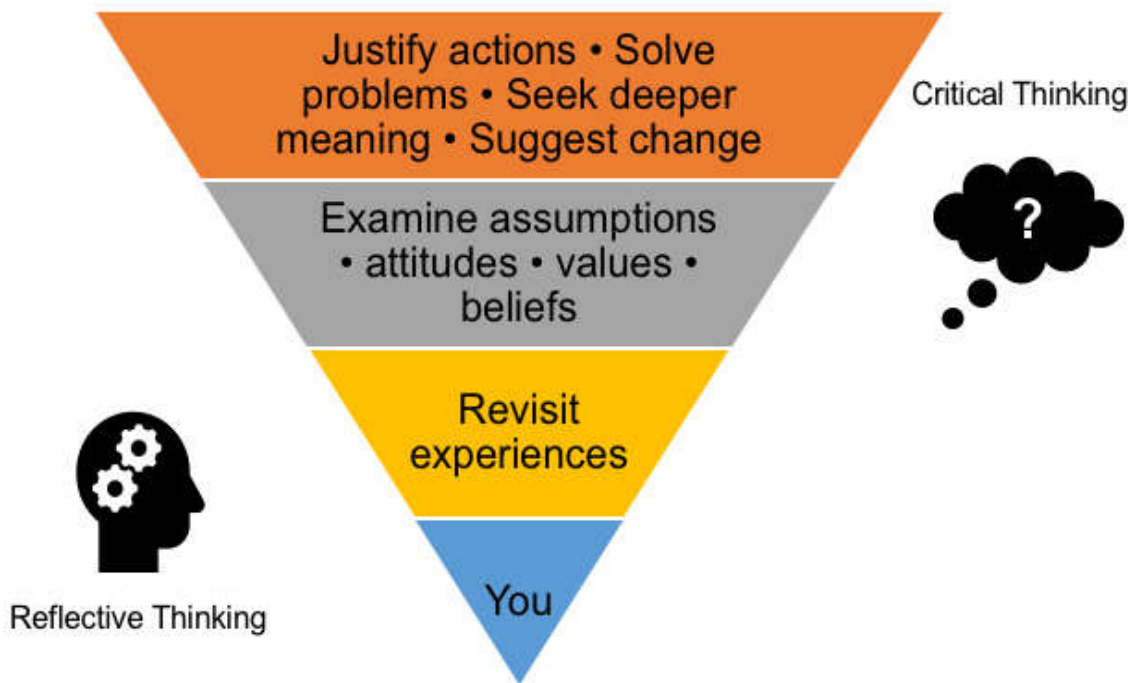


Figure 1: The Thinking Process (adapted from Mezirow 1990, Schon 1987, Brookfield 1987; Adopted from <https://artdesign.unsw.edu.au/current-students/student-services/learning-career-hub>)

Let me now turn to the outputs of my reflection about the proposal writing which is divided into two broad parts. In Part I reflect on the different phases of proposal crafting, and in the second part I summarise key lessons emerging from the cumulative reflections.

## **PART 1: THE PHASES OF THE PHD PROPOSAL WRITING [OR RATHER CRAFTING]**



From the first time I had a meeting with my supervisor he advised me to keep a record of what we discussed and keep it safe. I religiously followed his advice. Now that I am at the data analysis stage of my PhD research journey, I feel that I can share my reflections which are anchored on the journals I kept. I am convinced that those planning to embark on doctoral studies and those who are already on the journey, will find my reflections interesting and hopefully educative as well.

### **Reflections as I started my PhD**

After some basic coaching from a colleague, I had come up with an eight paged proposal which I attached to my PhD application. After four months of waiting, I got the favourable response - the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) had accepted me as a PhD candidate. I visited the Higher Degrees Directorate, and I was told how to register. I was given a DPhil Handbook which I was to study and follow. After three weeks I was allocated a supervisor.

My supervisor Mufunani Tungu Khosa (Prof Mufu as he prefers to be called), is an Associate Professor of Education. I now know that he is a seasoned educator with experience in teaching at secondary school level, teachers' colleges, as well as universities. He has 30 years consulting experience acquired in Botswana, Ghana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Mufu holds PhD in Education from MonashUniversity, Australia. The day I entered Mufu's modest office my journey began although I did not fully know who this man was.

### **Meeting my Supervisor for the First time**

Soon after being directed to my supervisor's office on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2018, I went there and introduced myself. He was expecting me. He asked me to give a brief biography which I did orally. He later requested for the proposal that had won me the study towards a D.Phil. I had a hardcopy and he asked me to send a soft copy. My supervisor advised me that he would not entertain hard copies on his desk, he gesticulated at his neat desk which confirmed words; it had two computers; desktop and a laptop. He also emphasised that since I was a part time student, much of the work had to be done online. My mind was flooded with worries and concerns:

My teaching has been based on piles of books; schemes of work, record of marks, registers. I am a paper person, I feel so confident when I do my work and students pass. Never have I been conversant with computer use, let alone constant use of email. . . This means I need Wi-Fi connections and a computer tutor. I did my Masters' Degree using hard copies; this PhD is different.

Using email was not the only challenge emanating from the first meeting; there were the issues research skills. My advisor promised to send me material to read on what a PhD is all about. It did not make sense at that time. I knew that this was the degree that I wanted to acquire at the end of the journey, and his emphasis on whether I knew what I really wanted to do somehow scared me. I was also caught off guard by the question on which referencing style I preferred to use. I just responded American Psychological Association (APA) referencing style, I knew very little about it. This marked the beginning of a series of battles with APA, up to now I have not yet won that war.

He emphasised that PhD is an in-depth study it is deep in content and methodology; he smiled at me and asked again, rather sarcastically, if I was ready for the journey. My daring character came to play here; I responded that I was ready for the journey.

This two-hour meeting was both intimidating and scary, my supervisor took a lot of things for granted. Looking back I strongly feel that the first meeting could have been much better if we had started by discussing the roles of the supervisor and the supervisee and how we were going to operate. He could also have given me a chance to expose my knowledge so that he would judge my level of competence in research and academic writing. I left the office with a lot of questions, among them were: *How was I going to cope with this technologically advanced man? Had I made the right decision applying for a PhD? Was I intelligent enough for a PhD study?* My conclusion after the meeting was; if this man is one of the best (as had been said by the Higher Degrees Directorate staff) then the journey was an uphill. But the daring Cleretah will make it all the same.

The second meeting was set a month away from the first. Four days after I sent the soft copy of my research proposal it was returned with more comments than the original script. Corrections were made on the working title, choice of words, sentence construction, punctuation, paragraphing among other writing skills. I was demoralised because remember I am a high school teacher, teaching English Language and Literature. More than that – I am a Part-time Lecturer and Supervisor of masters and bachelors research projects. Again, I felt belittled and inadequate. As a seasoned educator my supervisor should not have taken me like any other student forgetting that I was now 44 years. However, the feedback was a glaring reminder of my shortcomings. The document was accompanied by nine other documents on proposal writing, methodology and the APA referencing style. I was expected to have read all these documents in preparation for our second meeting. The documents were distressing for a starting, part time

candidate with four part time jobs. The initiation was scary. I felt that it could have been much better to focus on one aspect of research at a time.

### **My first draft proposal**

Our second meeting was based on my initial proposal. I had lost confidence in it after it had been reviewed by my supervisor. The first statement from my supervisor was. ‘Claretah, the goal of a research proposal is to present and justify the need to study a research problem and to present the practical ways in which the proposed study should be conducted. Whenyou convince me, together we will convince the Faculty Board.’ I remember these words vividly.

Silently I asked myself if ever I had the capacity to convince him. I have heard of candidates changing supervisors but since the Higher Degrees DirectorateSecretariat had hinted to me that my Professor was one of the best, it would mean that I would get someone more demanding and probably less helpful. I decided to continue with the belief that my understanding will improve with time. [I wished Prof Mufu could read my mind. I was worried.]

Besides emphasis on a convincing research proposal, we discussed a lot on methodology. I had not seriously thought about it since I believed that it would matter muchlater onthe research journey. I was advised that to settle for a methodology it was imperative to have an in-depth understanding of my research matter (the research issue) through wide and deep review of related literature. Though long and bringing in a lot of new knowledge and concepts, the second

meeting was much better (friendlier) than the first one. It made me discard my prior understanding of research proposal as a 'rough sketch' of what I intended to do during my study.

Again, the meeting was two hours long. I was given the task to rewrite my proposal showing my expertise in curriculum development in which I wanted to conduct a research. I had to show my knowledge of the existing literature and how my research would add value to the current body of knowledge. I was also supposed to be clear on the methodology which I was going to use. When I arrived home, I had this monologue:

This journey is going to be a tough one. I have to reorganise my life; time management as a priority. This study cannot be a secret at my workplace because it is so demanding. I must inform the Head of school, ask him for access to Wi-Fi which was only meant for the administration. The School Head must know because there will come times when I have to schedule midweek meetings with my supervisor. I must put my house in order.

Soon after the reflection I photocopied the letter of acceptance to study with the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) and took to my School Head and asked for WI-FI connection. All went well and this was the beginning of my learning and transformation. We need not forget that Prof Mufu had promised to send yet another set of reading materials. Later I realised that I had made a mistake of not identifying all the stakeholders in my life who would directly or indirectly influence my studies. These included friends, colleagues at work, family members, and church leadership. I had to notify them of my commitments much later when I failed to attend some social and church gatherings and activities.

## **Beginning to find my way**

I will take you back a little. On my second appointment I arrived twenty minutes earlier than the scheduled time and went straight to my supervisor's office. He was busy attending to someone. He raised his head and reminded me of our agreed time with a smile – at least he smiled. This reminded me of my inadequacy, I was not courteous. This time I was late by twenty minutes for our third meeting and he called to ask if I was still coming. Fortunately, when he called, I was in the stairs going to his office. I did not like this constant reminder of what I was not and probably will never be – respecting time for my good and for the good of others. I vowed to be on time every time we had an appointment. I would rather come early and wait in the lobby. If I could not be on time, then I learnt that I must call and apologise for either being behind time or unable to come. This is one of the social skills that I learnt.

The month between my second and third meeting had been a busy one. I had written my second and third versions of the research proposal and received sixteen more documents to study [or examine as he would say]. My second version of the proposal was submitted with confidence. Alas, my supervisor just read the first three sections (background to the study, statement of the problem, aims and objectives) and returned in two days with four documents of how to formulate a research problem. The general comment was that we could not go anywhere before we were clear on the research focus. He emphasised that once I was clear on what I really wanted to do then I would decide on how to do it. I had to rewrite the problem statement four times before it was approved. By the time it was approved, to tell the truth I was now clear on what I really wanted to do. I was also becoming computer literate as my supervisor emphasised advised me

that I could learn a lot through on asking appropriate questions on Google scholar. Appropriate questions = Appropriate answers! Google scholar was most helpful on the research methods and curriculum studies. As time went on, I also used Google and even YouTube to expand my knowledge of the computer and research methods. Since we were now clear on the statement of the problem, research aims and objectives, the focus of the third meeting was on review of related literature. My supervisor emphasised on the need to sample the literature according to years of publication. I was also supposed to move from the wider world then narrow to Zimbabwe revealing gaps in knowledge then focus on one which I had identified in the statement of the research problem or research issue. He advised me never to write with emotion; I was supposed to be an objective and composed academic. The task which I was given was to go and craft the preliminary review of related literature.

The third meeting different from the first two. Professor gave me a lot of time to express myself. He repeated that I was the expert in my area of choice and he was guiding me in research methods and the best ways of presenting myself. He promised to send more material for study. I expressed shock and he confidentially told me that some of the students called him Professor READ as he always told candidates to read, since I was directly under his supervision I was supposed to read as much as I could. Some of the material he sent was not directly related to curriculum studies and I wondered why I was reading all this, instead of focusing on my topic. As I am reflecting I now understand the reason - disciplines in education are interrelated and in order to fully understand one discipline one needs to understand the other/s. As I left his office I saw all my free time being consumed, vanishing in my face. Time with my friends and family

was being gradually taken away by this research proposal. I wondered what would happen when I got into the actual research. I did not know then that a thorough research proposal is a good start which makes the PhD journey easier to travel. A solid research proposal constitutes a solid foundation for a planned study.

### **Is it worth it?**

I attended the fourth meeting with a heavy heart. I was at the verge of quitting. This is what had happened -I had worked swiftly with my first supervisor, I was now used to moving backwards and forwards in my proposal until we agreed on each section of the proposal. The faculty then allocated me a second supervisor and my principal supervisor forwarded the sixth version of my research proposal to him. After two long weeks of waiting the response came in which my effort was torn apart - the background to the study was too long; my research problem not clear; he suggested I change my objectives (this being the core of the research it almost meant starting afresh). His most disheartening comment was:

Much of what you have here would constitute your review of related literature later. YOU COULD THEREFORE BE BRIEF. There was need to differentiate terms such as curriculum design, development and planning read Ndawi in Peresuh and Nhundu(1999). The term participation could also have been cleared. Why is it that I have a feeling you are copying someone else's completed [submitted]thesis.If you are doing that stop it!**HatidiChitunha** [I do not entertain the idea of resuscitating a thesis submitted by someone else].

This was the sixth version of my research proposal. I had changed and refined my document six times and here I was being suspected [accused] of plagiarism. I wondered whether it was necessary to have two supervisors. If I was supposed to have two supervisors, why did the



administration bring them into my journey at different stages? It was difficult to dance smoothly with the two Professors with different perceptions of what I had done and what I was planning to do. I had not met the second supervisor and did not know who he was, all I knew was his name. I was bound to miss a step and fall. After discussing with my principal supervisor, he advised me that whenever I did not agree with any of the supervisors I was supposed to say it out professionally. The role of the two supervisors was later clarified when my chief supervisor invited me for a workshop on, 'PhD candidate dancing with two supervisors.' The workshop enabled me to understand the role of the supervisors as well as speak out whenever there was a misunderstanding. This issue was solved amicably.

Then came the real bombshell. My chief supervisor has a friend at University of Melbourne in Australia and he sent my proposal to him for review. The proposal was back within a week. What I remember most was the general comment that the proposal was below standard and would never win as a PhD proposal. I was hurt when I received this email and I told my supervisor that I was losing hope. He advised me that what I needed was time. For a week I did not do anything concerning my research proposal. I was tired and regretting ever starting this journey. After that week, my supervisor then called me for the fifth meeting. We discussed the best ways of improving the methodology section. Emphasis was on sampling methods, research instruments and data analysis procedures. My supervisor had a way of convincing me to continue with my studies. At this stage he had ceased to be just a supervisor but my partner and advisor in this difficult journey. After the discussion and advice, I left the office revitalised and ready to continue. I was able to objectively look at the feedback by my co- supervisor as well as the

Australian reviewer. I managed to pick some helpful lessons especially on review of related literature. This is the time I started calling Mufu my advisor not supervisor.

### **Version after Version of Proposals**

After my seventh version of the proposal my advisor called me, he just said we needed to discuss some issues. When I arrived for the sixth meeting our discussion was focused on perfecting the proposal and preparing a power point presentation in case the workshop would be held soon. He promised me that if time permitted, he would get me a panel of curriculum specialists to review my presentation as part of the preparations. I received this offer with reservations because by now I had realised that there is nothing like a ‘perfect proposal’ to all academics. I was afraid of being demoralised again. This was an abnormally short meeting; he had another meeting. We made an appointment for the 24<sup>th</sup> of the same month – June. I was relieved and happy that at least I was going to focus on something new. I worked on the slides and sent them to my advisor for review. Necessary adjustments were made. I continuously wondered to myself if the presentation day was fast approaching. If so, was my proposal good enough to convince the audience consisting of academics from varied academic disciplines? I was prepared to present but I was not sure of the reaction of the board, by then I had no idea who would sit in that board meeting to decide my fate.

### **Energised to continue**

As was now the norm, I was punctual for this meeting – the seventh meeting. The news which I received upon arrival were both stimulating and terrifying. My advisor calmly notified me that there was going to be a defence workshop on proposals and chapters, on the 28<sup>th</sup> June, he had just received the communication from the Higher Degrees Directorate. We had four days to prepare; he asked me to go to the higher degrees directorate offices and register and inquire on the requirements. With excitement mixed with anxiety I went to the Higher Degrees Directorate and submitted the required documents. The workshop was set to run over two days and I was slotted on the Day One. When I went back to my advisor's office I was taught three things about the workshop:

- 1) I was going to the workshop to share my proposal with the faculty board and NOT to defend it. The significance of the terminology became clearer on the day of the workshop; I was able to embrace constructive criticism from the participants.
- 2) Be confident of what you are doing. I had done a lot of reading and this was the time to expose my knowledge and interest in my area of study. I was supposed to be composed and convincing.
- 3) Time management -I was going to present my proposal in 15 minutes. I had to utilise every second wisely and focus on the most important points only.

The four preparation days were the busiest days of my proposal writing journey. I had to master every aspect of my proposal. I also practised time management with a stopwatch. On the 27<sup>th</sup> I could not sleep I wanted to do the presentation once and get the proposal approved by the faculty board.

## **Time to make public my research intent**

The day was 28 June 2019, and the workshop was scheduled for 0900hrs. I was supposed to present at 1100hrs; the third presenter of the day. I arrived at the venue thirty minutes before time. The venue was deserted. However, in a few minutes preparations started; I was both anxious and expectant. We started an hour late. This was a blessing in disguise: I managed to meet other students and share our experiences. I also managed to meet my advisor for a word of assurance, something I needed most. More importantly, I had a chance to have a final glance at my work. Looking around I noted that in my university PhD seemed to be a male dominated area. Amongst the board members there was only one female professor, and on our side of the five candidates who were going to present, I was the only female. At first I was uncomfortable but later I reassured myself that these men were professionals, and they would do justice to my work.

At 1210hrs I started my presentation; it was smooth though I was nervous at first. My advisor was quietly listening; his presence alone was assuring enough. After the 15 minutes presentation I was relieved, a huge load had been lifted off my shoulders. I received constructive feedback – suggestions for improvement and praises with an open mind. Dealing with the feedback was not an issue because I had been exposed to candid but constructive comments during the eight months I had prepared for this day.

The first comment I received was, ‘What a relief we have had the first female voice today and the voice was vibrant and confident.’ The next positive comment was that I presented and not

read my proposal. Areas that needed improvement were my statement of the problem which needed further trimming to narrow down my focus. I was also advised to perfect in-text referencing. I managed to meet my supervisor an hour later when we had a lunch break; I thanked him for the thorough preparation. He was also impressed by my confidence. He reminded me of the importance of a precise power point presentation; that aspect had won me the board's favour, I was not reading but presenting my proposal guided by the power point presentation. I learnt that what the professors who sit in the board want from a 'defending candidate' is confidence, knowledge of what one wants to do and the passion to do it. As I travelled back home, I felt on top off the world. I was confident that I had made it! Two weeks after the presentation I received my results - my proposal had passed with minor alterations to be monitored by the advisor. I cried out of joy. My hard work had been rewarded. I owed everything to my advisor. He had managed to prepare me fully for the day and the journey as a whole.

As indicated earlier on the proposal writing period was a period of transition. I learnt a lot of lessons which changed my attitude towards research, critical thinking and academic writing. Let me now share with you the major lessons from the proposal writing phase of my PhD journey.

## **PART 2: LESSONS FROM THE PROPOSAL PHASE OF THE PHD JOURNEY**

From the journal entries, it is apparent that the experiences that I went through during proposal writing were greatly influenced by my experience and exposure before entering the PhD program. The challenges which I faced were also a result of the vast academic differences

between me and my supervisor. The experiences changed me from an ordinary high school teacher into a researcher and academic – Yes I am now a researcher who qualifies to be called an academic. I believe if I were to start afresh these lessons would assist me immensely in coming up with an acceptable proposal without having to rewrite it seven times. These lessons are directed at aspiring PhD candidates. However, PhD supervisors can also gain from both the lessons and my story – the source of the lessons.

### **LESSON 1: Ensure the working topic is narrow and focused**

Looking at the different versions of my research topic, I learnt that a research topic must not be something very broad. At PhD level one is required to treat every aspect of their research with depth so if it is too wide then they will not be able to answer all the questions. Of all the aspects of curriculum development I chose to focus on one aspect: teacher participation.

After the fifth version of my topic which was approved by my advisor I realised that the topic I had submitted during application was just a hazy idea of what I really wanted to do. Writing the research proposal enabled me to be focused and clearly express my intentions in a short and eye-catching research topic. I was also guided by Jacobs (2011) who emphasises that it might sound a bit obvious, but the working title of any D.Phil. proposal has a subtle effect on its success. What one calls their project will reflect its D.Phil. statement. Ideally, every aspect of your D.Phil. proposal will speak directly – and with authority – to your peers working inside your

respective field. It is therefore necessary to choose a title that will grab their attention and shape the research to fit – and to hold your board’s interest.

### **LESSON 2: Make your research fit into existing knowledge**

It is important to provide a clear background to your intended research. This section can be included in one’s introduction or one can create a separate section to help with the organization and narrative flow of the proposal (Faryadi, 2012). This is where one explains the context of their proposal and describe in detail why it is important. I was advised to approach this section without assuming that my readers will know as much about the research problem as I did. My initial background to the study was confined to Zimbabwe; my idea being that the research problem was Zimbabwean. My professor reminded me that this was the section where I was supposed to explain the context of my proposal and describe in detail why it was important.

### **LESSON 3: Don’t give them a chance to ask, “*What is the problem?*”**

It is important in a proposal that the research problem stand out —that the reader can easily recognize it. Sometimes, obscure and poorly formulated research problems are masked in an extended discussion. In such cases, the reader will have difficulty recognizing the problem. The research problem should shout! It must hit the eyeballs of the reader. This was one frustrating stage; I wrote this section more than ten times, until I no longer knew what I was really doing or

what was going on. Let me admit, I was totally confused and frustrated. Later, I realised my weakness. My statement of the problem was generally too long. Crafting my research proposal gave me a chance to formulate a unique statement of the problem and objective which will not replicate an already exhausted area but fill the gap which I had clearly identified during review of related literature.

#### **LESSON 4: How to tell them the importance of your research?**

When I started this program, I was motivated by the experience that I was going through as a teacher in a country where curriculum change was taking place and teachers not consulted. My aim was to send a message to Head office and my professor told me that was not enough to convince the board when presenting my proposal. I had to be clear on the overall significance of my study. I had to ask myself the following questions: Why bother to undertake this research? What contribution- to scholarly understanding, to public policy- will it make? In answering these questions, I managed to come up with my project's significance which was clearer and worth the effort. This is supported by Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1987 cited in Faryadi (2012) who state that the purpose statement should provide a specific and accurate synopsis of the overall purpose of the study. If the purpose is not clear to the writer, it cannot be clear to the reader.

#### **LESSON 5: If you do not read widely, you are doomed.**

Review of literature needs to be wide and deep enough to pinpoint the gap which has to be filled by the findings of the planned research. This section had to be written in connection to the background and significance of my study. It was devoted to a more deliberate review and



synthesis of prior studies related to the research problem under investigation. My advisor emphasised that my proposal should locate my dissertation in the broader scholarly literature; my discussion of available literature had to show how my research would extend what is already known. I had to think of key theories and concepts related to curriculum development. Another emphasis was on recent literature; literature which was generally within five years of my research then only take milestone literature from as far twenty years.

### **LESSON 6: Spell out the methodology clearly**

I had to be so meticulous in spelling out the research philosophy; paradigm and design. My professor wanted to see a clearly spelt out methodology. He sent plenty of reading material. Thus, the objective here was to convince the board that my overall research design and methods of analysis would correctly address the problem and that the methods would provide the means to effectively interpret the potential results. The design and methods had to be unmistakably tied to the objectives of the study.

### **LESSON 7: Learn and master the preferred referencing style**

Proposal writing gave me a chance to learn the demands of the American Psychological Association referencing style. This is one aspect which almost saw me quit my studies. My advisor was so particular about referencing. Here I also learnt much on the relevance of acknowledging every text used. The emphasis was on avoiding plagiarism, the worst academic

crime. Trial and Error is Dangerous in Doctoral Studies. It is very important to learn and master the referencing style stipulated by your faculty.

### **LESSON 8: Set realistic schedules and deadlines**

My first schedule was very ambitious. As someone who desperately needed the qualification to improve my prospects in life, I wanted to graduate in the shortest possible time and with my university the shortest time was two and a half years. This stressed me every time I was asked to redo or expand on a certain aspect of my proposal. As someone who was undergoing some transformation, I realised the need to be realistic in projecting my timelines. This reduced pressure on the way I carried out my work and enabled me to do everything slowly and as many times as it took to achieve the required accuracy.

### **LESSON 9: Managing myself**

As mentioned earlier in my biography, when I started my PhD studies, I was a full time teacher, a curriculum developer, a part time lecturer and lastly a wife and mother. This means I had too many roles to play. My PhD demanded a lot of reading. I had to create time. My professor once shared that his day started at four in the morning. I had to work as late as midnight. This became my routine whenever I had work to do. Every minute counted for all my duties to be done. This meant reducing my social life activities. Every D.Phil. candidate must find a routine that works for them. Nobody ever told me to sleep late. Having a routine of certain activities throughout the

week: designated cleaning/laundry days and batch-cooking can greatly help you at getting into a routine that makes sure you get every that must be achieved done.

### **LESSON 10: Learn how to dance with two supervisors**

As mentioned earlier, I had two supervisors. This is normal practice in most universities to ensure continuity just in case one of the supervisors not available or unable to continue working with the candidate. Do not expect them to give you identical feedback. Focus more on how the comments complement each other rather than on the differences. Examine literature on the roles, obligations, and rights of supervisors. Remember that as PhD candidate you also have your rights, roles, and obligations in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Note that in the supervisor-candidate partnership you are the Senior Partner. WHY? As the candidate you are responsible for doing the research and the supervisors are there to provide guidance and support. Learn to dance with your supervisors. If in doubt of what should be done take the initiative and ASK. This is important especially if you feel that the supervisors are not providing adequate information to enable you to smoothly.

### **LESSON 11: Be willing to learn from your supervisors**

The academic board will expect you to show that your research is worthwhile and will have beneficial effects that outweigh or extend the existing knowledge. Working closely with your supervisors will enable you to draw from their vast knowledge, and in the process you will also grow as an academic and researcher.

**LESSON 12: Behaving with integrity**

Build a firm professional relationship with your supervisor in terms of mutual sharing of roles, expectations, rights, and obligations. I have heard of students who ended up entangled with their supervisors and most of the time these entanglements affect their work negatively. I also respect my supervisor for creating and maintaining such a professional relationship- he became my academic supervisor as well as counsellor when my studies were negatively affecting my social relationships.

**LESSON 13: Don't Give up it is the nature of the game called PhD**

Many times I thought of quitting. The pressure was too much on me. The difference between Masters and PhD became increasingly apparent. I felt as if I was moving in ever widening circles, writing and rewriting every section of the PhD proposal. I thank my supervisor, husband and sons for encouraging me. After ten months I was proud of a clear roadmap to my research. Even now as I am analysing data, I still go back to my proposal for 'consultation'.

**LESSON 14: Understand the purpose of a PhD proposal**

The purpose of the PhD proposal is created to guide you research, complete and deliver your dissertation with great ease. The proposal helps you market our planned research to your primary

stakeholder – your supervisor. Examine literature on a PhD research proposal. Go beyond the guidelines provided in the PhD Candidates Handbook. Guidelines are guidelines; they do not provide a full picture that you need.

### **LESSON 15: Proofreading for awesome results**

As indicated in my reflections, one of the demotivators came every time I received feedback from my supervisor. The document was smeared with red ink of corrections. The **BIG LESSON** is: A PhD proposal calls for grammatical correctness. The best practices for proofreading a PhD proposal are as follows:

1. Read- examine- and- read the proposal over and over to yourself to identify unnatural wording.
2. Proof, proof, and proof again- taking a break between writing and proofing sessions to allow the mind to look at the document with fresh eyes.
3. Ask a few friends to read your proposal.
4. Make sure proof reading is part of your plan.

### **MY FINAL WORDS**

It is my hope that the reflections given above help aspiring researchers to conceptualize their work and transform into full blown researchers. Proposal writing is a must for student research work. There is need to adhere to its basic elements. There is also need to work closely with one's

supervisor and reflect on the life lessons. The wider our experiences of academic life the more we learn, and the more we learn the more we become whole people and achieve what we aspire for as PhD candidates.

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