"I had no time to bleed": Heroic journeys of PhD students in a South African School of Education

Jane Castle

Abstract

Why do students in a South African School of Education describe their experience of doing a PhD as a journey of epic proportions? Why do they portray themselves as superheroes in this journey? These were questions I asked myself as I collected students' narratives during a 'PhD weekend' in August 2011 and reflected on the problems, pleasures and risks students associate with doing a doctoral degree. The research draws attention to the dominant narrative of a heroic journey so that supervisors and academic coordinators can better understand and respond to the challenges embedded in students' experience of doing a doctorate.

> *"It was pure hell. . . I had to stand on my own, fighting for time, fighting for money, for space. . . and the targets were always shifting. . . I was so busy fighting. . . I had no time to bleed. . . In the end I succeeded, but it was pure hell and determination."*

So began one student's dramatic account of doing a PhD in a School of Education several years after the event. It is a story of difficulty, delays, hardship, and determination. It is also a story of heroism and, ultimately, of triumph.

Thirty-five postgraduate students and supervisors had gathered in the School of Education staffroom at the end of a 'PhD weekend' in August 2011. As chair of a roundtable discussion designated 'reflection on the weekend', I invited them to think of a metaphor for their experience of doing a PhD and to write or sketch it using the coloured paper and pens I provided. After a few minutes, participants were invited to tell their stories and show their drawings. The vast majority of them used the metaphor of a heroic journey undertaken alone over exceedingly rough terrain. Their drawings showed landscapes bisected by powerful rivers to cross, mountains to scale, pitfalls to circumvent. This was nothing like my own experience of doing a PhD in the same institution fifteen years previously. Why, I wondered, do so many students describe their experience in this way? What are the conditions and events which lead them to depict themselves as superheroes facing – and defeating – terrifying odds?

Research purpose

In this paper I explore narratives told by students and supervisors about their experiences of doing a research degree in a South African School of Education. My interest lies in finding out how this group interprets their experience, how individuals negotiate and overcome problems, and how they succeed in completing their degree.

Exploring students' narratives in this way has the potential to sensitise both students and supervisors to aspects of their roles, possibly enhancing the quality of supervision and the postgraduate experience (McCormack, 2009). Students' stories can open a door for students and supervisors to reflect on and negotiate what Grant (2003) has called the 'chaotic pedagogy' of supervision.

Assumptions

The research proceeds from a humanist assumption that postgraduate students are in essence creative, resourceful and whole. Creating stories, or narratives, about their experiences is one way in which students can express their creativity and resourcefulness. Playing with concepts and ideas by constructing a narrative can enhance the experience of learning, teaching and supervision. Furthermore, a relationship between creativity and reflective practice can be nurtured and enhanced through the process of reflection at different levels.

A key assumption underlying this research is that significant events, remembered and reconstructed in stories, play an important part in the construction of identity. Throughout adulthood, people construct their identities, change themselves, reinterpret themselves and see what benefits (and losses) they derive from doing this.

In the next section I introduce narrative enquiry, followed by four narratives which show how students' identities are shaped and (re)constructed as they complete a research degree. I then turn to a particular type of narrative, the mythic journey, before reviewing research on the challenges posed by doctoral study. I review contextual and other factors leading to student attrition. Next, I give a detailed account of the methods I employed in the

research and the participants in it. A three-act narrative, the heroic journey, represents the research results, and the paper closes with concluding remarks.

Narrative enquiry

Narrative, in its simplest form, has to do with stories. Narratives are first person accounts of experiences in a story format, having a beginning, middle and end. All forms of narrative share an interest in making sense of experience, of constructing and communicating meaning to others (Merriam, 2002; Rossiter, 1999; Richardson, 1994). Stories provide an opportunity for reflection on emotions, contexts, influences and significant events that contribute to a particular experience.

Through stories, people construct and reconstruct their sense of self as they find their way in the world. They move beyond a simple recounting of events to "create spaces for understanding [themselves] as multiple and diverse, as a work-in-progress, constantly evolving, growing, shifting and changing" (McCormack, 2009, p.142). Stories help us to structure our sense of self and shore up our position in the world. Furthermore, stories have the potential to reveal not only the personal but also the collective nature of experience. "A story. . . carries the shared culture, beliefs and history of a group. . . It is a way of experiencing our lives" (Durance, 1997, p.26). Because stories provide an opportunity for thinking through the emotion, context, influences and significant events that contribute to an experience, they are a form of research and representation that is inherently educational (Evelyn, 2004; Merriam, 2002).

Ylijoki's narratives of thesis writers

In interviews with 72 students completing a research degree in Finland, Ylijoki (2001) found that postgraduate students constructed four core narratives about their experience, which she termed the heroic, tragic, businesslike and penal narratives.

Students who relate the *heroic* narrative believe that their dissertation is a quest for scholarship and intellectual wisdom, and believe that their dissertation will make a significant contribution to knowledge. Their

'heroism' involves living up to a high standard of scholarship, toiling against the deficiencies and criticism of supervisors and peers, and undergoing emotional swings as they complete trials and tests (Ylijoki, 2001). According to Badenhorst (2008, p.12) "Students on this path are often stuck for long periods, sometimes paralysed by the task they have set themselves". Ultimately, however, they succeed.

Ylijoki's *tragic* narrative is one in which students live in fear that they will be exposed as inferior and unworthy. Students who construct a tragic narrative often fail to complete the degree because they are convinced that they are not good enough to undertake research at a high level. They despair, they avoid their supervisor, they feel guilty, and ultimately either withdraw or rationalise their failure to complete the degree (Ylijoki, 2001).

In the *businesslike* narrative, the student simply gets on with the job. The dissertation holds no mythical qualities for these students – it is something to be understood and constructed. It is hard work, but these students have no fear of failure (Ylijoki, 2001). Perseverance is the key to success, and the student has a close working relationship with the supervisor. These students focus on a goal and are not usually side-tracked by emotional or self-esteem issues (Badenhorst, 2008, p.13).

Finally, the *penal* narrative has punishment and suffering at its core. These students are motivated only by the need to complete a degree to meet job or employment requirements. The thesis is interpreted as a nuisance and the supervisor as a prison guard. The student does the minimum amount of work, suffering all the while. The university rules are seen as petty and obstructive, the supervisor doesn't understand the student, and the effort seems pointless. Completing the thesis, even at minimal standards, means release from prison (Ylijoki, 2001; Badenhorst, 2008).

Ylijoki points out that the four narratives are collective stories that do not correspond precisely to the accounts given by individuals. However, they begin to provide explanations for why certain students complete a research degree, or abandon it, or become 'eternal students'. The narratives also suggest that people's beliefs in their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities (Bandura, in Durance, 1997, p.3). One has to have the will *and* the way (the resources) to accomplish goals. In Ylijoki's heroic and businesslike narratives, students have the will and the way to complete the degree. In the tragic and penal narratives these are lacking.

Ylijoki suggests three possible levels of reflection on the narratives. At the individual level, a narrative perspective can help students to problematise their tacit assumptions and beliefs about writing a thesis and consider alternative ones. At the interactional level (the level of student-supervisor), the narratives can contribute to improved supervision practices. The four core narratives signal different views of the role which students and supervisors take up in thesis writing. It is important that supervisors and students recognise their own narratives, or at least be 'on the same page'. Finally, at a cultural level, the narrative approach could help make visible the unexamined norms and values prevailing in different disciplinary cultures or academic departments, into which students may have been socialised in their undergraduate degree. For example, are alternative narratives to the heroic journey available in the School of Education?

Mythic journeys

My interest in this research is in the power of story-telling for its mythic, as well as explanatory qualities. Why *was* the dominant narrative of doctoral students in the School of Education the mythic or heroic journey?

Rule and John (2011) suggest that all narratives have an element of the performance about them as the story goes beyond representing mere content to include the way that participants understand their story in social context. A shift in identity often occurs at a turning point in a story, and events and experiences both past and present take on different significances in the light of the new identity of the characters or narrator (Riessman, 2003). The story and its narrator are part of a social world in which characters, plot and action all play a part.

The characters in the School of Education narratives will be described in a later section of this article, but the plot and action of heroic journeys were studied by Campbell (1968, 1988) who explored myths from many different cultures and found that they all followed the pattern of a three-act drama: Departure (Act One) – Initiation (Act Two) – Return (Act Three).

In Act One, the hero is living in the ordinary world when he hears the 'call to adventure'. He may initially refuse to heed the call, but the call becomes insistent and eventually the hero embarks on his journey. A mentor may be

consulted to help the hero prepare for the journey and therefore to heed the call. A group of supporters may join the hero in his quest. Yet the hero faces the first threshold, or challenge, of his journey alone.

In Act Two, the hero has his first triumph behind him. He attracts allies and makes enemies. After several struggles and trials, he reaches the 'innermost cave' where he knows he must face an ordeal. He hesitates at the threshold of the cave, to gather strength and renew his vows, before proceeding. The hero then faces the ordeal and overcomes it, showing immense courage and fortitude. He takes a reward away with him, but his journey is not over yet.

In Act Three, the hero is on the road back to the ordinary world, accompanied by allies, and harassed by enemies trying to take the reward back. Although weary and perhaps physically injured, the hero knows that there will be one final skirmish before his journey ends. In this final battle, the hero succeeds and makes his way home. However, he is not the same person who began the journey. He has undergone a transformation, or 'tasted the 'elixir'', and cannot any longer be an ordinary person in the ordinary world (Badenhorst, 2008; Vogler, 1988; Campbell, 1968).

South Africans of different cultural backgrounds and all ages enjoy popular myths and epics such as the Star Wars trilogy and the Harry Potter books and films. They also have their own cultural variants of Campbell's 'monomyth' (for example, 'a promising young man is trusted with an important mission by his chief, but first has to cross a river infested with crocodiles. . .'). One of the best-known stories in South Africa is Nelson Mandela's heroic journey: from birth and youth in a remote village in the Eastern Cape, to lawyer and leader of the ANC Youth League, to initiator of the armed struggle against apartheid, capture and the Rivonia treason trial, long imprisonment on Robben Island, and finally release in 1992 to become president of the ANC and South Africa, – all captured in his autobiography '*Long Walk to Freedom*' (1994). With such a stirring narrative widely available and celebrated in their country, perhaps it is not surprising that students in the School of Education adopt the metaphor of the heroic journey to describe their own initiation and transformation.

The PhD: quest or ordeal?

Why do people undertake a PhD? Backhouse (2009) suggests that there is no single understanding of what a PhD is, and why people undertake one. Instead, there are at least three competing, strongly held, views. The 'scholarly' view entails completing a substantial scholarly project, firmly located in a discipline, in order to contribute original knowledge to the field. People who hold this view see the PhD as a 'rite of passage' for entry into the research and academic community (Bitzer, 2007). A licensed scholar, a 'doctor', is qualified to pursue research "unsupervised, independently and autonomously" (Johnson, Lee and Green, 2000, p.135). The scholarly view is also known as the traditional, or autonomous, view of the PhD (Badenhorst, 2008). It is widely held in the School of Education, where the 'apprenticeship model' of the doctorate prevails. In this model the student toils, often alone, to complete a thesis under the guidance of a supervisor. Adherents of the scholarly view may display resistance to alternative models of the PhD on the grounds of compromising standards of excellence or preserving the culture of the disciplines (Backhouse, 2009, p.5).

The 'labour market' view, on the other hand, is about developing high level skills for the economy, and is rooted in the discourse of the knowledge economy and the market. Research may be designed and carried out in groups or teams to develop particular skills or to solve particular problems, for which there is a recognised demand. This view of the PhD, like the 'scholarly view' is present in the School of Education, as in other professional schools and disciplines, where students may have, or aspire to enter, careers in the public service or as researchers and consultants.

The 'ongoing development' view of the PhD sees the doctorate as a process of ongoing personal and professional development, of both student and supervisor (Backhouse, 2009; Fataar, 2005). The aim of undertaking a PhD, in this view, is to increase personal satisfaction and growth by developing critical intellectuals able to engage with knowledge in an academic way. This view of the PhD may be driven by a social justice agenda.

Backhouse notes that personal motives for undertaking a PhD are seldom simple, but may be related to influences accumulated in students' lives and the circumstances and opportunities they encounter (2009, pp.287). So, for example, academics and professionals may undertake a PhD to enhance their

careers *and* to establish themselves as researchers with knowledge and skills to be applied outside the academy.

The liberal education for English gentlemen of the last century, known as the 'Oxbridge' tradition, and described by Backhouse as the 'scholarly view' of the PhD, still holds appeal for academics in many universities. The concept of supervision embedded in this tradition sees higher degrees as an intellectual apprenticeship, offering students opportunities to become rational, self-directed, autonomous scholars. The stakes of this kind of supervision are often high (Grant, 2005) as the student may work for long periods of time in isolation from his/her supervisor. The student may be intentionally or unintentionally abandoned to 'get on with writing the thesis'. As Grant (2005) and Lee and Williams (1999) point out, this traditional model of the supervisor-student relationship is implicitly male, highly personalised and yet not interpersonal. It has been characterised as a 'trial by fire' and 'a bit like a military training academy' from which only the strongest survive (Lee and Williams, 1999). The authors deem the process of doing a PhD as 'fraught and contradictory' for everyone, but particularly for women who cannot easily be accommodated in the rational model of the 'autonomous independent scholar'. Supervisors and students who adopt this model perceive the PhD to be both a quest and an ordeal. The ordeal is what makes the quest worthwhile.

Problems which contribute to student attrition (incomplete degrees, or 'dropout') are well documented in the local and international literature. Mouton (2007) attributes attrition in South African institutions variously to the relationship between the student and supervisor; untrained and inexperienced supervisors; insufficient financial support for students; and insufficient resources devoted to postgraduate support, including an acute shortage of equipment and office space for students. There are thus personal, physical, psychological and organisational factors which contribute to attrition.

Drawing on data from two large national studies, Herman (2011) studied the causes of attrition cited by PhD students and postgraduate programme leaders and grouped them in six categories in descending order of frequency: 1) conflicts over time and energy as mature students in full-time employment attempt to balance work pressures and family commitments; 2) academic challenges, such as a gap of up to ten years since the previous degree, lack of research training, and lack of team work; 3) problems with access to facilities and resources, including faulty equipment and the unavailability of library

materials, internet time and working space; 4) financial problems, exacerbated by officially legitimated discrimination against mature part-time students, white students and international students; 5) Supervision issues (supervisors are overloaded, fail to give timely feedback, their expertise and personalities are mismatched with those of students); and finally 6) the South African context, a category which takes in the trauma resulting from high rates of crime, negatively affecting time on task, concentration and motivation. International students noted xenophobic experiences, difficulties with visas and permits; and feelings of permanent fear. Herman (2011) observes that a better understanding of doctoral attrition is needed, and that research should be conducted in different departments and institutions to inform students and those working with them of the obstacles to completion.

This section of the paper has reviewed three views of the PhD offered by Backhouse (2009), and research undertaken to understand the high rates of attrition in doctoral study. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the PhD may be understood as both a quest and an ordeal. Students who live by Yliyoki's heroic and businesslike narratives take up the quest and circumvent (the businesslike narrative) or overcome (the heroic narrative) the ordeals. Students who live by the penal and tragic narratives are overwhelmed or crushed by the ordeals.

 The next section and the following one deal with the context of the research.

The School of Education: challenging terrain

Swanepoel (2010) and Divala and Waghid (2008) draw attention to important challenges facing higher education institutions in South Africa in the first decade of the century. They charge that institutional autonomy and academic freedom have been eroded by increasing government oversight of higher education. University leaders and research managers no longer lead academic institutions, but instead are engaged in responding to changing policy and satisfying external audits. Both government and university managers have lost touch with what is going on at ground level. Therefore, academics have to find their way through an uncertain and confusing higher education landscape.

Like staff in other institutions, lecturers in the School of Education encounter escalating corporatisation and managerialism in the university. They feel the weight of decreasing autonomy and academic freedom, and pressures to grow *and* excel while also to economise – pressures which are both oppressive and contrary to the academic endeavour (Waghid and Divala, 2008; Jansen, 2010). For example, a government directive, the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001), aims to improve retention and throughput rates at all levels of study in tertiary education, yet effectively increases the burden on academics who are already under pressure to conduct and publish research, obtain NRF ratings, and teach and supervise increasing numbers of differently prepared students. This burden leads to increasing resignations and 'circulation' of academic staff as lecturers seek better conditions of work at other institutions.

Deteriorating work conditions for most university academics (Habib and Morrow, 2007; Nundulall and Reddy, 2011) are evident in increasing teaching workloads under disheartening conditions, including large class sizes and inadequate lecture halls. This means that supervisors have less and less time to devote to their students and to research in their own disciplines, reducing their capacity to mentor novice supervisors.

A relatively small number of academic staff in the present School of Education hold PhDs, a legacy of the merger between the former College of Education and the Faculty of Education in 2002, and their subsequent incorporation into the Faculty of Humanities. The role of College lecturers was to teach teachers, not to conduct research, so a higher degree was considered unnecessary (Jansen, 2010). In addition, there are few rated researchers in the School of Education to provide role models, inspiration and financial support for postgraduate students.

The profile of ageing and shrinking (due to retirement and migration to other institutions) senior academics also poses challenges for postgraduate supervision and research. Pressures to transform the institution racially have meant that young, entry-level black staff are under huge pressure to develop a research profile and complete a higher degree while simultaneously undertaking teaching, leadership and management roles in the School.

Meanwhile, the drive from national and provincial government departments to focus on educating a corps of teachers qualified to boost the failing public education system is at odds with the university's strategic goal of being a

research intensive university in the top 100 of world rankings (University of the Witwatersrand, 2012). There are too few postgraduate students in relation to undergraduates in the School of Education. To make matters worse, within the university, academic colleagues have low regard for teacher education, resulting in a constant battle for resources and recognition from senior administrators (Jansen, 2010).

Given the distressing conditions sketched above, it is perhaps not surprising that doctoral students in the School of Education, many of whom are staff members, describe their efforts to complete a higher degree in heroic terms. The increasing turnover of staff in recent years, and the high incidence of burnout, depression and cancer, especially among female academics, suggests that many students might have related a tragic or penal narrative rather than a heroic one, had they been present at the PhD weekend.

Levelling the terrain

In response to the challenging conditions sketched above, efforts have been made to improve the environment for postgraduate study in the School of Education. The first efforts took the form of practical, administrative measures such as revising admissions requirements and procedures; aligning School and Faculty standing orders on higher degrees and attempting to communicate them better to staff and students.

A 'PhD boot camp' designed to support academics to complete a doctorate and establish a publication record (Geber, 2010), was held in the School in 2010. Over a nine-month period, eleven mid-career academics participated in six courses and received twelve hours of personal coaching. Most academics found that participating in the bootcamp increased their productivity, commitment and accountability. The coaching component of it helped with exploring ambitions, building confidence, developing life skills and directing energies (personal communication with the Coordinator, March, 2012).

An existing postgraduate course on research design and methodology was given new vigour and status by expanding the involvement of senior academics within and outside the school and changing the venue from an awkward corner classroom to a well-equipped boardroom.

In addition, 'PhD weekends' which had existed only in disciplines such as Applied English Language Studies and Mathematics Education, were introduced to supplement traditional supervisor-student consultations with student-led seminar presentations. The weekends give students opportunities to chair sessions, organise and present their ideas to an audience of peers, debate, discuss and give feedback to one another in a structured environment. The cohort model (Govender and Dhunpath, 2011) which provides a conceptual base for the PhD weekends, attempts to foster communities of practice within and among students and supervisors. It is still too early to confirm whether this is the case in the School of Education. However, a significant advantage of the PhD weekends is that they present opportunities for supervisors and students to reflect on and honour their achievements, as in the roundtable discussion which gave rise to this research.

Finally, the School developed a strategy to enable legacy College of Education staff working on doctorates to take sabbatical leave. Financial support was sourced for 'time out [from teaching] sabbaticals'. The School introduced collaborative research projects with colleagues from overseas and local universities, supported and led by the institution. The result has been an expansion of research activity and output in 2005–2009, as reported in the quinquennial review (Wits School of Education, 2011).

So the challenges inherent in completing a doctorate remain but the resources and support are being increased. Increasing the financial resources and administrative and academic support may ameliorate some of the hardship for staff and students, but fundamentally the School remains subject to a policy framework, institutional culture and general conditions which are both contradictory and resistant to change. In such a situation it is easy to see why many students conceive of their PhD journeys as long, arduous journeys over uneven terrain. It is necessary to summon up courage to embark on the journey, to stay on it, and complete it.

Method

Qualitative researchers working with narrative draw a distinction between analysis applied to narratives and narrative analysis (or enquiry) (De Wet, 2011; Clough, 2002, Cresswell, 2007). To use Kouritzin's words, "you can research the story or story the research" (2009, p.80). In analysis of narratives,

narratives are the source material for knowledge and study. Researchers analyse them using methods such as discourse analysis, thematic analysis or content analysis, then interpret them, and sometimes create taxonomies of themes which hold across stories (Cresswell, 2007). In narrative analysis/enquiry, however, the researcher approaches the text not only as a representation of people's lives and worlds, but as a performance of it (Rule and John, 2011). Narrative analysis/enquiry begins with a written or spoken text giving an account of an event or action. The researcher collects texts, then reconfigures them into a narrative with characters, a timeline, plot, and setting or context. Thus the narrative in narrative analysis/enquiry is the outcome or result of the research, not the method of analysis. It is a data set in itself, reflecting the voices of the participants and the interpretive voice of the researcher (De Wet, 2011). The four narratives (heroic, businesslike, tragic and penal) which Ylijoki developed from interviews with students are examples of narrative analysis/enquiry. In this study I used narrative analysis/enquiry to better understand students' experience of doing a PhD. Both the story (the content) and the method (narrative analysis/enquiry) are powerful in their own right.

Using techniques associated with narrative analysis/enquiry I constructed the 'heroic journeys' of doctoral students by taking the following steps:

1.   Students and supervisors who attended the PhD weekend were asked to reflect on their experience as postgraduate students. They were asked to think of a metaphor for their experience, and to write or sketch it on paper.

2.   Students volunteered to tell their stories and/or show and explain their drawings. I took notes, attempting to capture words, feelings, events and explanations. Students showed courage and a degree of trust in me as facilitator as well as among themselves. No one was forced to tell their story.

3.   I did not determine the scope or focus of the research in advance of the reflection session. The students told their stories and I marvelled at their bravery and persistence. I gathered students' stories with their full agreement, taking ethical considerations into account. No names are used in this article, and students' drawings and stories are kept confidentially.

4.   After the PhD weekend I assembled the data and reconstructed my notes of students' texts so that they made a point.

5.   I 'restoried' students' stories (I put them in the three-act mythical journey format, with a chronological structure (a beginning, middle and end) a place or situation, a predicament, conflict or struggle, and a resolution or conclusion of sorts).

6.   I organised the stories to expose the understandings and interpretations held by *most* students. I reflected on how the understandings differed from or were similar to one another; what other conceptions were possible; and what students' constructions meant, if anything, for postgraduate study and supervision in the School of Education.

7.   I undertook reflective dialogue and member checks with others (with members of a writing group, and by presenting an earlier version of this paper in the School) to explore problematic experiences and consider alternative interpretations of the data. This was a way of managing the ethical and validity issues which arise when stories of others' experience are interpreted when they are not present to clarify or expand meanings (McCormack, 2009). It was also a way of repositioning myself from 'researcher' to 'acknowledged participant' in the PhD weekend.

8.   I explored links to experiences and stories in the published literature on student experiences of research degrees. I also sought to understand in greater depth the events and conditions in the School of Education which affected students' PhD experience.

9.   I examined my own willingness to question my own and others' assumptions, challenge entrenched ways of thinking, and to consider alternatives.

10. I reflected on the entire research experience and attempted to extract principles or draw conclusions from the stories.

The characters (participants)

PhD students in the School of Education are usually mature adults, diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, previous education, experience and motivation to do a PhD. Most study part-time as they are in full-time employment either in the School or elsewhere, for example in national or provincial education departments, or in the private sector. The traditional model of PhD students as young, full-time scholars supported by research grants applies to only a minority of students in the 'stem' (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education disciplines (ASSAf, 2010). Some are lecturers in other Schools and Faculties of the institution pursuing an abiding interest in education. An increasing number are international students from other countries in Africa, whose previous education was conducted in a different language, and in circumstances more or less challenging than those found in the School. Most students are in their forties or fifties, many of them women with responsibilities for child care and sometimes parent care. Some black South Africans, especially from rural areas, contribute financially to the education of younger siblings and family members, and provide a role model for other members of their community. Many are the first in their family to go to university, or to complete a higher degree. Parental, collegial and partner expectations of their success may add to the stress these students experience in doing a higher degree. Most students have experienced a gap of five years or more since completing their previous degree. Thus doctoral students have varied backgrounds, preparation, expectations, motivations, resources and responsibilities. These characteristics may be seen as a resource *and* an obstacle to completing a doctorate.

I turn now to the heroic narrative which students related in the PhD weekend. Statements made by students in the reflection session at the end of the PhD weekend appear in *italic* font, in double quotation marks. I have used the word 'hero' to refer to both women and men, for the sake of simplicity.

The heroic journey

Act one, departure

The journey begins in the ordinary world, in the everyday life of the hero. The hero heeds a call to adventure (to embark on a research degree). Sometimes the hero refuses to heed the call until something or someone makes it difficult for him to stay in the ordinary world, in his everyday life ("*It was part of my life, my career, then it became an obsession*"). There are milestones along the way (identifying a research topic; developing conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks; designing the research). A mentor, or supervisor, may help the hero to heed and respond to the call. The hero begins to understand that the quest is both a journey and a destination. The hero embarks on the journey. ("*It was like driving on an untarred, rocky surface, with potholes". "It was a massive learning journey*"). Not far along, he faces the first threshold (submitting draft work for comment or presenting work in progress at a PhD weekend; receiving feedback; revising and reworking; and ultimately submission of the proposal for examination). The hero becomes aware of the demands of scholarship. He is "*pulled in different directions*" and experiences "*shifting targets*". He persists and "*feels pride*" that he has crossed the first threshold. But he also admits to fear and doubt ("*Do I have anything new to say*?" "*Do I have anything to say at all*?"; "*At first I knew how much I know, then I learned how little I know.*")

Act two, the call to adventure

Once past the threshold, the hero meets *allies* and *enemies*, ("*I stood on my own but I got help from others, my supervisor, the PhDs*"). The hero must now face trials and tests as he develops his disciplinary knowledge and begins his fieldwork. He grapples with the amount and complexity of the work ahead. ("*It was like a giant puzzle*"; "*I was working in a structure, then I had to abandon the structure*"). He may have help, but he has to face the tests himself. He toils against the shortcomings of peers and the criticism of supervisors, ("*First we were close knit, then we got disconnected*"). As the hero passes through these tests, acquiring knowledge of ethical conduct and professional responsibility, reading widely, he reaches the innermost cave (writing the thesis), a dangerous place where he has to face a ferocious enemy – anxiety and self-doubt ("*Do I have control? Have I lost control?*"). He

undergoes emotional swings, and his confidence seesaws. The hero pauses at the entrance to the cave to prepare and summon strength ("*I had a sore arm, sore neck, sore back*"). In the cave, the hero faces The Ordeal *("I felt fear, insecurity"*; "*The intimidation was overwhelming"*). He faces his greatest fear – the possibility of death (feeling 'stuck', doubtful and paralysed for periods of time, contemplating defeat and dropout) – but he persists and is tested in a battle with his enemy ("*It was pure hell*"; *"It was a massive learning experience"*). This is where the hero's chances of succeeding in the quest appear bleak ("*Stretch me, bend me, don't break me"*). We experience the brink-of-death moment with the hero *("I had no time to bleed. . . It was pure hell and determination*"). But the hero returns from near-death. Having survived near-defeat and overcome obstacles, the hero takes possession of the treasure (the ability to conduct original research, to add to the understanding of a discipline or field, to write a thesis and submit it for examination).

Act three, transformation, tasting the elixir

The hero's journey is not yet over. On the road back, he has to deal with the consequences of confronting the enemy and taking the treasure. The enemy (examiners, supervisors, colleagues, even family members) comes after him to take the treasure back. The hero must face one last trial. He receives examiners' reports: revisions and corrections may be required. He must now communicate his knowledge to others through teaching and research. His supervisor wants him to publish his research. His colleagues want him to ease their load. His family calls him back to the life he left behind when he started his travails. The enemy tries one last time to defeat the hero. For the hero, it is the final test of whether he has learned the lessons of the ordeal. The hero wins and is resurrected *("Wow, I can write!"; "I achieve things I could never do before"; "I enjoyed the ride")*. He is transformed by this final lesson and is able to return to the ordinary world with new insights *("Joining a community of academics requires perspective, production, vision"*). The hero returns with an elixir (a lesson or medicine) from the special world (*"It opens the world of critical thinking"; "You have to be strategic").*

Discussion and conclusion

I began this paper by stating an assumption that creating narratives, or stories, about their experiences is a way for PhD students to express their creativity and resourcefulness. The process of interpreting and reinterpreting events and

experiences is a form of identity construction, an affirmation of the gains and losses students have made on their PhD journey. It is a way of restructuring a sense of self, a sense which is constantly shifting and changing.

I then reviewed literature on the disputed nature and purpose of the PhD, the role of the supervisor, and factors leading students in South Africa to experience hardship and to abandon their studies. The literature showed that the PhD may be seen as both a quest and an ordeal – key features of the heroic journey. I showed that despite recent efforts to increase support for PhD students, many of whom are mature, female students steeped in teaching, conditions in the School of Education are not favourable for study. It is essential for students to be both courageous and tenacious to undertake a PhD and succeed in it.

I return now to the questions I posed at the beginning of this paper, 'Why do students in a South African School of Education describe their experience of doing a PhD as a journey of epic proportions?' 'Why do they portray themselves as superheroes in this journey?'

Badenhorst (2008, p.17) observes that

> The extra-ordinary world, the call, the trials along the way, the mentors and enemies, the ordeals and rewards can all be related to the dissertation process. People who take on a large process like a PhD often go through severe personal tests. Some of them find it too much to bear and withdraw. Others face their worst fears and continue. Most undergo an identity transformation.

The PhD journey involves vision, strength and courage. It is an experience marked by trials and persistence on the part of the student. Doctoral students in the School of Education constructed a mythical narrative – the heroic journey – to make meaning of their experience of completing a higher degree in the daunting context of the School of Education. The fact that the heroic journey is a mythical story does not challenge its reality. Myths are not mystifications (Geertz in Britten, 2012).

The narrative of the heroic journey reflects the voices of participants and the interpretive voice of the researcher. It is an idealised version of the stories shared by the students in the reflection session at the end of a PhD weekend. It was the dominant narrative related by students, not the only one. It does not correspond to personal narratives of individual students, each of which has its own features (Ylijoki, 2001). The heroic journey makes visible students'

assumptions and beliefs about what it takes to complete a PhD in the School of Education. It is worth noting that students do not identify themselves as victims, or even survivors, of an institution whose vision and strategic plans far exceed its capacity to carry them out. Students see themselves as conquerors, as superheroes with exceptional gifts and powers. This should not surprise us, as students in South Africa engage in a testing academic journey while also overcoming contextual obstacles, as described in the literature.

The aim of using narrative enquiry was to gain a new perspective on the context and prevailing practices of PhD production in the School of Education, to enable students and supervisors to reflect on them, and change them where useful. Supervisors, programme managers and academic support staff would do well to recognise and encourage students' sense of agency, ingenuity, persistence and bravery, while pressing senior managers to increase resources and improve conditions for doctoral study and research. Students may then be able to finish their theses in a more business-like way, without so much drama and suffering. Perhaps, too, alternatives to Ylijoki's heroic journey (2001) will come to the fore in the School of Education, and students will create new narratives of their PhD journey.

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Jane Castle
Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development
University of the Witwatersrand

jane.castle@wits.ac.za