

"Starting a PhD - and keeping it going !"

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This was a "how to" session where we talked through some of the joys and difficulties of research work. I'd hoped that we'd get a mixture of people coming along who were at different stages of the research process - and we got just that. In a group of eight one participant had extensive experience of supervising PhD students and also had very lively memories of his own experience as a research student, several of us had embarked fairly recently on major pieces of research including PhD work, some of us had ideas for research projects at various stages of development, and one person already had vast amounts of data collected in an earlier project which she wanted to analyse more systematically. It was a very lively mix, and using as starting points the attached questions we picked each others' brains, aired concerns and shared the excitements in a very open way. I've tried to jot down here the ideas we came up with; of course some contradict others, and we weren't trying to put together a recipe for success; the session's value lay I think more in the sense of shared enterprise than in the specific ideas we came up with. For those at the start of the process it was particularly helpful to hear from those farther along and from one of the group who was an experienced supervisor.

We started by reaffirming that what starts you off and keeps you going is your interest in your research questions. We talked about how important it was to keep a sense of what the central questions were, and we agreed that fading interest in the key issues is a critical sign not to be ignored. We spent very little time thinking about the areas of skill or knowledge we'd need, moving quickly on to talking about how to choose and use a supervisor, how to keep records and notes, and how to monitor your own progress. Our tips were

- * Shop around for a supervisor; don't forget that Universities need you as much as you need them.
- * Talk to potential supervisors and read some of their work to satisfy yourself that they are knowledgeable about and interested in **your** issues.
- * Talk about potential supervisors with friends, colleagues etc to try to sharpen up your own ideas about what kind of supervisor will suit you.
- * Ask if your (potential) University runs courses you might need - in research methods etc.
- * Find out if research students are encouraged and helped to meet and talk to each other - are there graduate research seminars for example ?
- * Check the library facilities; try a mini search of the literature.
- * Try to find a supervisor you feel comfortable with; the ideal combination is somebody who doesn't intimidate you but does

stimulate you.

- * Remember when you're planning and doing your research that it's **your** timetable which must drive it, not some idealised version.
- * You may need to keep reminding yourself and your supervisor that it's **your** agenda that counts, it's your research, not theirs.
- * Be as open as possible - come to an understanding about how much time/energy you really have available.
- * If the worst comes to the worst, change your supervisor ! It's your PhD, not theirs, and not the University's !
- * Use card indexes rather than computer databases unless you have a laptop you can use on the move.
- * Keep two card indexes, one for references, the other for brief notes on particular topics.
- * Keep a research journal as well as notes on what you're reading and field notes - the journal will help you keep a sense of progress.
- * When you're writing, try to find a "friendly" reader to comment as you go along - in addition to your supervisor.

My own observations: I hope ALM continues to include in conferences "how to" sessions like this as well as research reports. We need to continue to find time to talk to each other about the research process if we are to meet the needs of teacher/researchers at all stages of the process. It's a very good way of supporting each other.

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What I find really

.... **interesting** **stimulating**

.. **infuriating** **puzzling**

..... **depressing** **amazing**

about my own work with adults ?

or

about adults learning maths in general ?

Starting a PhD - and keeping it going !

What skills or areas of knowledge will I need ?

What can I do to acquire them ?

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What really worries me about doing research

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my ideal supervisor

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How to handle a supervisor

