



## Transcript: Susan - PhD experience

What stage are you at now?

I have just completed my PhD. I have just submitted my corrected copy to my internal examiner and she has told me you know, verbally that it's fine and I've passed and so I have a PhD.

Congratulations

Thank you.

Tell me a bit about your experience of doing a PhD

Well I think there are two very distinct parts of the PhD. The first probably a year and two thirds and then the last third in the third year. And the first one was, very much retrospectively, I'm not sure I really knew what I was doing for a lot of the time. I would meet with my supervisor and she would ask me to write something every term and so I would present to her every couple of months or so with a 10,000 word essay and something I had written just generated off the top of my head. And she would say 'hm maybe I don't know lets think about this lets think about that' and I would go away and do something else. But in the meantime I was you know, still carrying on being a student going out drinking and generally having a good time meeting people being really involved in university life in general. And then towards the end of my second year that was all fine, it was all really good fun but at the same time I really didn't feel like I knew where I was going and what the final project was going to look like. And so while my project was narrowing and I was progressing, I was progressing very slowly and without any kind of real sense that I had anything to say to the topic.

There is somewhere in my second year I got very stressed out because it became very clear that I didn't really know and I had one year to go, one funded year you know, and so I sort of pulled it together quite a lot in that year. And at that point it became a sort of really intense nightmare of working really hard all the time and writing up and you know, pulling everything together. At the time I felt very much like making it up as I was going along. But retrospectively I think it was only in that period that I felt like I really became a researcher and I came into that identity a lot more.

Can you talk to me a bit more about the identity of a researcher?

Well because my PhD is in English I was only ever doing what I had always done which was go to the library and read a book and make notes on that book and then talk about it a bit. In my final year I got much more interested in various other bits of primary sources for example. One part of my thesis was about this pair of writers in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century about whom there is very little information and so I went on a massive mission to try and find out more information about them and I ended up looking at you know, books that were written about Somerset you know, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and prints from the period and sort of arcane references to local myths in Somerset and that kind of thing and so it was quite interesting. I found out a limited amount, I found out enough as it turned out. I mean the information is not really out there but it felt like I was really looking for information in a way that I hadn't really done before.

And I also got a bit more clarity about exactly how reading texts contributed to a kind of wider social world because until then I had been looking at philosophy of the period and what people had said about different things and about woman gender issues and it was all very kind of nebulous.

In my final year I got a much clearer sense of what I was doing what I wanted to achieve by reading a text. And so what I was looking for, what exactly about the language I was interested in drawing out. And basically I found a framework for what I was doing I think. That is a slightly unhelpful way to put it perhaps but I felt like I was working in a system that I had developed for myself and that is what I think I mean by saying I felt like I had a research identity because I had decided what I wanted to do and I was doing it. The information I wanted to find out in the way that I wanted to model the thinking that I was doing.

What have been the most memorable moments of the PhD, highs and lows?

Do you know I think the most memorable moments have been times when I've been sitting down with a group of friends you know, not anywhere near the desk or the library but you know, having like a drink in a bar or something sort of the rituals you are doing with your friends. And you are talking about your research and you say 'oh I think this and I think that what do you think' you know, and you sort of think 'look at me I'm having this really intense conversation with somebody' and the way in which people work together to be supportive. When I look back at my PhD I am going to remember talking about interesting things with my friends I'm not going to remember sitting in the library.

I can think of a few occasions when I realised something or I leapt out of bed you know, I've just thought of something this is really important I can make this work. And there was quite a lot happening towards the end because I had done so little for the first two years that I had to kind of work very hard to pull it all together. But that is not going to stay with me forever it is going to be that sense of community of all sort of working together under quite adverse conditions.

The lows (she laughs) I think the lowest point was right before I started to write up and I thought 'I'm going to write up over the summer in my third year.' I sort of thought 'right I'm going to get going around May' and for about a month I couldn't lift a finger I couldn't do anything and I spent most of that month just lying on the sofa crying and going 'I can't do this, this isn't going to happen I have wasted two and a half years of my life I'm not going to have a PhD at the end of this. The AHRC is going to want their money back' you know all that kind of stuff. The fact that I got over that is a positive memory because it shows that I could cope with it but yeah it was touch and go for a while and so yeah that was definitely my lowest point.

Is there some ambivalence now that you have reached the end?

Yeah but that is because I am so close to the end of it. I was really euphoric when I finished writing up and I felt like it was all completely worth it. Immediately after I had had my viva I felt like I quite sort of forcefully had the PhD put into perspective because I felt like a whole other set of challenges presented themselves in terms of getting published and finding a job and you know, the kind of really quite narrow nature of the PhD as it is when it has been done in three years flat. And so yes it is a PhD but it is only a PhD and I felt like that for quite a long time.

Now that I'm starting to say Doctor rather than Miss I am feeling quite positive about it again. I think I absolutely would do it again I think it was an amazing opportunity and you know, it was an amazing three years and in many ways I wish I was still doing it because just you know, the relationships you build up, the experiences you have are absolutely invaluable. The research itself perhaps a little less valuable and so maybe that's where the ambivalence is, is that you know so much of the PhD I think is more about the experience than about the product. I think once you sort of dealt with that I found it a lot easier to feel grateful that I had had that experience.

Can you explain a bit more about that?

I mean I suppose there is a lot about what the PhD is for and I think people still see it as this you know, sort of magnum opus sort of document you know, this is what you leave with the world. And I think once you have finished it becomes very clear that what you have produced is not the final word on the subject. And something that I've found great in one way and not so great in another is that I am now already thinking about how what I've done can be changed and improved and have more things added to it and could it work with other things that I've looked at. And could it be turned into something publishable for starters because a PhD is not publishable. You know how I can develop what I've done. The fact that it is not publishable in its present form means that it is essentially a worthless document but at the same time having now produced that document I know that I can produce another document of a similar length and better quality which would then be sort of something that would go into the world in the way that the PhD doesn't. And having gone through that process of producing that long document sort of like you know, a practice document sort of saying this qualifies me to be the kind of person who gets to publish articles rather than this itself is something that I would be ashamed to release on the world right now you know, in its current state. But it was good enough it got me a PhD it got me the rubber stamp and that is all I needed it to do. I think that is what I mean when I say the product is less important than the process. And people now are beginning to think in terms of the PhD as an apprenticeship especially if it is only going to last for 3 years there is no way that you could possibly produce anything of value to the learning community in that time or you know, of significant value.

And so it is kind of scaling down your expectations and saying 'right, well I will produce this' and then somebody somewhere will say 'yes that's why they've a doctorate' and that's fine. And then I will use that massive amount of information that I have garnered wonderful things because now I'm authorised to.