

## **A journey from supervisee to supervisor**

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# A JOURNEY FROM SUPERVISEE TO SUPERVISOR

Scott Harrison

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Musical participation by boys: The role of gender in the choice of  
musical activities by males in Australian schools.

Griffith University, 2004

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## *Abstract of thesis*

The thesis seeks to examine the relationship between gender and musical participation by boys. The problem of males' non-participation in certain musical activities has been the subject of research for many years and this thesis considers some of the issues in relation to this phenomenon. The notion of gender is discussed. Historical and contemporary perspectives in stereotyping are investigated to determine the extent of the problem, with a view to enhancing the experience of boys in musical endeavours. There are no studies of this nature in existence in Australia and the existing research

from other western cultures, while providing some basis, cannot be directly applied to this setting. Furthermore, existing studies have not brought about significant change in the gender order in music education. This project seeks to address these shortcomings.

Masculinity in Australia is examined, with particular emphasis on the effects of hegemonic masculinity on those who do not fit this stereotype. Issues of bullying, depression and suicide are addressed. Empirical and sociological studies are re-examined in the light of more recent thought on the subject, particularly with regard to the possible causes of non-participation in singing and playing of certain instruments.

The extent to which stereotyping of musical activities exists in Australian schools is reviewed through a series of studies of participation and literature. A number of subjects are interviewed to discover some of the reasons behind the choice of particular instruments.

The thesis concludes with some perspectives arising from recent case studies of schools that have, to some extent, overcome some of the gender issues raised in earlier discussion. Constructs of masculinity and femininity affect musical participation in Australian schools and the extent of this phenomenon is examined in this thesis.

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### ***Beginnings***

The journey into my doctoral research probably began about ten years before I enrolled in PhD studies. I was teaching in a boys' school in Brisbane and began to observe certain behavioural patterns, both musical and extra-musical, that affected boys' engagement with music. Over time, trends emerged: low numbers of boys on flute; difficulty in forming a choir or string ensemble. Initial reading suggested that

these were common problems in similar educational settings in other locations (Abeles & Porter, 1978; Griswold & Chrobak 1981; Delzell & Leppla 1992). In our small way, we tried to address these in the local context. There were certainly aspects of this phenomenon that were specific to this site, but there were also circumstances that seemed to be more universal. This then became the impetus for my study. In hindsight, I recognised that the idea came to me; I did not go looking for a doctoral topic, it was there as part of my everyday practice and I had a problem I genuinely wanted to solve.

I completed undergraduate and post-graduate coursework studies at Queensland Conservatorium (now part of Griffith University) and a Master of Music at The University of Queensland. When it came time to decide on a university for doctoral studies, I did not shop around. There was an emerging research higher degree culture developing at Queensland Conservatorium, and an intention to open a Research Centre during my period of candidature. I was aware of the potential supervisors there, and had worked with the person who became my supervisor in a professional capacity (he as a conductor, me as a singer) for almost ten years. I was interested in having a degree that was branded as a Conservatorium program, but also expressed an interest in having cross-faculty supervision with the Education Faculty. For me, it was important that I was studying with other musicians who were interested in the practical applications of research in artistic and pedagogical domains.

I submitted my application, and while it was being assessed, I spent about six months reading broadly about the proposed topic. At the time, this meant going to the library, borrowing books and photocopying articles from journals in hard copy. I would sit in a comfortable chair in the evenings and read two or three papers, marking relevant sections

with a highlighter. As a result of this preliminary reading (I must have read more than 100 papers in this time), I was well placed to determine a broad thesis area once I enrolled. I approached the formal parts of the study with some confidence. I knew what the research problem was and also had a few ideas about how to solve it.

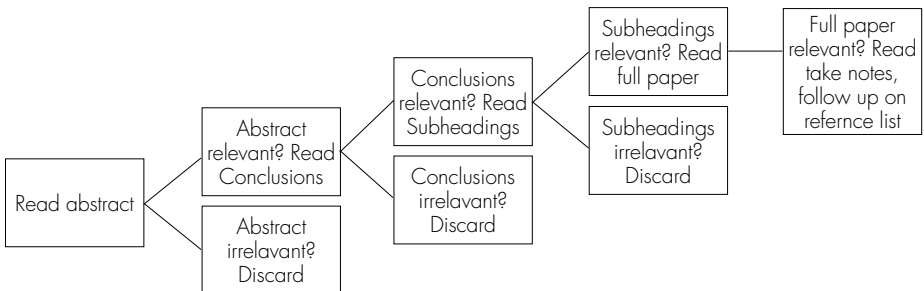
I consciously set up the routine for managing my life circumstances. I deliberately took a teaching post where the demands on my time in the co-curricular area would not be so great. My routine was to work at school during the day, care for my children into the early evening, then study at night. I would also dedicate every second or third weekend to reading and/or writing. In the years leading up to my enrolment, I had been working in the evenings as an opera singer. I reduced my commitments to the opera company, and substituted them with my study regime. Despite working full-time, I resolved to study full-time, too. I was blissfully unaware of the strains doctoral study placed on my personal life. My son was two when I commenced study, and my daughter was born in the first year of candidature. Given the routine I set up, I felt I was giving them adequate of time and attention. My study impacted quite significantly on my relationship with my partner at the time. I was oblivious to the additional family responsibilities she picked up as a result of my decision to study. As I progressed through the program, there were increasing demands for me to present my work in national and international forums. Unfortunately, the relationship did not survive much beyond graduation.

### *Candidature*

Once I enrolled, the broad area of study did not change substantially through the course of the degree. I quickly recognised that many studies had been undertaken into the stereotyping of musical instrument

preferences, but that my circumstance was unique. Few quantitative studies referred to singing as a stereotyped instrument, and so my initial data gathering adapted existing instrumental studies, and added singing to the spectrum. To be truthful, I stumbled across this as a data collection method and fortunately it worked! Armed with this quantitative data, I could explore some of the more detailed reasons for the trends I was discovering through qualitative paradigms.

My reading took me beyond the stereotyping of instruments and into gender studies. There were clearly sociological influences behind the stereotyping, but I was initially reluctant to go down this path: I felt like a fraud, not knowing much about studies into feminism and masculinities. One of my supervisors reminded me that I was not expected to read everything in the field, but to read selectively. He gave me some excellent advice about reading papers in this way:



As I delved further into the masculinities writing, I became clearer about my own views on masculinities and femininities. I came across the work of Connell (1995) who described masculinities studies with such clarity that I could find a framework for my research. I did not subscribe to Connell's theories, but I was able to use the foundations provided in this writing to further shape my own thinking. My theoretical framework was becoming established, but I still did not have a solid grounding in method.

Eventually, I turned to a colleague with some experience in supervision of projects in another discipline. He pointed me towards defining my research question in "BBQ" terms: that is, if someone asks at a barbeque what your topic is, how do you describe it? Once I had honed the question in this way, answering it became much clearer and my methodology was established. I used what Creswell (2003) would now call mixed methods. I had a large amount of quantitative data about the instruments played by each sex, and also conducted twenty interviews with young men who had completed their secondary schooling in which I asked them to reflect on their experiences of music throughout their lives. From these data, I was able to triangulate the actual instrument preferences with the experiences of individuals within schools and colleges and draw some conclusions.

### *The beginning of the end*

The write-up phase was tortuous. I decided to write in big chunks, using blocks of time to write large amounts of text. The result was largely stream-of-consciousness writing, but everything was on paper. One particular day, I wrote about 10,000 words. Most of it was rubbish and later discarded, but there were some kernels of writing worth keeping.

After about three months of solid writing, I proudly presented my supervisors with the finished product. It was, in fact, the first full draft. They gently referred me to sections that needed minor corrections or substantial re-writes and over the next year we shaped what would become the final version. Towards the end of the process, I took another three months away from the thesis altogether. After that fallow time, I came to the writing with fresh eyes and restructured, tightened and honed the thoughts. By now, my supervisors and I were very familiar with the content. One supervisor suggested I ask someone else to read it prior to submission: for proofing, for clarity of expression and sequence of idea. Alas, I did not take their advice and as a result the final product is less polished and less cogent than it could be.

As a student nearing completion, the fear lurked that some-one else might be doing the same project. Given the emphasis on the original nature of doctoral research, this concern was not without foundation. In an attempt to address this issue, one supervisor encouraged me to publish my findings along the way. This could have been a risky strategy, as the ideas were still fluid and conclusions slightly misguided. I began by presenting at conferences, and used the feedback to re-shape ideas. I also joined the Gender Research in Music Education (GRIME) network and found some like-minded researchers through this forum. I published some preliminary findings in journals, and gradually worked up the courage to put my work into international publications. The reviews I received were, for the most part, very positive and encouraging. My work was gradually becoming known and I was staking a claim to the territory, so the strategy suggested by my supervisor was on the right track.

Then an email arrived from a researcher in Canada. “Wow!” it said. “This is so cool! We are working on the same thing!” My reaction



was “Oh no! This can’t be happening. I’m just a few months from completion and someone is doing the same project! Why hasn’t my literature review revealed this? How could I have missed this person’s work?” After this initial state of panic, I read some of his work and realised that, while we were doing comparable projects, they were not really the same. My work had a particularly Australian flavour to it, and one of the central arguments focused on the unique nature of Australian masculinity. I was relieved that my work retained its originality, and I had found someone with similar interests. My colleague and I wrote and presented together in Canada and Australia. The collaboration continues and we are, at the time of writing, working on an edited volume together.

### *Submission*

Submission of the thesis was an interesting experience. After all the intellectual work, the collation of final product was slightly pedestrian. The right number of copies, bound the correct way, delivered to right address and then, the moment of hand-over. I bounced into the office with almost four years work in hand and the clerk behind the desk said “Thanks.” Is that it? Where are the trumpets, the fireworks, the champagne corks popping? This was a complete anti-climax.

While the work was being examined, I shaped articles for submission to journals, carving up the thesis, using pieces of data I had previously discarded but still found interesting (see Harrison 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009). My experiences of the peer review process had been quite positive up to this point. This changed when I received a review that questioned my right to undertake the study, my methodology and my findings. I was devastated! Angry and confused, I threw the paper, and the reviews, in the bottom drawer. After several months, I was able to

revisit the review, and submit the paper to a more carefully targeted journal. It made me more cautious with my writing, and gave me the jolt I needed to ensure my work was well thought out and submitted to the most appropriate journal.

The examiners' reports came back after submission and I realised why there were no trumpets and fireworks when I handed the thesis in. The job wasn't finished. I had to make some minor revisions to the thesis, and was admitted to the degree. From submission to graduation took about eight months. The celebration really took place at graduation. I had a real sense of being admitted to the academy: wearing the robes and the bonnet and being accepted as part of a wonderful community. I was given the rare honour of being giving the valedictory address, an opportunity to tell part of this story, to advocate for research into my field, and to encourage students at various stages of their studies.

### *Life beyond completion*

I did not start the PhD with the intention of gaining employment in a university. I had naively assumed that doctoral study was the pinnacle of academic achievement. It was only when I reached the end of the thesis that I realised why the process is called research training. Within a few months of graduation, I was offered a position at Griffith University, where I am currently employed. The post is in music and music education, and works across the Education Faculty and Queensland Conservatorium. In retrospect, I was well prepared for this eventuality, given that my doctoral supervision had been across these two academic elements. Part of my workload is to teach undergraduate music education. Perhaps more importantly in the context of this paper, I supervise around 20 research higher degree students and teach coursework in the Doctor of Musical Arts program. The coursework

involves teaching research methods and design specifically to musicians, rather than generic methodology courses. More recently, I have taken on the role of research higher degree convenor. This position has led to a strong interest in researching and publishing about the supervisory process, so my advice to prospective doctoral candidates is founded in a research context.

### *Advice to prospective doctoral candidates*

In my first semester at Griffith, I undertook a certificate course in supervising research higher degree students, and found new ways to handle the supervisory process: approaches that were at variance with my experience as a student. The course gave me an awareness of ethical considerations, the student-supervisor relationship and the interface of the academic elements with the administrative expectations. I also undertook a Masters degree in higher education because I sensed that my years of school teaching were a useful foundation, but there was more to learn about learning and teaching in higher education.

My own process was to do a literature review, collect the data, do the analysis and write up the document. The thesis was a fairly straightforward process. This is not to say there were not challenges along the way. The basic principle for prospective students to bear in mind is that things will go wrong, and that contingency plans will need to be planned for and inevitably invoked.

Of the twenty students I supervise, there are many different topics and equally numerous ways of working. I have quite a specific process for dealing with supervision meetings. It does not work for every student, but the following process works for most. A week to ten days before their next scheduled meeting, I ask for a report under the following headings: student's name, course, project, next meeting time, draft

documents, questions for discussion and progress to date. This allows for both supervisor and student to prepare in the most efficient way for the supervision meetings. In these meetings, we take a number of different strategies, but in the early stages I refer students to existing databases. Then, at various stages through the program, I provide templates of proposals, confirmation papers, tables of contents and final theses. Given my own experience as a student, the research question is central to all the discussions with students. If this has been clearly thought out, it can be referred to throughout the entire process, and will assist in deciding the most appropriate methodology and presentation format.

I also encourage students to engage in the broader research higher degree culture within the faculty, and the university. Candidates at my university attend regular weekly colloquia, and this helps enormously in reducing the loneliness that is so often a feature of doctoral study. The colloquia have a variety of themes, but there is a strong link to the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, which has three main strands: Artistic practice as research (which looks at the role of research in the creative process in music); Music education and training (which reflects on the way music is transmitted) and Music and communities (which focuses on the examination of recent dynamics in the global music arena). There is a public lecture series on topics related to student projects, often with international guests. The research centre also supports symposia and conferences, including the Cultural Diversity in Music Education Conference, Music and Health and, a recent addition: Musical Autoethnographies. The last of these has provided a framework for doctoral candidates to centre on their practice, while finding ways to interpret it for the benefit of others.

As there are a number of students in our programs who study from a distance (other states and internationally), students are also supported

by faculty based on-line materials including videos of colloquia, readings, lecture notes, research tools and advice about conducting fieldwork. There are also university-wide training sessions in statistics, ethics, analysis, writing skills etc. My advice to students is to make themselves aware of the facilities and resources available to them and, perhaps most importantly, become part of this research culture provided through the events and materials described above.

Finally, many students at my university are undertaking practice-based doctorates. Together with one of my colleagues, I have begun to research the challenges of undertaking and supervising these types of projects. Initial findings have suggested that the process described above is similar (literature, data collection, analysis, findings), though many students have commented on the issues of defining the topic. One student noted: “Scoping the nature of what you are doing and narrowing it down to a doctoral level early enough in the process to avoid major difficulties as the end of the degree approaches” (Harrison & Emmerson, 2009, p. 8).

One of the other issues I come across relates to the choice of methodology. In the same project, colleagues working with students in practice-based programs noted: “There is no trodden path for methodology and format and this is one of the disadvantages as opposed to doing a more traditional PHD where you use the methodologies that fit the problem” (Harrison & Emmerson, 2009, p. 7).

While there are a number of alternative formats presented in the visual arts and design (see Marshall & Newton, 2000; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2002; Borgdorff, 2007; Gray 1996), further research in relation to methodology in music-based research higher degrees (conducted in conjunction with my colleague Paul Draper) supported this view, and also found three considerations for working in practice-based doctoral programs in music:

1. A lack of prior research training experience [in candidates]
2. Few established research methodology exemplars [in practice-based fields]
3. [Assisting students in] Designing authentic practice-based research exegeses  
(Draper & Harrison, forthcoming)

These themes are explored in some detail in the Draper and Harrison paper, and form part of an ongoing program of research. There are a number of similar publications emanating from Europe and United States, including Bresler (2009), Hannan (2008), Polifonia (2007) and Tomasi and Vanmaele (2007). These publications provide guidance for administrators, supervisors and students in this relatively new field of endeavour.

1. In summary, my advice would be
2. Choose your supervisor carefully
3. Choose a program that suits your needs
4. Choose an institution that has a supportive research culture
5. Know the procedures expected within your program
6. Expect the unexpected
7. Set the ground rules for your relationship with significant others (including family and the supervisor) with whom you will share your doctoral journey
8. When refining the topic, take time to make ensure you know exactly what the central question is
9. Consider which methodology and final format will best answer that question

10. Get a critical friend to give your work fresh eyes towards the end of the process
11. Consider life after the doctorate: what will your ongoing contribution be?

## **Coda**

Every doctoral project will be different: it is why we undertake original research. My project, and the advice provided as a result of both my doctoral studies and my more recent experience as a supervisor will, I hope, be of assistance to some candidates. It can be a lonely and challenging experience, but the rewards are great. The contribution of doctoral work to the progression of knowledge in music education is of enormous importance to our profession, particularly as Australians head towards a national curriculum.

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