

THE BALANCING ACT

Three Case Stories

Part-Time Students' Experiences of Postgraduate Research

Geraldine: Small things make an enormous difference...

Bridget: The art of careful compromise

Marisa: I did my final year three times!

Geraldine: Small things made an enormous difference

I came to be an academic by a circuitous route. After finishing my first degree I joined the public service but it didn't really suit me. I think I'm too colourful for the public service. So I left and taught in high school for three years and then pregnancy intervened. However, being a mother at home was not entertaining enough. I needed some extra intellectual stimulation so I rang the University to see if there were any tutoring positions available. Luck was with me. I began taking prac classes. However, I soon came to realise that being a tutor was a dead end job, a place where you just really got used up. So I kept the tutoring up to keep the money coming in and started doing my PhD. But it wasn't easy. I began to develop the habit of never doing one thing at a time. I felt like I was on call all week with the kids, on call all weekend prepping for teaching and eventually it got to the point where I was alert to the children and alert to my work all the time. It was exhausting.

Then I complicated things by accepting a full-time lecturing position while finishing writing up my PhD. So then I needed to be alert to my teaching, alert to my study, alert to my committee work, alert to my research projects and the constant pressure from students to tell me their life stories. I was doing all these things simultaneously. It was just traumatic and then everything becomes more difficult with kids!

It's funny you know. During school holidays I would feel like I had everything under control. Everybody was friends with each other. There were no timetables to meet, uniforms to wash, or sporting activities to get to. Then the holidays would be over and all of a sudden I would be back in a state of high alert. It's like you've got this broad distribution from being totally relaxed in the holidays when your day is a total choice, there is no obligation, to the other end of the spectrum where every moment of your day is actually accounted for and there aren't enough moments in the day to do all the things you actually need to do. As soon as you go back to work you're instantly close to the end where you have every moment of the day accounted for.

It got to the point where the one thing I was not alert to was myself. I became more and more and more exhausted, but lurking there as the last straw, was the knowledge that my contract was contingent on me finishing my PhD. You can't get an academic position without a PhD in my area. I knew I would never feel that I was a valid member of that community until I had that equivalent of the plumber's certificate, the PhD. I also knew I couldn't go through another year with my PhD hanging over my head. I had to do something! So I made all sorts of arrangements.

I stopped making bread and cakes and stopped cooking lots on the weekends. They had to make do with bought biscuits. Other things at home had to slide too, though to help I made sure we had a cleaning person. I would cycle to and from work and that would actually make my exercise part of my daily routine. That helped keep me sane. We also made financial decisions. We bought all the kids enough school uniforms so that I didn't have to wash school uniforms during the week. Trivial things make a huge difference, like buying what I like to call my Chinese laundry, a good airing rack. All through those winter months when I'd leave at 7 o'clock in the morning and I'd get home at 6 o'clock at night I didn't have to worry about having to deal with drying washing on the clothesline. Another financial one was to choose to go from having takeaway once a week to having takeaway twice a week. Also, negotiating about if the kids are sick who's going to take them to the doctor.

I made a pledge with my husband that I wouldn't work at night. In fact I was so exhausted when I came home that I couldn't have anyway. I was too knackered and just went to bed. We also made an arrangement that it would be all right if I didn't know my children very well that year. They seemed to have lived through the experience. They went through a process last year of rediscovering their mother and they seem to be quite good friends with me again now.

I set aside chunks of time so that during the semester breaks I'd devote an entire week to doing PhD type things. At the end of the year when I actually got to the point where I could write up I set aside all my university responsibilities and I spent all of November and December writing up.

These small things made an enormous difference to how I coped with all those pressures and I think that's how I was able to survive and complete my PhD. I now have my plumber's certificate.

Part-Time Students' Experiences of Postgraduate Research

Bridget: The art of careful compromise

Early on the postgraduate study and the role of the academic were complementary but as I became more involved in the faculty, I had to add in the admin and the politics of being a woman academic and that was when I hit trouble - in my study, in my work and in my life in general.

I changed a lot of things at work and that was essential but not always easy. I had to look at being less available to students. I'd always had an open door policy. That was a policy I changed - people needed to learn that there was an appointment system. That didn't just happen overnight - students still came knocking and often with big problems. I saw that I had become one of the people in the Faculty who guided students through the maze and that there were not many others who would do that. But I knew that if I kept up that role I would never get to my own study. And there were troubles - some other staff made it clear that they preferred me to be as available as I had been, and that led to the guilts too. However I realised that some staff would only be happy if I was carrying the interpersonal load for them, so it felt a bit better when I could see that.

As a teacher it was a matter of learning not to be over responsible for students and letting them make their own mistakes and not rescuing them. I started to see that to give people five minutes on the phone and get them to solve the rest of the problem was probably good for them and that I could actually do that rather than giving them half an hour where together we solved it. So I actually started to feel I got some better practice happening from what I changed in the teaching area.

I was never happy about my need to drop back on my Faculty contributions. I always felt that in the last year of my PhD I was not pulling my weight there and one male staff member made it clear that he expected no changes to my prior full commitment. He even refused to allow me to resign from a committee when I explained that I felt I could not give it the attention it deserved - I was devastated when he said that he thought I should use my weekends for my PhD (which I had already been doing for two years) - that was what he had done - oh yes, with a wife I could do that too! What actually changed that for me was a quiet conversation with another woman academic who advised me to continue with the commitments I had but to be less worried about 100% attendance and involvement. She pointed out some of the other staff who had considerably less commitment and had no other big projects on their plate. Her timely comments let me see the system a little more clearly and I quietly balanced my work and my study in my own way.

One of the worst things was the subtle pressure put on me by some of the senior faculty staff. If you are not tenured you just can't ignore their expectations and you also realise how stressed your fellow staff are with the staff cutbacks. During the weeks when they're asking for members on a committee, asking for a working party on this, it's hard to hold back but I believe it is correct to hold back or you might never finish your study. I had a very close female academic colleague who helped me hold that line and I try and help her

hold that line. It is a thoughtful line, it's not just an arbitrary line. I also looked at the fact that the qualification I was aiming for would bring new things to the Faculty because I intended to use it to get research moneys to support other postgraduate students. That's one thing I wanted - to get other women onto the path that other good women had helped me on to and so I could tell myself that there was a pay-off to the Faculty, and I still believe it.

And then of course the PhD. Having worked on those other two areas I could actually then set up what became a relatively realistic timeline. And with the family side of things I actually sat down and openly discussed how the balance was working for them. That was really useful. It was really important to do it.

So in all of my life areas there was a sense of compromise but I felt they were very careful and thoughtful compromises and even though I've now finished the PhD there are still compromises - so I guess that's life.

Part-Time Students' Experiences of Postgraduate Research

Marisa: I did my final year three times

Well basically I've been in the final year of my PhD for three years - can you believe that! It might sound as if I haven't been working hard enough but believe me that isn't true. It just seems that every time I get a good space to write something in my life changes.

When I started my post grad study I was on a full-time scholarship and looking back I thought then that I had forever. The uni where I was enrolled encouraged its PG students to tutor so I took that up and I loved it. I enjoyed working with the students, particularly those who were the activists and real thinkers, but before I knew it two of my three years had gone. I had done a lot of my research but to be honest, I hadn't really written much.

At that time I had a very laissez-faire supervisor who was full of really challenging ideas but he didn't believe in pushing you so there was I, full of wonderful ideas, surrounded by data and it was then I panicked. I spoke to my supervisor about my panic and at the same time my partner was wanting to take the whole family on an extended holiday of 8 weeks and suddenly I just couldn't do it. My supervisor reassured me that a break would be good and so off I went. That was the worst holiday of my life - it just seemed as if the clock was ticking faster every day. People tell you about your biological clock but no-one tells you about the PhD clock.

When I returned from that holiday, I knew one thing - I needed a different type of supervisor and so with great trepidation I approached another supervisor. That was the best thing I did and at last I got strong advice on getting into the writing and I began to move forward. I felt as if there was light at the end of the tunnel and that was my first last year.

That was also the time that my PhD scholarship ran out and I had to get a job. I was lucky to be employed fairly quickly but the job had a lot of demands on my time and many evenings and weekends I was too tired to work. Once again I slowed down but that was just the start. My partner decided that this was time for a mid-life crisis and we separated - that is still in limbo and I don't even want to talk about that side of my life. That was my second last year.

So where am I now? I wish I could tell you that I've submitted and all's well that ends well but that's not true - I've been plugging on day after day and crying a lot and generally bumbling along. My supervisor has been giving me the maximum time possible and always leaves me feeling I can do it. Days at work are long and most days I start at 4am to get 3 hours of my PhD done. I have taken some leave without pay but can't afford to do that again. I have a close friend who has finished her PhD and she keeps me sane - but at times I even resent her. It is just hard work. I keep telling myself that one day I'll look back on this and it will be a distant memory, and at other times I plan the biggest