

‘How to write a PhD’ according to Andrew Glencross

Recently, I had the chance to talk to Andrew Glencross, currently lecturer in International Relations at the University of Aberdeen, about his own PhD experience, and his advice to people currently pursuing a PhD. We were colleagues at the EUI, where he defended his thesis in 2007 (and I took a little longer). He describes himself as an ‘accidental academic’, in the sense that he got into university at the age of 18, and is somehow still there now, going on 34. But when you talk to him, you realise rather quickly that academia has hardly incorporated him by mistake. Schooled at Cambridge and as he calls it ‘socialised in academia’, he knows a thing or two about how academia works.

Amber: I tend to start my HappyPhD seminars with the statement ‘Writing a PhD Can Be Easy’ – and ask PhD students for their reaction. I have to give credit where credit is due: that’s actually something you said to *me*, when we were at the EUI writing our PhDs. To me more accurate, we were having a beer in Bar Fiasco, and you told me: “Writing a PhD is easy, it’s just the rest of life that’s hard”. You must have hit a nerve, because I never forgot you said that. I’m curious: was writing a PhD really easy for you? What was your own experience like?

Andrew: Let’s say that in the end it seemed easy, but that doesn’t mean there weren’t moments of struggle. There was a struggle initially, in particular, to figure out what my PhD would look like, what it would be about. How am I going to contribute to the literature, say? That’s an intellectual struggle. Then, moving on, you overcome that first intellectual hurdle. There’s still a struggle, mainly to stay in the right frame of mind. To persevere. Overall, in comparative terms, I would say that it may have been easier for me than for some people if not a lot of people.

Amber: It’s interesting you mention the distinction between the intellectual challenge and the mental aspects of doing a PhD. I think many people go into writing a PhD with the idea that it’s mainly going to be an intellectual challenge. But it tends not to be the intellectual challenge that trips people up. It’s more the

mental challenge, the motivational challenges. I would argue that only once you get the mental part right, you get to focus your energies on the intellectual part, which is what the PhD should be about.

Andrew: Yes, which is designed to be a struggle.

Amber: Indeed. On the mental aspects, would you say you were well equipped to deal with them?

Andrew: Yes, I think you can say I was already well-trained on both sides. Intellectually, I had some rigorous training and experience. Because I'd been institutionalised a fair bit in academia, in a hothouse university environment such as Cambridge and Harvard, I knew that you've got to stay alert to being in the right frame of mind for being productive and successful. I was more self-aware perhaps about the importance of being in the right frame of mind and not taking chances with that aspect. I wasn't just expecting it to be a struggle on the intellectual side, but was also anticipating the personal struggles and wanted to make sure that I was equipped to deal with them.

Amber: Yes, because it does take people in surprise. Bas, my boyfriend, went to the University of Chicago for half a year. He met a lot of PhD students there who were just starting out. They were brilliant and really promising academics. Five years later he returned and many of them were still there, as PhD students, without having published anything! Not all of them, of course, but many of them. They were just completely deflated.

Andrew: The intensity can be counter-productive. In my case I was aware of the attrition rate for PhD students and of the mental dimension that can interfere with very clever people and impede their success and achievements. I was trying to be alert, for how that might happen to me, and trying to avoid that.

Amber: So, in your experience, how could PhD students prepare for these challenges?

Andrew: I would say that the two most common issues are to do with problems of focus and problems responding to criticism. Regarding focus I would say it's about self-awareness. Being aware of your own productivity as it were. When are you productive? When have you stopped being productive, in a given workday, or even a given week or in a given task? There's nothing more deflating and demoralising than thinking you've put in the work, but then realising that the output simply doesn't match what you think you put into it. Being aware of your own productivity, in a sense not deceiving yourself, is important for that aspect.

Amber: In my opinion, PhD students try to work too long hours. They try to do hard mental work for God knows how many hours a day. It's counter-productive.

Andrew: Some of them put in 14 hours as if it's an office environment. Without thinking about how many of those hours are actually productive. The problem there is it's a question also of experience and self-knowledge. You have to at least start thinking about it, because otherwise, you're just sat there at a desk with your bum on the seat not being productive. And you may also not even be aware of it. It's so frustrating when nothing good comes out of it in terms of writing and progressing towards the thesis. You've got to try and avoid being in that situation too often. Instead of counting hours you should ask yourself: "What have I done to actually progress in terms of writing something, reading some new literature, etc?"

Besides awareness of your productivity 'PhD awareness' is a factor, by which I mean making sure you know what a PhD actually is: what constitutes a PhD. To not treat it as an abstract badge of honour represented by a certificate that you might pin up on your wall, but rather as a concrete specific piece of work. It's a written document made up of different parts, different sections, that constitutes an original contribution to literature. What bit are you actually working on at any particular time when you're writing the PhD? A literature review, number crunching, data collection, analysis of findings, the bibliography? Knowing what

your specific task is allows you to then measure whether or not you really are progressing on that front.

Amber: What if you don't know what you're doing yet? The most difficult phases of writing a PhD, in my experience, are those in which you aren't quite clear on that. What would your advice be for PhD students during such a phase?

Andrew: You're in a university environment, which means you can find advice informally but also formally in terms of trying to know what it was that people actually wrote. You've got access to PhDs in person and in print. You can access people who have just written a PhD. You can find a list of topics that have been examined recently in your department. Ask yourself: "Hang on. What am I actually supposed to be doing here at the end of the day?"

Amber: To move on to your second point: how to deal with criticism. It's such an important topic in academia. In a way, it's an academic's job to deal with criticism well.

Andrew: Precisely. You've got to become much stronger than, say, a novelist or an author who has a meltdown when they are criticised. I'd say one of the things about responding to criticism is definitely what not to do. I think there is always a tendency to respond with outrage, in many ways. You're protecting your own ideas, as if your investment in your work hasn't been recognised. I think that's the wrong way to go about it in the sense that criticism in the academic world is normally an abstract phenomenon. It's not about personal interaction. It's criticism at an abstract level. I think you've got to be aware of that basically.

Amber: Awareness is key here, because it's so easy to become over-identified with your work when you're writing a PhD. An attack of your work can feel like an attack on you!

Andrew: Exactly.

Amber: If you know how your brain works, it's very understandable that it works that way. Our brains are wired to identify threats and to respond to them instantly on an emotional level. Once you become aware that you have these emotional, defensive automatic reactions, and if you realise that it's normal to have such reactions it becomes easier. You can say to yourself: "OK. I'm having an emotional reaction – fine, but I'll just let it be. I'm not going to get carried away. Instead, I'm going to focus on the content of the criticism."

Andrew: Exactly. You've got to be prepared for that first sense of outrage, but you also have to realise that it's misplaced. On both counts, avoiding the misplaced emotional feeling and also then being equipped to deal with the rational response to criticism; I think both of them rely on self-confidence a lot, self-confidence about your own work and also your own ability to improve it based on criticism. Dealing with criticism is just an inherently cumulative experience. People need to actually build up, in a sense, their resources and experience in order to generate the self-confidence to deal with criticism.

Amber: But all beginnings are difficult. Let's say you're presenting at a conference for the first time, and it's tough. You get difficult questions, and you're not sure how to respond. And afterwards you think, "Oh my God, I'm just not cut out for this".

Andrew: That might be the temptation, but first of all, going to a conference is the right idea because it's about exposing yourself. Some people hide away too much in a way that afterwards denies them the opportunity to gain that experience of criticism. Sending out papers to conferences, or submitting an article, these things are good for gaining experience on the process of criticism.

If you're in the university system preparing a PhD, you should be aware just how common criticism is and build up the knowledge and the awareness that it's not personal. It's rather just how the system works, and the idea is that criticism is designed to make something better. There is no other reason for that criticism to exist. Think about a literature review. That's a critique of what's out there, in

a sense. Or pick up a journal that has book reviews. Those are essentially critiques of people's work. It's important to pick up on the rules of the game there, to know what you might be subjected to one day.

Mainly, it's about getting the balance right between seeing your work as something that you are personally invested in, as compared to something that contributes to a field of ideas or knowledge that is actually abstract and not something that personally belongs to you, even though you're personally contributing to it and being judged on whether or not you are making an adequate contribution.

Amber: Criticism can get quite complicated once it comes from your supervisor, because of the personal and hierarchical relationship. I know I often didn't get the feedback I was looking for when I was writing my PhD. Do you have any words of advice?

Andrew: That one-to-one relationship with a supervisor and that personal connection behind the criticism is actually relatively unusual in academia where normally, it's more abstract or detached. You've got to get your expectations of that relationship right in terms of knowing that they might be very much in demand with other projects, and might very much have their own interests beyond you and your PhD. As a result, you need to make sure that you're going to have alternative sources of critical input, from say, a peer group, someone else in the department, or someone you've met at a conference, to solicit input beyond just your PhD supervisor.

One thing that can help get the right kind of criticism is to draw up a list concerning what you want to talk about prior to a meeting. Be punctilious about what it is that your meetings are about. Are you actually going in with sufficient preparation to suit the demands of the supervisor? Similarly, are you leaving having had a constructive discussion about your work in a way that suggests your work is being taken seriously? You've got two elements there: going in under-prepared and leaving without the appropriate feedback. I think there is a

responsibility for the PhD student to make sure they are fully ready for both aspects there. Are you going into the meeting with the right preparation and expectations?



Did you see the PhD Comic I sent you? I think that's a classic one where you're going in hoping for enlightenment, hoping for an epiphany, and then it doesn't come. When the supervisor tells you: "That's your task. That's your responsibility," and makes it clear that it's not going to come from him or her, whether it's about what books you should read or how you should make the contribution literature, et cetera. I can see why things would break down quite quickly after such a meeting and could become a vicious cycle.

Amber: How would you go about handling such a situation in which you feel misunderstood by your supervisor, or for that matter, a situation in which you feel you have been criticised too harshly by your supervisor? It's so easy to become overly sensitive to criticism.

Andrew: You want to make sure that you avoid that scenario. One thing I've been doing with students in my individual one-to-one meetings this year, which can be replicated by PhD students, is to record supervision meetings to improve communication. Record the meeting with your mobile phone device or with a little recording device to actually have a record of what was said. Then you can go back, compile a report on what the criticism was and what the suggestions

are, so that you're working on the same page and showing that you're aware of their input to your project. What supervisors want to see is not just preparation but the idea that you're responding to their input in a way that shows you are taking account of their criticism and their guidance.

If criticism does become a challenge, it's important not to just let it fester, not to let it get to you internally and sap your self-confidence, but rather to try and make it clear what problems you have with that criticism and why. Having prepared documentation helps there. One of the complaints we often see is that supervisors are actually repeating criticism and perhaps not acknowledging that steps are being taken. If you can actually point to a record of responding to their criticism, then you're in a much stronger position. There's a depth of preparation you need to be able to deal with such a possibility.

Make sure you draw up a report on what was discussed at the meeting so that you both have a record of what was said and also maybe an account of what is supposed to come next. It's a document for your own records but also a way to challenge your supervisor to make sure that they agree that you're on the same page. It's about trying to get an acknowledgement of your position, of your progress, as well as an acknowledgement of your response to criticism. Write down what it is you've done, what it is that still needs to be put right, or why your supervisor still has a problem, and whether or not that has something to do with a fundamental flaw in the PhD or whether it's simply a disagreement about interpretation, data, or even results.

Amber: Right. You've got to try to initiate a real dialogue about your work with your supervisor. You're a partner in the dialogue, not the victim of the dialogue.

Andrew: Exactly.

Amber: One of things I struggled with when I was writing my PhD is that I often didn't get much feedback at all. At times, my supervisor hadn't read my work, and I found it to be a very disheartening experience. I understood, of course,

rationally, that my supervisors were very busy people, but I didn't know how to handle the situation well – nor in terms of getting the most out of the supervision meeting anyway, nor in terms of dealing with the difficult emotions of not feeling worthy of their time. Now I say, *prepare, prepare, prepare* for meetings – I call it ‘corner your professor’ in my online course. What would your advice be in such a situation?

Andrew: First of all, I think you've also got to be prepared for that eventuality. It is the unfortunate reality. The higher up you go in the food chain of academia, the less time there is for the small fish, like PhD students.

Amber: They're the tiny fish.

Andrew: The very tiny finger fish, the parasites, some supervisors might think of them. You've got to be prepared for that.

Amber: That is so wrong. PhD students are fresh. They're exciting. Talking to them may well be more exciting than talking to people who have been in the field for 20 years.

Andrew: Right. So why not present yourself in that way by coming to meetings prepared, by asking the right questions, by sending the right documentation, and not just going in there seeking help, seeking a plan, seeking a kind of ‘deus ex machina’ from the supervisor? Try and go in to impress them with your preparation.

If that still doesn't work, then make sure that you have the ability, to go in and run what you want to run past them in terms of ideas, methodological approaches, interpretation of results, whatever it is, orally. That way you can still get some kind of feedback on the substance of your work, without necessarily having had them read anything. Know what's going to be important in terms of what you specifically need feedback on. If you are clear on that you can get good feedback, even if your supervisor hasn't done the work they should have done. Because they're very well-trained, and simply because you're still sat in the

room with them, you've got a great opportunity to get good feedback even if they haven't fulfilled their end of the bargain, so to speak.

Amber: When you start publishing papers, dealing with criticism becomes about dealing with criticism from journal editors and reviewers. What would you say is the right approach to dealing with rejections and revisions?

Andrew: Criticism becomes less personal when dealing with journals and reviewers, compared to criticism from your supervisor, but that doesn't mean it becomes easier to deal with. The way I look at it is it's an abstract, stylised game where you have rules and conventions, and it's a very formal exercise. You submit something to a journal or send something to an editor or publisher, and then you get criticism from people who quite literally don't know who you are, or where you're coming from. They're just evaluating what they see, the written product as it were.

If you think about it as an exercise, as an exercise in its own right, whereby you have to meet their objections, or take account of them if you are successful in terms of a revised and resubmit decision, you've got to treat it as a formal setting whereby you have to just complete and go through different stages. You can't expect to jump stages. You can't expect your work to be published without corrections, for instance. Don't expect that. If you think that's the case, you've got a problem. You've got to go in and do the hard work of actually taking account of those revisions, knowing which ones to reject and which ones to actually build on.

Amber: It's also important to be aware what the academic game is about and whether you enjoy playing that game or not.

Andrew: Yes, that's an important one for PhD students to think about. Further on in your academic career there's going to be more criticism. It's abstract and it's going to be less personal in terms of one-to-one with a supervisor. Someone you don't know who isn't invested in your work in any way, may send you back what you

may perceive as harsh criticism. In response, you've got to enjoy building your case. You've got to enjoy saying: "OK. This is my point. These are my conclusions. And this is how I arrived at them."

You've got to have very strong mental boundaries. It comes down to self-confidence. Have you got the self-confidence to actually use your skills to do new things, to do research, and to lay it open to criticism? If the criticism is harsh and yet still constructive, do you have the resources to build on that and respond to that criticism?

If you've got doubts about your credentials in that respect, then you should think hard about whether you want to pursue that academic path beyond the PhD because it will get harder. It will become, in a sense, more discriminating and more direct, blunter as it were.

Amber: The question is whether you can turn criticism into a challenge that invigorates you, in a way? Can it be a positive challenge, instead of something that just drains you?

Andrew: Right. Living under the cloud of criticism is an absolutely essential part of the academic game after a PhD as well: always waiting for criticism and responding to it. Just last week, I was waiting basically all week for reviews of a textbook manuscript. You're in this funny phase where you know it's coming and yet you don't know what the content will be, and in a sense, it's hanging over you. Then you receive the criticism, and the question is, how to respond to it. If you've got problems on that score, you've got to think about your trajectory.

Perseverance is really essential. Persevere through the comments. I think there is always a tendency not just to be outraged by comments but also, in a sense, to give up, to just suddenly think that, "OK, this is very fussy. This is nitpicking. Therefore, I won't read the next comment, I'll ignore it". I think that's the wrong attitude, whereby there actually might be something really good in amongst all

of that other maybe more peripheral or even tangential criticism. Never dismiss it wholesale. Look for what really is important to your argument, to your work.

Never give up on the criticism, even if you might think it's perverse. Have the perseverance to go through it, and the perseverance to respond to all of those points. That takes time. Time management in terms of making sure you have set aside enough time to be able to revise and resubmit, that's going to be very important.

Amber: I always advise people to celebrate *everything*, especially when the going gets rough and criticism gets you down. It's challenging the negativity bias head-on. It's either that, or getting drunk, wearing heels and embracing being miserable as a semi-permanent state of being. Do you have any advice for more difficult times?

Andrew: I would agree on: 'remember to celebrate'. When you go through a laborious peer review or something, you have to go through all these different stages. The whole thing drags on forever, potentially. Then, when you get your final go-ahead or when you finally see something in print, will you remember to celebrate at that point what you've gone through? Don't forget you've got cause to celebrate after going through all of that. I've been doing this textbook since 2008, for instance, and I mustn't forget to get blindly drunk when that's finished.

Amber: [Laughs] Let me know when it happens Andrew. Thanks for talking to me about these topics.