

## With or without leave – Setting up for research at the outset

*Dr Susan Boyce's study was based in professional practice during her time at Caulfield Grammar School, Melbourne. Recently retired from her position with the School of Education, Faculty of Education at Deakin University, Susan shares her journey as a researcher - a story that is warm, knowing and encouraging.*

Undertaking research at post-graduate level, whilst working full time, particularly as a teacher, may well seem a daunting task, but it is something I managed to do - without taking leave. This is a personal story, and it might sound rather smug, but bear with me, the story is short and the moral may be useful.

I'm not pretending that life was not a grind for a lot of the time during my courses of study. Of course, postgraduate study at the level of Master and Doctoral degrees cannot be achieved without dedication, discipline and putting in the hours – which is what I did – at night, weekends and throughout most of the school holidays. But what I should confess is the private pleasure I experienced in recapturing my concentration in the process. Isn't it true that constant interruption of thought is the very essence of parenthood, of classroom teaching and especially of library work? Whilst I claim to have exerted dedication and self-discipline, perhaps I should also admit to an obsessive, preoccupied immersion and the satisfying intensity of orchestrating and negotiating my way through the intricacies of a very large problem-solving project, in my own, uninterrupted realm of deep thought. I should explain that I returned to study at a very favourable time of my life and within a very propitious set of circumstances, which, together, benefited the quality of both the study and the experience.

My four children had all become reasonably independent with lives of their own, my partner had taken up rowing and I had the benefit of almost two decades of professional experience during a period of great social and cultural change. Study and academic research gave me the opportunity and where-with-all to make sense of these changes, opening sight lines in and around the future. But that wasn't all. Because my workplace was my data pool, life there suddenly became hyper-interesting. It wasn't just that I was wallowing, more often drowning, in data-rich whirlpool of culture, politics and power (integral to a study of communications and technologies), I also came to realise that I was developing a split identity.

As librarian and a member of the school community, I was an *insider* but as an academic researcher, bringing critical self-reflexive awareness to my inquiry, I was simultaneously an *outsider*. With this dual means of being 'in the know', my loyalty hovered perilously around the paradox of sometimes being complicit in the very situations under critique.

But this is what made life so interesting, and surely it is this very ambiguity that marks the post-modern researcher – immersed as an actor in the daily particulars of institutional life on the one hand and involved in a critical re-thinking about the institution on the other.

### **Diplomacy in practitioner research**

Which brings me now to the more prosaic politics and diplomacy of in-house research. Bear in mind that your colleagues may not necessarily share your interest in, or conviction about, the benefits of your research. Remember that you are ploughing their

field as well as your own. Tread carefully.

Keep your Principal informed about your processes as well as your progress. As manager of the estate, he/she may perceive your research as having all the potential of a public audit. Clarify, early in the piece, whether study leave could be an option at a later stage. After all, the Principal, responsible for the smooth running of the estate, employed you for a particular purpose and may be sensitive about sanctioning your absence and creating a precedent.

In retrospect, I have to smile at the heady breathlessness of covering all contingencies and I wonder why my family never told me to *get a life*. Perhaps they could see that I was beyond redemption. Would it have helped if I had taken leave, taken a break to hasten the work along, or at least to get a perspective on myself? I don't think so. The truth is, I loved it. I couldn't bear to stay away.

So, the moral of my story is this. If you are going to embark on a research project that will be as time-consuming and demanding as a Master or Doctoral degree should be, set it up so that it will be an experience you can enjoy, so that the rewards might be found in the process as much as in the final relief of a satisfying completion. Check that your circumstances and timing will allow you to make the most of this adventurous opportunity.

Don't lose heart, nurture that little flame of enthusiasm and courage, and if you need to take leave – ask for it.