Into the fray: becoming an academic in my own right

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Having agency, being able to make choices and plot one’s own course, is an important part of building an identity as a scholar (Mantai, 2019), as well as being able to complete a doctoral programme (Sverdlik et al., 2018). But it is not always clear what having agency means in practice, especially when students enter a doctoral programme with a fully developed professional identity that may pull them in different directions than would be expected by the university (Hardré et al., 2019; Kovalcikiene and Buksnyte-Marmiene, 2015).

In my case, I had established a successful career as a specialist in academic writing and publishing before embarking on a doctoral programme. This meant that although I was familiar with the products of scholarly activity (such as journal articles and monographs), I knew little about how to conduct the research that went into those products. I was like a coach who had never played the sport themselves. I could help people write about their research, but I had no research of my own to write about. By starting a doctoral programme and learning to carry out and publish my own research, by leaving the safety of the sidelines and throwing myself into the fray, I believed that I would become a better coach and develop a new-found sense of legitimacy (Wellington, 2013).

I thus started my doctoral journey with a clear idea of what I wanted to become: a publishing academic and a better writing coach for academics. I assumed that, because these two identities were so closely related, the journey would be relatively painless. However, some of the skills and personal qualities that made me a good support for other scholars made it difficult for me to establish my own academic identity. And I quickly discovered that knowing how academic writing
and publishing works in general was of limited help in figuring out what worked for me in particular. And to become an academic in my own right, getting a doctorate would not be enough. I would need to take some extra time to publish alongside my thesis. In perhaps direct contrast to much of the literature that frames delays in doctoral progress as a symptom of failure, I see the delay caused by this publishing activity to be a direct result of my own agency and a deliberate construction of my academic identity (Kovalcikiene and Buksnyte-Marmiene, 2015; Mantai, 2019).

The aim of this chapter is to deconstruct this deliberate identity construction by examining first how I developed as a professional and then how that shaped my path as a doctoral student, where my identity as a professional sometimes helped but often posed a challenge to my development as a scholar. I reflect on how my own sense of agency led me to take extra time to publish outside my doctoral studies, and how the strong academic identity I was building (in combination with my professional expertise) helped me tackle an unexpected personal crisis that could have easily forced me to discontinue the programme. I conclude by noting that the importance of building an identity as an academic in my own right meant that receiving acknowledgement from the scholarly community through citations of my publications represented a far more important milestone for me than receiving my degree.

From accidental to purposeful professional

My professional journey had an inauspicious beginning. I was born and raised in the United States, and after I finished my BA in women’s studies at UC Berkeley, I thought perhaps a gap year in Norway, where my grandparents were from, would give me something to do while figuring out my next step. I decided to study political science at the University of Oslo mainly to keep myself occupied while I was in Norway. While still a grad student, I started making extra money ‘language washing’ academic articles written in English by Norwegian researchers. That is, as a native English speaker, I would read through what Norwegian authors had written and try to ‘fix’ the English. I had no particular desire to be a full-time copy-editor, but I thought it was a good way to turn my linguistic disadvantage into an advantage. As it happens, that ‘one year’ in Norway has turned into three decades – and counting. To my own astonishment, I completed my graduate degree in political science from the University of Oslo, and the part-time freelance copy-editing I did to earn a little extra cash developed into a core competence that eventually allowed me
to become a specialist in academic writing and publishing. In my current position, I help researchers at my institute write journal articles, grant proposals and doctoral theses, in addition to regularly holding writing workshops and retreats for researchers throughout Norway.

Because I came into my profession ‘accidentally’, I missed out on what I imagined other writing professionals had – a writing-related university degree and colleagues who work with writing-related issues. My training was neither purposeful nor directed. I became a writing specialist almost despite my disciplinary expertise and employment context. It was only after many years of waiting for ‘something better to come along’ that I finally started to purposefully seek to develop myself as a professional.

A key turning point for me came when I accepted a position at a research institute as an editorial adviser. In doing so, I moved from the anonymous world of freelancing, where I would receive a manuscript in the mail, to working shoulder-to-shoulder with researchers. As a freelancer, I never saw what happened to a manuscript after I edited it. But working alongside researchers, I could see that hours of meticulous editing were often ignored because, as one told me, ‘while the language is better, it is not what we meant to say, or what the journal wants’. I learned then that the work of academic writing involved much more than just picking out the right verb; it also involved learning how to tell a story about research and what it means. As a freelancer, I could only work with the words I saw on the page and what I thought they meant. But as a colleague, I could talk to the authors and try to understand what they were trying to say, which also meant asking questions about what was not on the page. I learned to shift my focus from the surface features of the language to what was happening underneath: the struggle to make sense of research and explain it to someone else. And this was far more interesting to me than correcting minor points of grammar or syntax.

This shift in focus from the surface features of language to the challenges of transforming research into writing inspired me to put together my first workshops, and the demand for these workshops inspired me to write my first book. I spent about five years working on Writing for Scholars: A practical guide to making sense and being heard (Nygaard, 2008). Writing the book helped me develop my ideas about building an academic argument and tailoring it for an audience – as well as how to approach the task of putting words on paper. The more I wrote about these things, the more I paid attention to them in my practice. And whenever I had an epiphany while working with a researcher or answering a question from someone in a workshop, I wrote about it in
my book. Writing the book cemented my interest in academic writers and the writing process. I no longer needed to figure out what I wanted to do. I was already doing it.

Writing the book also thrust me into a world I scarcely knew existed: other writing experts who also specialised in working with academics. Unfortunately, this meant that my initial pride in publishing my first book turned quickly to dismay. How could I have not known about all these other experts? Indeed, one of the first reviews of my book pointed out that I used no references and expressed scepticism that I could have written all that with no inspiration from others. But while most people become professionals by first learning how other people do it before finding their own path, I did it the opposite way. I figured out a way of editing and working with academic writers before I even knew that there were other people out there doing the same thing and writing about it. That is not to say that I had never read any books on editing or academic writing, just that I had never systematically approached learning about it as if it were a proper profession.

At this point, I was becoming a kind of ‘blended professional’ (Whitchurch, 2009), straddling professional and academic domains. But I felt that although I had been developing a unique kind of competence, neither my professional understanding of academic publishing nor my understanding of how academia works was as developed as it could be. A colleague encouraged me to apply for a part-time Doctor in Education (EdD) programme. Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that I could pursue a doctorate. I had assumed that my graduate degree in political science and my lack of background in education would eliminate me from consideration as a candidate. The EdD, however, allowed me to use my professional experience, rather than my previous discipline, as a point of departure for developing both as an academic and as a professional. Moreover, since the programme was in London, I could still live in Norway but pursue my doctorate in a country where the language of instruction was my native language. From that point on, my professional development became intensely purposeful. However, being allowed to pursue a doctorate was one thing; being equipped to do so was something else.

Jumping into the fray

Coming into the EdD programme at the age of 48 and as a seasoned professional, I was afraid that I would be too old and too used to being ‘the expert’ to be able to handle being a student again. I worried that my
profession as writing coach was too strange compared to other education professionals and I would feel like an outsider. I was also concerned that my background in women’s studies and political science would leave me ill-prepared for the field of education. All of this was true, but not nearly as problematic as I feared. I was indeed a bit older, a bit strange and a bit under-prepared. On the other hand, I had some advantages that the others did not. Not only did I have a solid background in research and academic writing, but unlike most of the others in our programme, I was moving from a context where I was a foreigner having to speak a second language to a context where I was still a foreigner but had the luxury of being able to go back to my first language.

What turned out to pose the greatest challenges were the very real differences between the sidelines and the game. It’s a lot simpler to think about strategy when you are watching the game from the bleachers, and a lot harder when you are in the thick of it. Thus, even after coaching dozens of doctoral students through thesis writing and publication in journals, I was not ready for exactly how painful writing the thesis and publishing my own work would be.

**You are what you read: finding the right literature**

A first challenge for me was figuring out what I should be reading. An obvious starting place for any researcher is becoming familiar with what other researchers have already said. Locating the right literature is presumably relatively straightforward for someone who is basing their doctoral research on the same topic, same discipline and same methodology as the work they carried out as a master’s student. But like many doctoral students who enter their programme from another discipline, or enter academia from a profession, I lacked these advantages – and I was unprepared for what that meant.

The terms I used to describe what I saw in my everyday practice were not the same as the terms that are used in the academic literature. The questions I wondered about were not the questions that were addressed by academic researchers. For example, as a practitioner I wondered why some researchers seemed to write and publish with more ease than others. As far as I could see, it was not necessarily related to overall intelligence or talent, or even the ability to string words together to form sentences. I felt like this question was a good starting point for doctoral research, but where should I start looking for answers? What search terms should I use?
I felt quite alone in this. While librarians can help you find things when you know what you are looking for, there is little they can offer when you are unable to articulate what you need. I eventually found what I needed through a combination of poking around through empirical studies on ‘research productivity’ and (at my supervisor’s suggestion) looking into a theoretical perspective called ‘academic literacies’ (see, for example, Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis and Scott, 2007). I briefly thought I could tick ‘theory’ off my to-do list, but then realised that this was only a beginning. I had to fill in some of the blanks with other theoretical ideas – and the search for those was long and painful. I had described the importance of building a good theoretical framework many times in my workshops, but it was the first time I really understood how difficult it was to do.

Like most students before me, I got well and truly lost in theory, but I am not sure how I could have approached the reading more efficiently. Since I did not have a clear academic identity as a starting point, my reading was messy and eclectic. What was a strength for me as a professional – my ability to read academic literature from a variety of traditions – became a kind of weakness for me as a student in terms of being able to locate a core body of literature. I did not have a natural sense of disciplinary home and did not think twice about reaching into social psychology, scientometrics and bibliometrics, sociology, applied linguistics and whatever other field came across my radar. Everything seemed equally interesting and equally relevant, which made it very difficult to pick out what would serve my research best. But even though I ended up using very little of this reading in the final version of my thesis, the search for relevant theory, and the critical thinking involved in deciding what best served my research, was invaluable. The reading forced me to ask myself what kind of academic I was trying to be.

Is this research yet?

Once I started to get a sense of the literature, I faced the next challenge of trying to understand how to conduct the research itself. The traditional purpose of doctoral programmes is to train students to become researchers (Mantai, 2017). Having observed the research process for many years, I imagined that when the time came for me to carry out my own research, I would instinctively know how to do it the right way. But because I mostly worked with the end product (academic articles) or the idea stage (research grants), I failed to appreciate how many choices researchers have to make along the way, how thinking evolves and how
often there is more than one right answer (or seemingly no right answer). Because I was unsure about whether I was doing the research ‘correctly’, I felt like an impostor – like I was play acting, while everyone else knew more than I did (Pajares, 2009).

Even more complicated than deciding how data collection should work was figuring out what to do with the data once I got it. I read, of course, several books on thematic analysis and diligently took courses on NVivo. But the analysis still felt like a mysterious process that boiled down to reading through the interview transcripts multiple times and in different ways until I felt inspired to say something about them. Could this be research? How was I supposed to know if I was doing it right? When the time came to write about my results, I felt the full impact of impostor syndrome (see, for example, Pajares, 2009): I’m not really a researcher. I don’t belong here. What if someone realises that behind what might appear to be a string of well-crafted sentences is actually a pile of nothing?

As a practitioner, I knew that especially doctoral students feel that writing is a lonely process, but until I started trying to write about my own research, I don’t think I truly understood what they meant. Both the literature (such as Wisker et al., 2010) and my own practice suggest that it is important for academics to feel a sense of ownership of their writing. Before I started conducting my own research, I saw this as purely a positive thing: having ownership meant having pride and responsibility. But my experience as a student showed that ownership also brought with it a kind of loneliness that came from feeling like only I could make the important decisions about my own writing. And that was a new kind of loneliness for me.

**Transforming research to writing**

A third challenge was, ironically, the writing itself – which was supposed to be my area of expertise. While I knew a lot about academic writing in general, when it came time to write about my own research, I was horrified to realise that not only did I make the same kinds of blunders that everyone else does, but also that – like everyone else – I was blind to them. For example, I was appalled to hear the comments from both of my supervisors on an early draft of mine along the lines of ‘we can’t figure out what your research question is’. If there is one point I repeat ad nauseam in my lectures, it is that everything in an academic paper revolves around the research question (or aim), which means it has to be clear to both the author and the reader. I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t managed to do that myself.
I unconsciously expected my experience would somehow make me different, which made me interpret some of the natural stages of learning and early drafting as evidence of failure. And because I was always telling students in my workshops to not interpret their inadequate early drafts as evidence of failure, I was disappointed in myself for doing exactly that. So, I was critical not only of my writing, but also of my own response to redrafting.

I also struggled to find my voice as an author. My professional role required me to help others bring out their voices, regardless of what discipline they were in, not to develop my own. So once again, what was a strength for me as a practitioner was a weakness for me as a budding academic. Fine-tuning someone else’s academic voice was not at all the same thing as trying to develop my own. No matter what I tried, it didn’t feel natural or convincing.

Moreover, as a professional, I focused on improving the flow and readability of academic writing for publication, helping authors make difficult concepts simpler for wider audiences to understand. However, as a doctoral student, I was supposed to be writing a thesis – which is another genre entirely. The doctoral thesis is supposed to conform to university regulations and the expectations of the examiners, which ‘militate(s) against the production of a text which, in content, tone and organization, might be pleasing and informative to a wider audience’ (Poole, 2015: 1520). I found that my usual focus on trying to write in an engaging manner was often not considered appropriate for the thesis, and my main supervisor often pointed out portions of the text that (to her) came across as unprofessional – or ‘too journalistic’.

The view from the other end: receiving feedback

Finally, perhaps the most difficult part of the entire doctoral journey for me was being on the other end of feedback, which meant switching from a higher place in the hierarchy to a lower one (Lawrence, 2017). Feedback was normally something I gave, not something I received. And as a professional, I had strong opinions about how feedback should be given. Because I learned early on that what is not on the page is sometimes just as important as what is there (and because I could never assume I had enough subject matter expertise in the topics I edited), I developed a style of coaching that focuses more on asking questions rather than moving straight into giving advice. This had two separate but related implications: First, I was unprepared for a different style of giving feedback; and, second, I had little experience in being on the receiving end and did not know how to process
all the feelings of insecurity that arose when someone in authority gave negative feedback about what I wrote (and how it was written). I was unprepared for the tension that would arise between my main supervisor and me when she not only told me things I didn’t want to hear, but also approached the process in a way I didn’t expect.

As a result, what for her was probably a straightforward diagnosis of a writing challenge in an early draft, accompanied by a clear recommendation, felt to me like a direct assault on my professional identity as a writing specialist. I resented being treated like a novice, which I’m sure had more to do with me being a mature student than my supervisor’s abilities as a supervisor. I didn’t necessarily disagree with my supervisor about what was wrong with my draft, but what I wanted was the kind of open-ended coaching conversation I try to have with the researchers I work with. I wanted her to ask me critical questions, to try to understand my work, to force me to think about what I was trying to say and help me make my own decisions – not just jump straight to a solution that felt wrong to me.

The resentment I felt at being told what to do was exacerbated by the fear that what appeared to be a writing challenge might in fact be a symptom of a deeper problem – namely, that I did not know what I was doing. What if someone realised that this so-called expert in academic writing really knew nothing about research? The more I learned about doing research, the more I realised how messy and ambiguous it was – and the more I feared that I was somehow not doing it right. It was thus difficult for me to listen to any kind of feedback without tapping into that fear.

Before embarking on my own doctoral journey, I had seen this kind of fear repeatedly on the faces of the researchers who came to me for help, but I wasn’t sure where it came from and it was easy for me to dismiss its importance. This was the first time I felt it myself. I like to think that now I will not only be more sensitive to this kind of fear in my supporting role, but I will also be able to work with it constructively (and not just ignore it) by considering the issues related to identity development that lie implicitly between the lines (Hall and Burns, 2009).

**Stretching out the doctoral journey: saying ‘yes’ to everything**

More than one of my cohort classmates commented that I would surely be among the first to finish, given my background in academic writing and publication. But my motivation for being there was not to get the
degree as quickly as possible. I was there to enhance my identity as a professional by developing my identity as an academic. For many people, a doctoral degree is a ticket to a dream job – or at least a job. I was already working in a job I loved and had no intention of leaving. Instead, I hoped that the process of obtaining a doctorate would give me an opportunity to learn everything I had missed out on by not taking my professional development seriously all those years. Moreover, I had an important point to prove to myself (and others): that I, too, could write and publish as an academic. Daring to put myself out there was exhilarating. It was terrifying. I knew exactly what I should do, and no idea how to do it. Whatever the cost, I would use the opportunity of being a doctoral student to become an academic writer in my own right.

One of the costs was, of course, that I was by no means the first one to finish. I don’t think it would be an exaggeration to say that I was among the last. To the frustration of my supervisor, I embraced every opportunity to publish that came my way. By the time I finished, I had published four academic articles and one book chapter based on my research. I also produced a second edition of my first book (Nygaard, 2015), and a whole new book on writing a master’s thesis (Nygaard, 2017b) – both of which were based on my professional expertise rather than academic research. I also deliberately set out to build networks by attending academic conferences and holding writing workshops at the Institute of Education, all of which took time away from thesis writing.

The delays in my doctoral progression caused by all this additional writing, publishing and engagement in network building were a direct result of my own choices – my own agency. Slow progress is often seen as failure, on the part of either the student or the doctoral programme, whereas in my case, it was deliberate. I was also in the privileged position of not having to worry about financing, as well as getting a formal interruption of study (which also helped to relieve some pressure). For me, it was a case of my personal goals not being fully aligned with the goals of the university (see Kovalcikiene and Buksnyte-Marmiene, 2015). While I’m sure the university was more interested in getting the students through the programme as efficiently as possible, I was more interested in getting as much out of my experience as a research-producing academic as possible. I knew I would go back to my position as a professional (support staff rather than researcher), and I was worried that I would never have this opportunity to conduct research again. In light of the debates about student drop-out rates and slow progress, this makes me wonder whether we have fully appreciated the possibly diverging goals that students might have. And in writing this, I am also reflecting on the
irony that had I been in a standard PhD programme, my goal to publish academically might have been better understood (although the two non-academic books I published as a professional might have been less appreciated).

Writing: interrupted

While the delays I described above were fully a result of my own choices, I also faced a delay that was not in any way within the scope of my control. As I was on my way to the book launch to celebrate the publication of my second book, I got a phone call. My husband had been critically injured from a fall, and they did not know if he would survive. After weeks in intensive care and months of rehabilitation, he recovered far better than we could have hoped, but would never be the same. Coming back to writing after nine months on sick leave was the hardest thing I had ever done. The thesis felt meaningless. I used all my energy to just get through my day. It was almost a year after the accident when I would start writing again, and a bit longer before my writing started to make any sense.

So why didn’t I quit? Although personal crises are a well-known reason why students leave a doctoral programme, I suspect that it depends on the nature of the crisis. There is no question that this crisis was dramatic and all-consuming. But we were fortunate that after the lengthy recovery, my husband regained (almost) full mobility and was able to take care of himself. In other words, I did not end up with a permanent, time-consuming caregiver role and was able to gradually turn my focus back to my work. For many people, a personal crisis like this means never being able to redirect their gaze back to their studies. But more important than the nature of the crisis is probably the presence of other factors that enabled me to continue despite a major setback.

In a review of factors that affect the likelihood that doctoral students will finish, Sverdlik et al. (2018) describe both external factors (such as financing and supervisor support) and internal factors (such as motivation). With respect to external factors, I remained financially secure and continued to receive a salary throughout my sick leave. Moreover, the fact that my employer was paying my tuition made me acutely aware that I had to ensure that the investment was not wasted, so I felt morally obligated to see it through. And what was perhaps the most crucial external factor in my case was the very practical help I received from my supervisor to arrange a second interruption
of studies. At the time of the accident, I was in such a state of shock I did not have the energy to think about such things. All I could do was put one foot in front of the other. My supervisor, on the other hand, saw that this needed doing and took care of all the paperwork. She later expressed surprise that I found this so helpful. But although it was quickly done from her end, from my perspective it was something I was in no position to do. Had she not done this, I might well have been seen by the university as inactive and unresponsive, causing massive problems for me down the line with respect to my ability to finish within the allotted time frame (since I had already stretched out my doctoral period through all the additional writing projects I took on and my first interruption of studies).

Even these factors would not have been enough had the internal factors not also been present. Sverdlik et al. (2018) describe four main kinds of internal factors: motivation, writing skills, self-regulatory strategies and academic identity. All of these played a role – first and foremost my high degree of intrinsic motivation. I did not embark on a doctoral programme because of some nebulous promise of a different job. I did so because I had a clear idea of how I needed to develop as a professional. My motivation to finish – to see it all the way through to the end – was driven not only by the carrot (self-development) but also by a fairly large stick: Not being able to complete a doctoral degree when my professional identity was based on my ability to coach doctoral candidates through the demands of academic publishing and thesis writing would have been tantamount to saying that I simply cannot do what I help others to do. It was hard to imagine a more definitive threat to my professional identity, at least in terms of my own ideas about my competence. Quitting did not feel like an option for me, even when I didn’t see how I would be able to go on.

Second, there was no question I benefitted from having well-developed writing skills. And here I am not referring to an ability to write eloquently (because I feel like that comes and goes sporadically), but rather an ability to self-regulate – to make myself write irrespective of inspiration. Indeed, this is how I was able to pull myself out of this slump. And here, for once, my professional expertise gave me a distinct advantage. One topic I touch on in my writing courses and books is that even the best-laid plans can implode, and sometimes life just happens: people get married, divorced, have children, move house, get sick and so on (Nygaard, 2017b). What matters is how you come back. So, I made myself do what I tell everyone else to do: stop looking at writing like a performance with high expectations for perfection, and
start treating it like a workout – something that is simply an unquestioned part of a daily routine. I started with 30–60 minutes of ‘thesis work’ every day. At the beginning, it was mostly reading what I had written already, making notes, reading some new literature, making more notes and trying to remember why I was doing this in the first place – and making notes about that. I focused on developing the routine of sitting down to work on the thesis, not on what was coming out on paper at each session. And slowly, I got into the habit of writing again. And the writing got better. In this way, too, I grew as a professional. I had coached other writers through some very difficult periods, but it was not until I needed the same techniques myself that I really understood how much they matter.

Finally, Sverdlik et al. (2018) identify academic identity as an important factor, and point out that this identity is strengthened through, for example, participation in conferences and publishing activities. This is precisely why I became a doctoral student to begin with and, as described above, I fully embraced this aspect of the doctoral journey. By the time the accident happened, I was so fully invested in building my academic identity that, again, quitting simply did not seem relevant. I had already published, attended multiple conferences and was building a network of like-minded academic colleagues. The roots had taken hold. Moreover, throughout all of this, I was in contact with the other members of my cohort – even when we did not see each other physically anymore – who not only offered support but also gave me a strong sense of belonging.

Hardré et al. (2019: 125) write that ‘some factors that influence graduate student dropout (like family or financial crisis) are less controllable or amenable to intervention by higher education institutions’. My experience suggests that although higher education institutions cannot do anything about such crises per se, they can provide considerable help in easing the student back into the fold. As I described above, getting help with formalising an interruption of studies was crucial. Moreover, the techniques I used to get back into writing again are highly teachable (and are indeed an important part of my workshops). While the university as an institution did not offer me any specific help in this respect, there is no reason why this kind of support cannot be made available. Writing centres could, for example, offer workshops on picking up writing again after a long absence and tackling writer’s block. Finally, encouraging and stimulating the kind of informal networks that emerged from our cohort and provide a strong sense of belonging can provide immeasurable help when crises arise.
Becoming an academic

Archer (2008) talks about the pressure young academics feel to ‘be’ academics, without feeling like they have a chance to ‘become’. To me, this refers to the pressure to instantly be an expert in everything academic without being able to take the time to learn. I felt this pressure not only from the outside, but also (and perhaps mostly) within myself. Although I wanted to embrace the role of learner while in the doctoral programme, and often did, it was hard for me to escape the pressure to demonstrate that I already knew the kinds of things that I was supposed to be learning. In other words, I was focusing on the product of doctoral education, not the process (Wellington, 2013). The fear I felt when I received negative feedback speaks very much to this pressure. As someone who was already supposed to be a kind of expert, it was hard for me to accept the vulnerability involved in the process of learning. This is perhaps another reason why extending my doctoral studies was so important to my development. It forced me to take time to become.

The exact moment I felt I could begin to legitimately call myself an academic in my own right happened unexpectedly—and long before I graduated. In my initial days of easing myself back into my thesis after the accident, I carried out a supplemental search for more recent literature when I found someone else’s doctoral thesis that seemed extremely relevant. I was skimming through the introduction when I found a reference to one of the articles I had written. There it was. In black and white. Someone cited ‘Nygaard 2017a’, as if I were an authority and my article had something to contribute to the discourse. I remember being so floored by seeing a reference to my own work—in a work that I considered to be authoritative—that I had to stop reading. I never had any real doubt that I was capable of writing something of publishable quality; I just did not think I would ever have anything to say that other academics would be interested in.

For other people, I imagine getting the doctoral degree would mark the moment they knew their journey was a success. For me, it was this: the first citation of my work spotted in the wild. Not from a colleague, or a friend. Not from someone who I met at a conference who was just trying to be nice to me. From somebody I’d never met who was doing doctoral research and found my article to be relevant enough to download, read and then cite in her own work. I had produced a research output that was externally validated by the community (Mantai, 2017). That’s it, I thought to myself. I’m officially a scholar, and I finally have an academic community I belong to.
References


