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LEIGH REIMAGINED: THE OUTCOME OF A DOCTORAL JOURNEY

Leigh Quadling-Miernik

Work Reimagined is a great theme to focus on as I near the end of my Doctor of Professional Practice (DProfPrac) journey. The DProfPrac centres its Graduate Profile Outcomes on two aspects: new knowledge creation, and contribution to practice within one's field or industry. As you may be aware, I have been documenting my DProfPrac journey over the last five years. It started with a piece in *Scope (Work-based Learning) 3* (Quadling-Miernik, 2022) and this is now *Scope (Work-based Learning) 8*. The previous articles have focused on my yearly development, and each ended facing the next year of study. By the time you read this. I will hopefully have completed all stages and be looking forward to graduation in 2027.

There have been challenges in my DProfPrac, as I assumed there would be. However, the biggest challenge has been turning this highly experienced educator and teacher educator into a researching practitioner, and further into a researching teaching practitioner, one who is working in education but using research to develop. So the theme of this article is: Leigh Reimagined.

This article takes the form of a scholarly personal narrative. Writing a scholarly personal narrative allows me to use my voice and my language to explore the journey of a doctoral student as an insider (Nash, 2004). It emphasises the need for a story not only to be personal but to also uphold academic rigour (Heidelberger & Uecker, 2009). The narrative's structure is formed around three quotes I came across in early 2021, before formally starting the journey of the doctorate. I titled them "Quotes to keep me grounded" on page one of my DProfPrac journal. These quotes are not from academic journals. Two are from novels I was reading, and I cannot remember where I read the third, but I attribute it to its original source. I link my story to these quotes and highlight aspects of relevance to any doctoral journey, not just mine.

My narrative expresses my understanding of self and my personal identity through giving meaning to the question "Who am I …?" (Polkinghorne, 1991) as a doctoral student, at this moment in time, before completion, in relation to the quotes. Personal narratives within academia go beyond a story with a beginning, middle, and end, and are interpreted for insights into the experience (Barkhuizen, 2016). By viewing my development across the entire DProfPrac journey, I bring forth "Leigh Reimagined" in its current form.

Quote 1:

> "Everything is connected and it is how they are connected that tells their story."
>
> (Pattison, 2011, p. 80)

This statement is one that the central character of *Eye of the Raven*, a Scotsman, hears from his mentor, a Native American, who is teaching him how to interpret the landscape. This quote made me see that what I was before starting was connected to what I was to become upon completion. In my Review of Learning (RoL) task, I stated that Leigh in 1991, the year I started teaching, was a 'Do' teacher but the Leigh in 2021 was beginning to feel like a 'Be' teacher. I can confirm that in early 2026, on reading one sentence in one article, something went click in my head, and I realised my whole career of over 30 years has centred on the doing part rather than the being part. The sentence stated that within teaching "epistemology" was "in the service of ontology" (Dall'Alba, 2024). As a teacher and teacher trainer I am always trying to improve delivery to achieve learning outcomes. Furthermore, if there is a challenging situation or a time when someone says it cannot be done, well, I will take on the challenge and show them that it can be done. I have been a do-er through honing my skills in teaching, not a be-er through focusing on what it means to be a skillful educator. My practice was the outcome of my experience and my internal drive to develop, not a result of reading educational theory (Turner, 2016).

Leigh Reimagined is a confident 'Do and Be' teacher. As a teacher educator, I now focus on supporting teachers, not only developing their skills but also working with their professional identity. Thus, the points along the way: developing my practice over more than 30 years, writing the RoL task focusing on my career, focusing on professional identity in the DProfPrac, and reading an article that became a critical moment that changed the focus for the future. They are all connected and they tell the story of my development.

Goodall et al. (2017) write about their experiences and identity shifts as four female academics who were the first graduates of a new professional doctorate programme, much like the DProfPrac. The further they ventured into their studies, the more confident they became, enabling them to move further along the "academic continuum" (p. 11). The shift from outsider to insider came with a deeper understanding and knowledge but this shift did not come without costs. My journey from outsider to insider mirrors theirs. Along the way I have had goals to achieve, but it has been a constant struggle to understand these goals, the process to achieve them, and the language needed. I did not see connections between each goal.

Some of my most frequently used resources throughout the entire DProfPrac have been Google, and more recently ChatGPT and Gemini. They have been my lay definition provider for academic language not familiar to or even used by me. This started in the first month and still continues, as there are words I vaguely understand but not enough and I need to confirm my understanding. The crunch is that for most of my career I have been an English Language teacher, where the English language is my subject-matter expertise. Too often the thoughts have been, "Why don't I understand? Am I good enough? Am I bright enough? How can I fit in?" Articles on doctoral journeys have stressed that anyone doing a PhD or doctorate needs to accept they are a talented, educated, and skilled beginner—a novice, as such (Cook, 2020)—while those who drop out may do so not because they are not bright enough, but because they are not knowledgeable about the academic world (Hawley, 2010). Feeling like an academic is enhanced through recognition by others, building the feeling of belonging (Emmioğlu et al., 2017).

It is now in hindsight I can see the connections between myself and academia as loose links. These connections are more like wispy cotton threads than solid hemp ropes, as Leigh Reimagined can connect language, theory, and practice to some extent. I feel confident that my actions will be regarded as holding academic rigour and contributing knowledge. However, I still feel like a novice

academic. Over the doctoral journey, recognition by others has been encouraging, but it has also been disheartening as I have struggle to feel like I belonged. Leigh Reimagined is slowly moving along that academic continuum from outsider to vague insider.

Quote 2:

> We've bought into the idea that education is about training and 'success,' defined monetarily, rather than learning to think critically and to challenge. We should not forget that the true purpose of education is to make minds, not careers.
>
> (Hedges, 2009, p. 104)

The words that struck me in this quote were "the true purpose of education is to make minds" as they align with my vision of teaching and learning: to develop into a better version of oneself. Why would someone do a doctorate? Is the reason status, or financial gain? Maybe it is a burning desire to seek the answer to a question. With Aotearoa New Zealand's attrition rate for doctoral students sitting at about 20 percent (Education Counts, 2026), it might be relevant to consider why I started and why I stayed.

Lesham's study (2021) investigated the identity formations of students while studying for their doctorate. Three different routes arose, with the first being the unmotivated student who did not identify as a researcher and was doing their doctorate for external reasons such as employment requirements. Unmotivated doctoral students do not identify themselves as researchers, which is something I have felt throughout my journey, yet I started for other reasons. Perhaps those applying pressure on the unmotivated student should read Hedge's quote and ponder the purpose of requiring anyone to do a doctorate. The students in Lesham's study experienced frustration and struggles, and the pressure extended to the supervisors to support the students. Crucial to any doctoral student's success is the relationship they have with their supervisor (Sverdlik et al., 2018), so how does the pressure support the wellbeing of a student?

While I am not aligned with this route of the unmotivated student, one moment that spurred me into contemplating a doctorate was a confrontation between myself and a lecturer I will name Dr X. During a moderation workshop I delivered, Dr X was frustrated. The cause of his frustration could have been a number of things: his lack of understanding of what moderation was or why it occurred; his sense of not needing to attend this compulsory workshop; the time the workshop took away from his other tasks; the compulsory nature of the workshop as set by management; or perhaps my delivery. Whatever was the cause of his frustration, it bubbled and came out as a belittling comment as he left the room: "Who are you to tell me what to do? I am a doctor and you … you are nothing." This experience was not the catalyst for my starting my DProfPrac, but he has been in my mind throughout. The true reason for doing a doctorate is that I have a passion to create learning opportunities, be that with students, with educators, or within myself. In Lesham's (2021) terms I would be classed as the highly motivated and goal-oriented student. Linking to quote 2, my doctoral journey was never about money or status; it was not even about challenging myself with research and critical thinking. It has always been the goal to understand how to support educators like Dr X to develop.

Leigh Reimagined has a deeper understanding of teacher education and professional identity. My core being has been widened beyond knowledge of actions to now include theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, my core being has strengthened its focus on education as developing the person first. The rest—money, status, career—is secondary to this goal.

Quote 3:

> The ivory tower of academia is an echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. You look at the world through glass and eventually all you see is yourself.
>
> (Harper, 2010, p. 7)

This is the rebuff given by the director of a prestigious bank to the protagonist of Harper's novel. In this scene, the director is attempting to employ the main character who has only recently started their DPhil at Oxford. This quote is the most poignant of them all. The process of becoming Leigh in 2026 has only echoed louder, as I am a distance student and I do not feel high in a tower while alone in my small office. However, the quote reminds me that I have been using a magnifying glass to research an itty-bitty area of the entire world, and the end result is that I am looking at myself. That basically sums up my doctorate and *Scope* journey. I have been investigating the professional identity development of tertiary educators to improve my practice, and I finish off this public journey by describing myself; my professional identity, not the outcomes of what I have been researching for five years.

Going back to the confronting power-driven comment from Dr X, my identity as a teaching researching practitioner is what I have held as I have been wandering around the "ivory tower of academia." Dr X was right in that I did not know what he had achieved nor did I know who he was. The process of completing doctoral research affects who we become (Knowles, 2016). Leigh Reimagined now stands tall because I know I know. Furthermore, I know the title "Dr" from the qualification comes with sacrifice (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) and represents extremely hard work but is also an example of someone investigating a tiny bit of the world.

The three quotes I have looked back on were written down to ground me before starting the DProfPrac journey. Each one had an element that supported my focus. They highlighted to me that the journey was about growth, connection, and humbleness. I often see qualifications as just pieces of paper, not to belittle them but because real learning goes beyond the information bouncing about in your head and put down within assessments. Ultimately, it is how you use the knowledge that is of greatest importance, and how that knowledge improves you the most rewarding. Leigh Reimagined is still developing.

Leigh Quadling-Miernik (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5527-5912) is in the final push to the end of her Doctorate of Professional Practice journey. The journey has been looking into professional identity development of tertiary educators, but to be honest, upon reflection, it has been also about her own professional identity development. Her passion holds strong for creating learning opportunities and the motto "whatever gets to the goal with integrity."

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