



Strategies for Completing a Successful PhD

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[MUSIC PLAYING] [Strategies for Completing a Successful PhD]

RICHARD BROCK: My name is Richard Brock. [Richard Brock, PhD] After graduating with a degree in physics, I taught English abroad in Japan and then spent eight years as a secondary physics teacher in schools in Essex. Whilst being a teacher, I became increasingly interested in how students learn, and in particular the idea

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: of what does it mean to really understand physics. Why can some students be highly successful at GCSE and then struggle to achieve with more complex kind of learning required at A-Level. Therefore, I chose to do a part-time PhD in science education. Before starting my PhD, I studied for an MPhil

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: in educational research in which I looked at ideas of intuition and insight in physics education. For my PhD, I chose to investigate the nature of concepts such as understanding and making sense in physics education. I interviewed five learners, 22 times, using a range of different probes

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: to develop a very fine-grained model of how their learning developed over time. [Working Strategies] It can be difficult to manage the highly-unstructured nature of time during a PhD. In the first two years of my PhD, I combined my academic work with working part-time as a teacher.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: And therefore, I had to fit my research work into small pieces of time around my teaching. I found it was really helpful to set myself very well-defined short-term goals in order to make the maximum use of the time available. So for example, if I had an afternoon available, I would set myself the target of writing 500 words in that afternoon or of reading and making notes

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: on a small number of papers in that time. Reading broadly is an important way to develop your research question and find material for your literature review. However, reading can become never-ending. I found it helpful to roughly sketch out the research areas which I wanted to read and develop a reading plan which set out which topics I would cover.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: I could therefore ensure that I'd covered all the major authors I needed to in time to write my registration report. Something I found that was particularly helpful for me was making sure I kept really good notes on everything I'd read. Especially I found pulling out particular quotations, particularly useful sections of books and papers I'd read, and keeping them filed away in a Word document

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: was incredibly helpful. Those quotations then became searchable. Often, I would have a sense that I'd read something interesting or useful about a topic but couldn't remember the author or where I'd read it. So having all the useful quotations in a single Word document meant I could simply search through or browse to find the material I needed. I found that writing as much as possible

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: at all stages of my research was really powerful. Whilst I was reading, whilst I was collecting data, and of course during analysis, I found continually writing was a really productive process. It's easy just to have a thought about something, but I found it much more productive to actually write that thought out longhand and include references to authors.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: Then when I came to the final stages of writing up, it was more a pulling together of things I'd already written rather than having to write lots of new material. Also, by writing the ideas out fully, I found I was thinking more clearly about the ideas rather than just having a vague notion in my head. In addition, seeking as much feedback as you can is really important.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: Of course one will get feedback from one's supervisor, but also submitting your work for conferences, or to journals, or even just your peers is really helpful. Feedback is incredibly useful to improve your writing. It's very easy to believe that the argument you've created is watertight and really strong until you show it to someone else.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: Other readers will always have different views on things, and hearing someone else's criticisms of your work will doubtless strengthen it. [Dealing With Criticism] Students studying for a PhD are likely to have been very high-achieving and are likely have done very well in their past educational history. However, the way the PhD is set up can be very challenging.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: You have long periods in which you get no feedback and then periods in which you get a lot of criticism of your work. Coming to be able to accept criticism is a really important facet of developing as a researcher. One can know at a rational level that feedback is useful and constructive, even when supportively delivered. But it's hard to move away from an emotional response

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: towards criticism. However, it's really important to develop resilience towards critical input. Critical input is really valuable, and you should actively seek it out, even though it is hard. One approach I've found that helped me deal with the difficulty of criticism was making sure I always had multiple projects on the go. Therefore, if one conference paper was rejected,

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: I would have another article under review at the same time. Try to conceptualize criticism as a spur to make your work better. My response to negative reviews is often to think, well, I shall show these reviewers just how strong my work is. It's important to remember if you get negative feedback on your work, there's at least one reviewer who you haven't convinced.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: And that's important data. You should really consider why this one reviewer hasn't been convinced. Even if you disagree with their views, that is one person who doesn't see the value of your argument, and that's useful data for you to take away and to consider why you haven't made your case strongly enough. So do seek out criticism, as difficult as it can be, and find ways to become comfortable with it.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: [Developing a Network] Developing a network of peers and more-experienced researchers is important for supporting your well-being, but also for developing opportunities for future work. Initially when I first began my PhD, there were few other researchers in science education

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: in my faculty. So I set up a forum in which other PhD students in science education would meet to discuss their ideas and present their work. And this was an excellent way of developing opportunities. I found that the more things I was involved with, the more people I met, the more opportunities for projects arose.

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: Therefore, I would say it's important to network. Go to conferences, meet other researchers in your faculty, hear what work is going on. I found my first academic conferences could be quite challenging. Their size is often overwhelming, and it's difficult to know what one is meant to do at them. I found that-- as well as my own presentation--

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: meeting other academics and introducing myself, even if at the time it didn't feel terribly significant, could lead to other opportunities further on. Really take opportunities to get out there and be involved with other research projects that are going on. And have brief conversations with other academics. You never know where they might lead. [Writing Is an Iterative Process]

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: Writing well is really hard. And it's not something-- certainly-- I can get right first time through. I found that often I would have to get my initial ideas onto paper and then run through multiple drafts-- over several weeks often-- of shuffling sentences around, and reworking ideas and concepts,

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: and developing the argument. Often surprised me how long a single paragraph would take to write really well. But I think that time in honing your work is incredibly important. Arguments don't often arrive fully formed. Be patient with the time it takes to create a really strong argument. I hadn't planned for the time it would

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: take to develop the final draft into a coherent whole. Make sure you leave plenty of time once you've finished your first draft to go back through all the sections to ensure that everything fits together into the best possible single argument. [Being Proactive]

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: While studying for your PhD, be as proactive as you can. Often, other opportunities will arise-- opportunities for teaching or contributing to other research. Do grab onto these. It's easy to think that the thesis is the only important thing in your PhD. However, if you're interested in an academic career, you should think of the PhD more as an apprenticeship

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: for becoming a researcher. Therefore developing the skills of being a research assistant, and networking, and lecturing are equally important. Often these opportunities don't just arise, but you have to be slightly proactive in getting out there and making them happen. So do foster relationships with other people in your faculty,

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: talk to other researchers, offer your services to research projects or for teaching in order to develop the widest network you can. [Conclusion] PhDs are hard, both academically and emotionally. You need to be able to balance being sufficiently academically

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: driven to ensure you complete the PhD, but you need to be gentle on yourself so that you can survive the process. Ensure that you keep up with your hobbies, keep up your social networks. You need that support to get through. PhDs are also a long process, and they're more like a marathon than a sprint. Do keep in mind the excitement you had

RICHARD BROCK [continued]: when you started the process. What was it that brought you to study for a PhD? This can easily be lost in the routine and the nitty-gritty of working through the PhD. Try and keep a sense of the wonder and excitement you had when you started the process, and that should be able to pull you through to that final submission point.