



The quest for the PhD: a better metaphor for doctoral education

The quest for the
PhD

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper seeks to propose the adoption of an alternative metaphor to that of the “journey”, currently the most pervasive characterisation for the student’s experience of doctoral education.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a conceptual and rhetorical approach.

Findings – The paper offers a critique of the journey metaphor as a characterisation of the student’s doctoral experience and proposes instead the metaphor of the Quest, a cultural and literary form found in most societies. It argues that the six elements of the Quest identified by W.H. Auden resonate with the contemporary doctoral experience and emphasise the uncertainty involved in research rather than the linearity implied by the journey metaphor.

Social implications – The paper argues that the quest metaphor offers a cross-cultural basis for both staff and student development activities through which sense can be made of the research experience, student concerns can be surfaced, and potentially difficult issues raised for discussion in an unthreatening way.

Originality/value – The paper is the first to apply the quest as a metaphor for the student’s doctoral experience and offers a new way of interrogating that experience which will be of use to those involved in supporting research students.

Keywords Doctoral education, Metaphor and the PhD, Research as quest, Research student experience, Support for research students, The research journey, The doctoral experience, Research student orientation

Paper type Conceptual paper

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By mutual confidence and mutual aid – great deeds are done, and great discoveries made
(Pope’s *Homer*, cited in Ransome, 2012).

A new metaphor is needed for the messy process that most students experience while they study for a PhD. The current dominant metaphor is that of the journey, the sub-text of which is that whilst studying, the doctoral student starts from point A and moves to point B, at the end of which period of travel they are awarded a PhD and

The author would like to thank Professor Marie Brennan for giving him the idea for this paper at a seminar on the research degree she gave at the Mawson Lakes campus of the University of South Australia during Winter 2009. In answer to a question from another participant, she said words to the effect that she disliked intensely the metaphor of the journey for doctoral study and suggested strongly that it should not be used. This gave the author food for thought as, up to that point, he had been blithely deploying it both in seminars and conversations with students and supervisors without giving it another thought. Her words struck home even though no alternative was suggested. It took several months before serendipity took a hand and the author came across the Auden chapter upon which the article draws whilst reading a long way outside the area of research education. To use both a cliché and a metaphor, a light went on!



(presumably) move onto the next stage of their life. This is much too simple a metaphor for research education and is likely to mislead both potential and current students rather than assist them to understand and make sense of their experience, one of the key functions of metaphor. Further, it is not particularly generative, being descriptive rather than heuristic. Put simply, the problem is that the notion of journey implies a known start and a known destination, that the terrain to be covered can be mapped out in advance, and that the only real issue for the traveller is how much they would like to pay, which route they would like to follow, which mode of transport they would like to take, how much comfort would they like to experience whilst travelling, and how long they would like the trip to take. This is what we do when we choose between driving, flying or taking the train from, say, Adelaide to Sydney. Whilst the journey will provide an experience irrespective of which route is chosen, and there may be the occasional problem to overcome (as, for example, when there is a strike of baggage-handlers or if roads are flooded or cattle stray onto railway lines), there is little real mystery about the journey and in almost all cases there will be a successful outcome. The notion of journey also suggests a process with a relatively predictable and structured beginning, middle and end, something which many have questioned as an appropriate characterisation of doctoral education (for example, Wellington *et al.* 2005; McCulloch and Stokes, 2008). Whilst intellectual and personal travel of some sort are always involved in doctoral education, and whilst it is possible to make a *post hoc* determination of starting, middle and end-points, I believe that the journey metaphor is much too routinized for the experience of doctoral education which is much less predictable than either a railway or airline timetable, or an itinerary provided by Google Maps, a web site or a motoring organisation.

The role of metaphor

Metaphors are closely associated with constructivist approaches to education which dominate contemporary discourses of learning and teaching and which are grounded in the notion that “cognition is the result of mental construction” in which “(k)nowledge of reality [...] (arises) through the interaction of that knowledge with the context in which it is presented and with the knower’s pre-existing knowledge” (Ortony, 1993). Metaphor works by bringing “into cognitive and emotional relation any two separate domains, using language appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other” (Haynes, 1975, p. 275). The importance to learning of bringing an individual’s emotions into play is something which constructivism has foregrounded. This is important because, as Brown states, “(t)he idea that learning is an intellectual pursuit separate from emotional processes has long been dismissed as nonsense” (Brown, 2009, p. 9).

Metaphors can also help bring coherence to argumentation and hence understanding and Sticht (1993) uses a passage from Moby-Dick in which two domains of knowledge are brought together to demonstrate this. In the passage, Melville integrates two discourses, one on human destiny and the other on weaving and Sticht concludes that using “the metaphor initiates an interactive mode of thought between the two domains” in contrast to what would be achieved if the author were simply writing in linear mode. He concludes that in “efficiently providing a meaningful, functional context for acquiring new knowledge by means of old knowledge”, metaphor “has the effect of producing a certain saliency in the discourse which makes it ‘stick together’ or cohere” (Sticht, 1993, pp. 622-623) “Metaphor has an

interactive force as well as a comparative force” (Haynes, 1975, p. 274). In the context of a discussion of supervision, Linden (1999) supports this notion suggesting that “(p)eople seem to understand the world by means of plots, a form of organisation integrating the intentions and circumstances of concrete persons with the typicality or generality of certain prototypical stories. Individual events can thus be given a contextual meaning” (p. 352).

Carter and Pitcher remind us that metaphors can “transfer meaning at many levels” (Carter and Pitcher, 2010, p. 580), and Low argued that metaphor “makes things exciting and understandable” (Low, 2008, p. 212; cited in Carter and Pitcher, 2008). Metaphors are important ways of describing, learning about and interrogating social phenomena and are also useful tools to help individuals understand and make sense of their experiences. Finally, metaphors operate at two different levels, “the comparison level and the interactive level. The latter is not mere comparison, but the whole eureka process which, in bringing together the hitherto unconnected gives a new insight which belongs to neither” (Haynes, 1975, p. 273).

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle characterised metaphor as “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else” (Bentoko, 1987, p. 209), and it is important to ensure a good “fit” between the metaphor and the “thing” being “named”. Bontekoe suggests that developing a metaphor “is not at all difficult [...] if we intend to be satisfied with just any inappropriate naming, but if we expect our metaphor to somehow ‘make sense’ in spite of the ‘error’ involved in its construction [...] (we need) the ability to recognise resemblances which normally pass unnoticed” (Bontekoe, 1987, p. 209). To quote Weed, “there are good metaphors, useful, even inspiring, metaphors, and there are inappropriate and misleading metaphors” (Weed, 2006, p. 585).

Metaphors and doctoral education

Metaphors abound in discussions of doctoral education and it is impossible in an article of this length and nature to engage fully with all issues concerning metaphors and doctoral education (for examples of earlier discussions, see Lander, 2000; and Willox *et al.*, 2010). However, a number of examples relating to selected aspects of the research degree are given to illustrate the breadth and nature of their use. Starting with the supervisor-student relationship, Grant explores the notion of the “master-slave metaphor” suggesting that “while much current discourse wants to posit supervision as something else more mutual and collegial like ‘mentoring’ or ‘sponsorship’, such impulses are flawed unless they can co-exist (in uneasy truce perhaps) with the ubiquitous hierarchy of master and slave” (Grant, 2008, p. 24) adding that while this metaphor is “clearly problematic”, it “is also productive – providing impetus for the student in particular to get the work completed.” Also in the context of supervision, Lee and Green introduce “authorship”, “discipleship”, and “apprenticeship” as “arche-metaphors” (that is, the “sacred metaphors of supervision”) (Lee and Green, 2009, p. 621) the authors also providing a list of only a few of the many metaphors used in the doctoral literature. They point out that “fathers and midwives appear frequently in the literature on doctoral supervision, along with more idiosyncratic figures such as cooks, gardeners and mountaineers. The landscape of supervision is populated with bridges, chasms, mountains and archways, and traversed by a plenitude of journeys, punctuated by juggling and balancing, marked by rites and rituals, and filled with darkness and light” (Lee and Green, 2009, p. 617).

Metaphor can play a powerful role in developing both learning and reflection and also an understanding of the situation a person finds her/himself in and Carter and Pitcher offer a number they found useful when providing support for students writing research theses. These include: the “visiting guest tour” which “can explain signposting in thesis writing”; the “guest-in-the-home” which can describe the “need for tidiness and correct signalling of direction”; “packaging” which describes “that turning point with a thesis when the writer must shift their head from a writer’s perspective to the reader’s”; “stitch-tension” which is of use in helping some students develop writing in which “the tension is [...] best kept even”. They continue suggesting that “(w)riting conventions are like traffic rules” and that for “the thesis writer who is also a mother, birth comparison contextualises the panic felt in the transition that precedes submission” (Carter and Pitcher, 2010, pp. 586-587). They argue that metaphors allow for space between the frustrations of experience and for thinking about those frustrations by “removing the author from their protective instincts towards their work [...] (grounding) it in everyday frustrations and conventions that are less emotionally fraught” (Carter and Pitcher, 2010, p. 587). Hoult, also working in the area of supporting research writing and referring to the role of the reader of research student drafts and the need for readers to be “safe” (for the student), states: “No reader is completely safe but some are much more dangerous than others and this is particularly true for the sapling text. The sapling is fragile and needs space to breathe and grow.” She suggests good readers need to have “green fingers” (Hoult, 2009, p. 19). Oliver talks of the importance of the “signpost” to both argumentation and thesis structure (Oliver, 2004).

In accounts of their experiences as doctoral candidates, students frequently resort to metaphor. A number of the examples from this point on can be found in a report of a project organised through the UK’s Higher Education Academy in which a group of recent doctoral candidates were asked to write about their experiences (Brown, 2009). Writing was complemented by group discussions involving the participants. Hoult[1], a student pursuing a cross-disciplinary PhD, tells that she found “not exactly a community, but a loose affiliation of other hermits and the odd prophet in the wilderness [...] Communities exist in the desert but they are moving, nomadic and loosely affiliated. The guarded citadels behind city walls could never provide a home for me – besides, even if I wanted to get in, the gatekeepers wouldn’t let me pass” (Hoult, 2009, p. 21). She adds that, from her perspective outside both contributing disciplines, it “all started to appear as a sham to me, all of it seemed to be a parade of the emperor’s new clothes.” The outcome was that “(l)ike an atheist in a seminary, I was aware that I had lost my faith and was angry with the others who couldn’t see through the hocus-pocus. But militant atheism is a deeply unimaginative position to be in – forever tied to closed versions of theism, like squabbling Siamese Twins, and forever trapped by language into denying the existence of what can’t be described” (Hoult, 2009, p. 22).

Bryan opened a piece reflecting on her doctoral experience with the words: “The imagery of the shuddering car, barely holding the road in Louis Macneice’s *The Wiper* perfectly captured my uncertainty [...] Whilst there were gauges to measure my speed and distance covered (word counts, supervisor comments, reviews) the importance of developing resilience in the face of uncertainty seemed to me to be central” (Bryan, 2009, p. 23). Thinking about her future as a new supervisor herself, she asks the

question, “Is the wiper a sufficient metaphor for how I should inhabit this role? Or will there be an expectation that I will function as a deeply interventionist satellite navigation system?” (Bryan, 2009, pp. 23-24) referring also to an “arduous trek over *terra incognita*” (Bryan, 2009, pp. 23-24).

Metaphors of the body and medicine have also been applied to doctoral education, with Haynes relating that in one set of discussions between research students “metaphors of the body occurred frequently” with “useful migraine”, “being scarred”, “constipation” and “stillborn” all arising (Haynes, 2009, p. 30).

Haynes argues that metaphors “offer a meta-dialogue concerning the researcher, the process of research, relationships with self and others involved with them in this lived experience” and explores “gestation and birthing [...] as a metaphor for the tumultuous and at times unpredictable life cycle of knowledge creation” relating that she “found it very apt for my experience of the PhD” (Haynes, 2009, pp. 26-27). In her reflection, Haynes worked through various dimensions of the metaphor. She starts by considering her experience of being supervised: “Perhaps most PhD babies are monitored more closely than mine was before birth and delivered in proper university labour wards [...] Once pregnant I had to deliver [...] Now of course, with a little distance from the birth, I am curious about my baby. How will she grow up” (Haynes, 2009, p. 28). Having raised the “birth” metaphor as appropriate for the doctoral student, she then explores the suitability of “the metaphor of midwifery to illuminate the experience of the supervisor and the relationship between student and supervisor” (Haynes, 2009, p. 31).

Despite this variety, the metaphor of the journey appears to be the most common. Carter and Pitcher, for example, draw attention to Bartlett and Mercer’s (2001) phrase, “comparison of the thesis process to a long and arduous journey may make the steeper passages more endurable” (Carter and Pitcher, 2010, p. 580). It can be found in the titles of articles (for example, Bayley *et al.*, 2012), chapters (for example, Wellington, 2010) and throughout discussions of doctoral education. Lee and Green call it “pervasive” (Lee and Green, 2009, p. 622). Wellington *et al.* (2005) begin one of their chapters: “As authors writing in a different time and place from where you are now as a reader of this text and a traveller on your own unique journey, we can neither come alongside you to share the journey, nor provide you with a detailed map or account of what you will encounter along the way” (Wellington *et al.*, 2005, p. 31). Wilkinson introduces his contribution to the doctoral “how-to” literature in the following way: “Negotiating a learning journey can be a demanding task [...] This book has been developed and shaped around a typical postgraduate journey [...]” (Wilkinson, 2005, pp. 2-3).

It is important that metaphors should be applicable to changing circumstances and to diversity. For Green and Lee, it is important to develop metaphors that challenge the increasingly dominant trope that the research degree is simply a matter of a technique to be mastered as a simple act of research training. They identify “two areas for concern regarding the conceptual limitations and constraints of available ways of thinking about research degree supervision”, the first being the lack of emphasis on education at the expense of a focus on research and management processes and the second the continued implicit assumption that supervision entails a one-to-one relationship between one supervisor and one student (Green and Lee, 2009, p. 616). The remainder of this article proposes a metaphor that addresses these concerns.

An alternative to the metaphor of the journey

In looking for an alternative metaphor for doctoral education, we are looking for an idea that will take account of the fundamental nature of the doctoral degree and also the way it is currently offered, delivered and experienced in contemporary higher education. It must take account of the doctorate's complexity, the uncertainty involved, the extent to which research involves the unknown, the fact that multiple actors are involved and the emotional ups and downs of the experience. It should also help students and others involved in doctoral education to recognise that research is not linear. The metaphor of the journey fails to do these things and I would suggest that a more appropriate metaphor for doctoral education is that of the "quest", a form of story much used in ancient Greek literature and identifiable in many other literary and cultural traditions. In an essay first published in 1961, the English poet W.H. Auden discusses the concept of the quest and, in a way that points to its appropriateness as a metaphor for doctoral study, distinguishes the quest from lesser experiences:

To look for a lost collar button is not a true quest: to go in quest means to look for something of which one has, as yet, no experience; one can imagine what it will be like but whether one's picture is true or false will be known only when one has found it (Auden, 1969, p. 40; all Auden quotes are taken from Isaacs and Zimbardo, 1969).

In a reference to its universal nature, Auden argues that the "Quest is one of the oldest, hardest and most popular of all literary genres" [...] "[...] the persistent appeal of the Quest as a literary form is due, I believe, to its validity as a symbolic description of our subjective personal experience as historical" (Auden, 1969, p. 41).

The use of the quest as metaphor is not new in education, however its application to doctoral education is. In a discussion of one particular graduate-level course (Education of self for professionals) which used the heroic journey metaphor as its basis, Murray says that over "the last 15 years, educators and trainers in a broad range of settings, educational, therapeutic, and organisational, have found that the heroic journey model provides powerful educational tools to support human learning and development – cognitively, emotionally, socially, and spiritually" (Murray, 2009, p. 109). He interviewed 17 of the participants in the course to explore their perceptions of the effectiveness of the metaphor in encouraging learning and identified a number of roles or ways it did this including the provision of "opportunities for reflection, self-discovery, personal challenge and risk-taking, introspection, and self-disclosure" and the creation of "awareness [...] about themselves and their world" (Murray, 2009, pp. 115-119).

Auden identifies the essential elements which characterise a quest and the remainder of the article takes those elements and discusses the metaphor's appropriateness to the experience of doctoral education. The six elements are:

- (1) "A precious object and/or person to be found and possessed or married".
- (2) "A long journey to find it, for its whereabouts are not originally known to the seekers".
- (3) "A hero. The precious object cannot be found by anybody, but only by the one person who possesses the right qualities of breeding or character".
- (4) "A Test or series of tests by which the unworthy are screened out, and the hero revealed".

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- (5) “The guardians of the object who must be overcome before it can be won. They may be simply a further test of the hero’s *arete*, or they may be malignant in themselves”.
- (6) “The helpers who with their knowledge and magical powers assist the hero and but for whom he would never succeed. They may appear in human or in animal form”.
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The elements explored

The precious object

The precious object being sought through the doctoral quest may take a variety of forms. It may be the simple award of the doctoral qualification, of the title “Doctor” which carries with it the weighty approval of an organisation authorised to make such an award. The precious object may be the knowledge which is gained through study or it may be the original contribution to knowledge that must be made for the degree to be awarded, that is, the thing sought may be knowledge for its own sake. The precious object may also be the self-knowledge developed through the reflection that doctoral education encourages. Alternatively, it may be the solution, the partial solution, or the better definition of, a particular issue or problem (whether social, technical, theoretical or cultural). It may be the development of a new concept, artefact, or performance. However, a key element of the research quest is that by definition research outcomes are unknown until discovered or uncovered. If this were not the case, the activity simply would not be research.

Individual candidates may desire different objects in different combinations and to varying degrees from their research degrees. As Smith states, there “is a world of difference between a PhD which is undertaken in order for credentials and one that is undertaken from a philosophy of transformational education” (Smith, 2009, p. 16).

The “precious object” is much more than just something that is desired. It also provides the motivation that is so essential to the completion of the PhD (Phillips and Pugh, 2005, p. 32).

The long journey

Whilst rejecting the metaphor of the journey as being an appropriate characterisation of the whole of the doctoral experience, it is unwise to dispense completely with the notion of travel and distance because, as with any form of education, to be successful the experience must change the person in some way. The key point is, what sort of journey? The PhD quest is a long one, with relatively few completing in less than three years full-time, and many taking much longer, especially if they are studying part-time. As in any quest, the PhD offers plenty of opportunities for distraction, for side-adventures, for going down blind alleyways. Some supervisors encourage a little of this sort of activity so that students can learn to recognise a false or unproductive path, while in other cases it is the student themselves who pursues non-research project-related activities (teaching, paid or voluntary work etc). In some cases these activities are built into doctoral programmes and in some cases the “distraction” can provide time out to think about the project, or can introduce the student to a new idea which supplies an answer to a thesis/project-related problem they are facing. For example, teaching a theoretical course and developing classes for it is an extremely

good way of also developing a very good understanding of the subject (this, as with some other examples, is drawn from my own experience as a research student).

This element can also refer to the degree of personal travel that is undertaken during a programme of doctoral education. The experience can, and some would argue should, be transformative, certainly in the way the individual's thinking is structured and possibly also in personal terms (Brew, 2001). Doctoral programmes, as with all good education, should result in personal change and that change can be characterised as the distance travelled. Doctoral education certainly involves one or more journeys and each can involve a significant distance, but that is not the whole of the story.

The hero

Despite what supervisors occasionally feel, the undoubted hero in the doctoral quest is the research student. It is the student who has been motivated to study for the degree, who is travelling through the intellectual landscape and making sense of it, who is in search of the original contribution to knowledge, and who bears the ultimate responsibility for failure should that be the outcome. It is the student who is plunging into the unknown and who will reap the prize for success or pay the cost for failure. Quests are nothing if not long and in addition to the intellectual capacities required to complete a PhD, an equal and possibly more important individual quality is that of tenacity, the "stickability" required to see the enterprise through to the end.

In his discussion of the hero, Auden identified two types.

One resembles the hero of Epic; his superior *arête* is manifest to all. Jason, for example, is instantly recognizable as the kind of man who can win the Golden Fleece if anybody can. The other type, so common in fairy tales, is the hero whose *arête* is concealed. The youngest son, the weakest, the least clever, the one who everybody would judge as least likely to succeed, turns out to be the hero when his manifest betters have failed (Auden, 1969, p. 46).

Many supervisors and non-supervising academics and administrators will recognise these two ideal types of student (most actually falling somewhere between these ideal types) and it is encouraging for students when they realise that it is not necessary to fit one particular character-type to be successful in a research degree. The quest metaphor can be used to encourage students to reflect on this. The hero is the person who, when faced with apparently insurmountable problems, finds both the courage and means to solve, detour around, or design them out.

A test or series of tests

Whereas in the "journey", the traveller regularly sits back and is carried from beginning to end with the occasional time out, change of vehicle or interruption, in the quest, the hero is continually battling and facing tests to allow her or him to pass through to the next stage and progress towards the prize. As the PhD becomes more "quality-controlled" these tests become more formalised and can lead to frustration as was the case for Hoult who refers to the "repeated demands to account for where I was going" citing the request by her Research Degrees Sub-committee that: "As part of your proposal tell us what you think you will find out at the end of this study before you begin" (Hoult, 2009, p. 20). In the PhD quest, the hero does not suddenly appear, but is revealed over time largely by overcoming the many challenges which doctoral research throws at the researcher. In conversations at conferences some people have begun to talk about "becoming" rather than "getting" a PhD and gradually, through

study and research, the candidate develops and reveals within themselves the qualities of “doctorateness”. While at times the tests may seem to be designed to prevent the timely completion of a PhD, viewing them as part of the quest casts them in a new light.

The guardians

In the PhD quest, the “guardians of the object who must be overcome before it can be won” are the examiners of the candidate and her/his thesis (or, in most Australian universities, just the thesis). The examiners are the actors in the process who decide whether the candidate has performed at a sufficiently high and consistent level to be allowed to possess the precious object and join the pantheon of heroes. The examiners act as guardians for both the discipline and the university and the question as to whether or not malignancy has been involved must be left to discussions about specific cases, but thinking about the metaphor of the quest will certainly provoke those discussions! However, on a more serious point, surfacing the issue prevents the development of a mythology around the examination process, encourages students to develop confidence in the processes which are in place to prevent or remedy unfairness and helps to maintain confidence in the value and worth of the qualification.

The helpers

In quest stories, how is the hero successful? Is the successful pursuit of the precious object a one-person effort or something involving just the student and, sometime but not always, her or his one loyal companion? Auden tells us success is not down to the hero’s own powers, for he or she is merely a mortal human being, “but to the fairies, magicians, and animals who help him, and he is able to enlist their advice because, unlike his betters, he is humble enough to take advice, and kind enough to give assistance to strangers who, like himself, appear to be nobody in particular” (Auden, 1969, p. 46).

Unlike the mythical quest, in the PhD quest, while the Helpers are legion, most take human form most of the time. They include supervisors, research advisers, colleagues, librarians and laboratory staff, administrative staff, friends, family and those who provide information, data or commentary and critique on papers or thesis chapters.

Conclusion

What I set out to do in this article was to argue for a new metaphor for doctoral education to replace or at least subsume that of the journey. The journey is too simple, too linear and too general to do justice to such a complex and potentially transformative experience whereas the quest offers a much more nuanced and appropriate metaphor. Metaphors are important and when they work well they operate at more than a simple descriptive level which is the level at which the “journey” operates. The quest, on the other hand, is heuristic and encourages insight and helps bring meaning, coherence and understanding to what can be a confusing experience for many research students. The quest is also better than the journey in assisting us to interrogate the doctoral experience. These are all important functions of metaphor and it is the contention of this article that the quest with its component elements of the precious object, the long journey, the hero, tests, guardians and helpers offers an excellent vehicle for better understanding, not only to research students, but also to

their supervisors and those interested in doctoral education as scholars of higher education. The quest's ubiquity across cultures means that it is well suited to doctoral programmes with international students drawn from different cultures.

The quest metaphor face can also surface important questions about the contemporary PhD such as the tension between the private and the public benefits arising from doctoral education which play into questions of who pays and is there more than one motivation and purpose for the PhD. Auden does this in his discussion of the precious object saying that, in "many versions of the quest, both ancient and modern, the winning or recovery of the Precious Object is for the common good of the society to which the hero belongs" (Auden, 1969, p. 46). It is important that a metaphor can raise this and other contentious issues (the journey metaphor cannot) because, for many doctoral students, the motivation to pursue a doctoral degree is the public benefits that may accrue (for example, a contribution to public health or increased historical knowledge) rather than merely the private (for example, the establishment or development of a career).

The identification and explication of the quest as a more appropriate metaphor for the doctoral experience has positive implications for researcher development and those charged with facilitating development programmes for research students and their supervisors. Metaphors provide useful starting points both to structure workshop presentations prior to discussion and also to act as prompts for discussion on specific aspects of the doctoral experience. The generative nature of the quest metaphor makes it particularly appropriate for these purposes. Take, as an example, Auden's comments on the social isolation involved in a quest that "(t)o take a man on a journey is to cut him off from his social relations to women, neighbors, and fellow-workers. The only sustained relation which the quest hero can enjoy is with those who accompany him on his journey [...] Aside from these, his social life is limited to chance and brief encounters" (Auden, 1969, p. 49). This quotation will resonate with most research students who have been studying for any length of time and most of those (including staff) who already hold doctorates, and will promote discussion about the nature of the doctoral quest as well as almost certainly prompting discussions about gender and inclusive language.

A further positive implication for researcher development is that the quest genre is ubiquitous across cultures and, hence, is useful when working with international and domestic students either independently or together. Further, the genre is known to almost everybody, even if they are not aware of it. This article is being written at about the same time as the film of the first part of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* was released. That series of films and the preceding *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy are forms of quest. Many video games are based on the quest model. Many of the tales that children in all lands grow up with are based on the idea of the quest. It is this universality and appropriateness that make the quest metaphor an ideal alternative to that of the journey as a thought-device which will enhance understanding of, and promote reflection on, the doctoral experience and the doctoral process.

Note

1. A number of the examples from this point on are drawn from the same report of a project organised through the UK's Higher Education Academy in which a group of recent doctoral

candidates were asked to write about their experiences (Brown, 2009). Writing was complemented by group discussions involving the participants.

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