

Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Gillian Ferguson, Fiona Aubrey-Smith

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 00:16

So a very warm welcome to you doing, I wonder if you could start by telling us a bit about yourself and your professional doctorate journey.

Gillian Ferguson 00:25

Yeah, sure. I mean, I'm a central academic with the Open University now in the health and social care and social work areas. But that's fairly recent since actually completing the doctorate. And the doctorate has been really quite instrumental in that sort of shift. And when I started out doing the study, I was working in local authority and workforce planning and development across social work, but also in housing and community learning lots of different things. And I changed role in the middle of that. I mean, I'd been an Associate Lecturer with the Open University for around 17 years alongside my other work, so I was always sort of part academic part in the workplace. And that was really my identity was really strong across those two areas, and then a move job in the middle of my doctorate to work somewhere else. And I'll talk a bit more about that in a minute.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 01:18

Can you tell me about how changing your job affected your professional doctorate journey?

Gillian Ferguson 01:23

Yeah, I mean, well, I started out trying to solve quite a practical workplace problem. And I was really interested at the start and improving what we do for social workers learning in the workplace. And the doctorate, it really shifted that from being a very practical explanation to far more philosophical, because I really realised I needed to find something Oh, that was philosophical before a good return to the practical. So I know that sounds a bit confusing, but I was really frustrated a lot, a lot of practical things about how things were planned in organisations. So that really sort of changed. As I kind of changed role and change job through doing the doctorate, my thinking was changing all the time, about what I was needing to learn about, and that kind of really shaped the study. So in the middle of the work had moved from being really directly in charge of design and, and developing workplace learning solutions for social workers in the workplace. And that was obviously the focus of my study, and a change job to move to work with the Scottish regulator for social services, and I kind of moved on a whim in terms of changing my job, because it was very, very sort of rooted in the work that I was doing.

So there was a little bit of apprehension about moving and moving from an area that I was really experienced in to a place and a sort of space that I was far less so familiar with and experienced with. But it gave me the headspace to really focus on my study. And I think at the time, I was really worried that, oh, I'm moving away from the essence of what I'm trying to find out about. But my new job was also about social work, education, and learning right across the career. So that was still a huge fit. But I did have that apprehension about am I moving away from practice, is my study findings still gonna be relevant to what I'm doing. But it was able to kind of really get my head down and focus on what I was exploring from these sort of different Hey, it's sort of almost moving from the the sort of organisation and individual organisation approach to think and actually, what might this mean, not nationally, and it ended up actually a position of being able to influence lots of different things that I just didn't really expect, because I had learned so much, and really was shifting what I was thinking all the time through the study. So finished the doctorate, whilst in that new position that I was just in for a couple of years, we had the pandemic going on all sorts of different things. But at the same time, we were developing work around our whole approach for newly qualified social workers in Scotland, there was work around all sorts of huge strategic decisions in Scotland. And actually, my study cannot. I just started to think my gosh, this is related to everything. And it was able to sort of almost sneak ideas and normals from the study, because I became very confident about what I was seeing through the doctorate process, if that makes sense. So none of it was planned. And it was sort of in this limbo state of changing job. And I kind of thought I wasn't going to be there forever, because I've been, you know, as I said, shifted on a whim, but I didn't really have a plan for where I was going at all. And but I had a huge connection with the Open University, which is superb that I've kind of returned to, if that makes sense. But um, the things that happened with my study, I was really apprehensive to share my findings until the thesis was published. So I was almost bursting with all this stuff that I was learning about, and the findings from my study, because I knew that it was really related to some of this big work. But I was really worried somebody might steal my ideas. And it's not usually like me to worry about that, because I share everything I've got. But I thought I've got something and I want to get it right what it is, you know, the way that I shared that. So I kind of also was worried that people might misinterpret what I was seeing, in terms of the findings, if I didn't have a chance to explain the study and explain why I was focusing on a the specific area that I was looking at. So I kind of had all this excitement, but also this fear about the confidence, you know, the imposter syndrome that a lot of people kind of can experience as well around doing sort of research. But that all came together in a wonderful sort of almost perfect storm of the thesis being ready at the time, where I could really, really talk confidently about the ideas in relation to that work. And it's super rare, because I've actually since leaving that role as well, which was also quite unexpected. And on a hammock, again, probably just to kind of move. And I feel as I said, that's, that's been a really great move for me to do. But I think when when I've moved away from both those organisations, the local authority, the regulator have actually been invited back to both with such open arms to share these ideas in relation to influencing the direct work in the workplace, and where people are planning for social workers, but also at that national level around just helping think through some stuff, and connecting that with some other really big research that's happening as well, in Scotland at the same time. So just an absolute delight for the research to kind of fit so well, in a way that was completely unexpected, because I just really did the doctorate, to learn more. And I definitely did that. And it's superb that as I say it's been so well received and be able to kind of fit with what people want to think about, if that makes sense.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith

Absolutely. What a journey. Thank you so much Gillian, can you talk us through what kinds of conflicts you experienced between your professional knowledge and your academic knowledge during your professional doctorate journey?

Gillian Ferguson

Yes, I mean, I think I always thought that I had quite a lot of knowledge about certain things, and not about other things in, in practice as a social worker, but also in, in supporting the learning and development of social workers. But social work is really fraught with an ambiguous context, if that makes sense, you know, what it means to be a social worker, and what the role is, what the tasks are, and the knowledge that's there needed to do those tasks undertaken that rule. All of that's actually quite ambiguous, and there's nothing that's absolutely set in stone. So social work draws from all sorts of other professional disciplines, in written form, what it does. So in terms of that, I kind of felt confident, because it worked in other areas of knowledge around reflective learning, and practice learning, and lots of theory about individual learning, and also organisational learning. But actually, the study was really kind of right at the heart of all these different sort of areas of knowledge and expertise, if that sort of makes sense. So I think that's why I can really shifted my focus and my study from exploring some exploring something practical to explore in something more philosophical to kind of really try to get to grips with what even are we talking about when we're talking about learning for social workers through doing the direct work tasks? But also, what is the knowledge around that, you know, what are we even talking about, that needs to be learned, and if that makes sense, so very, all over the place, and quite a quite a messy journey, which people often advise you over around doctoral study that it's gonna be messy, until you can come out the other end. So I don't mind mess, as long as you can sort of tidy it up a little bit at the end. But I was really aware of this. The nature of my study being right at the centre of all this, I kind of developed a visual diagram for myself early on in the study, without what kind of had circles concentric circles of all these different areas of knowledge around what I was trying to find out about and almost generate some new knowledge about right at the heart of all these fields. And in some ways, my study was very much about drawing from practice related knowledge, but also theoretical knowledge, but trying to almost bridge these different theoretical fields around workplace learning around practice and reflective learning, and around practical wisdom, knowledge of that date, trying to almost bridge What on earth are we talking about when these things come together? Right at the heart of what social workers are doing on a daily basis. So The diagram really helped me see what I was trying to do, because I was all over the place with these different kinds of professional and academic knowledge. And I think that what has happened is the study really stayed sort of true to try to bridge ideas from these different types of knowledge. And in some ways, my academic knowledge that has been generated by the study, I think, is almost become professional knowledge. Because it is being used directly in professional work and workplaces, and in design and sort of solutions around thinking for so you know, how we support social work, education and social work learning. So in some ways, there's this almost duality of what do we even mean by which is the academic and which is the professional, I think that's really beautiful for a professional doctorate to think in that way, there's only no on reflection, I'm thinking in that way about, over the knowledge has kind of come together. So didn't have conflicts as such between. But I was aware that I had to kind of draw things together. And now I can really see that actually, you know, what are we talking about, these things do come together? Sometimes there's a bit of each in terms of academic and professional knowledge coming together.

And sometimes the knowledge really changes depending on how it's used. I don't know if that makes sense. But yeah, right at the heart of lots of different things, you know, knowledge is gonna keep changing, I think that does some powerful reflections. Thank you so much.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 11:36

So we've got the last one, then it's just a really practical, practical one about top tips if that would be okay.

Gillian Ferguson 11:41

I'll do that. I mean, I've tried to think of top three tips that I would think around, for people that are thinking about doing a professional doctorate, or people in the middle of it. And it can feel quite difficult in the middle, it can feel strange at different times. But I think I would really suggest always focusing on and trying to study something that your heart and your soul are interested in, because it's got such a close relationship to, I think your identity, whatever, however you would define your identity now, but also what that identity becomes, if that makes sense. So I can really reflect it in my final thesis a lot about different aspects of my identity, you know, myself as a social worker, myself, as a part of the regulator myself, as you know, all sorts of different things as an educationalist or lecturer. And then also, in terms of academic practice. So I think the strongest thing that happened was my researcher identity really strengthened that sort of my social work one in a way that I didn't expect, I've never been surprised to be able to see that I am a qualified social worker, through the findings have just been able to listen to the people that I interviewed and worked with, during the process of my research, I think there are surprises along the way around the identity. And but my top tip is, you know, do something that is just so connected with something that matters to you. Because then that's, you know, that's going to give you some sort of joy, even in the difficult times over, if that makes sense. But that is academic sense of identity, I think it's just given me much more confidence to talk about my research and be part of an academic conversation, and have that articulated in such a way that I can help influence the original practical problems that I kind of sought to solve through doing the professional doctorate. And I'm really still in love with the research that I did, which is a lovely place to be in terms of the study. And I think the second tip I would give is, kind of take notice of where you're at at different points of the journey. You know, even if you're only considering a doctorate at this stage, you know, think about what is it that you'd like to study, I mean, it'll probably change how you refocus and refine that, if you do kind of pick up an opportunity of that type. But I think it's really good to kind of just notice, you know, who you think you are, you know, the different things you bring into that at different stages, and see how that does fit. I mean, I think I thought that would maybe come out of the, the written work in terms of the thesis. However, actually, I was invited to bring more of that into my final work in terms of the examiner comments as well. So it really does sort of have a, you know, sort of have a relationship to what you're studying. So I think the second top tip I would give is just, you know, notice where you are at different points of the journey. Even if you're just thinking about doing a doctorate at this stage, you know, what is it that matters to you that you want to study, you know, how does that really relate to your personal interests, you know, who you are at work, you know, the different roles you might have had because you're kind of coming to the study with everything that you've ever done before and everything that you're going to do now. Actually, when all comes together, and there's an incredible amount of expertise, which is actually sort of my third, you know, top tip is almost to remember, you've got all that expertise to bring to the professional sort of doctorate study. And that is a

really, really kind of rich place to start. And actually, the foundation of that to where you would then get to, I think, can be really quite incredible. So that's kind of my third top tip. But back to that second point that I made, which probably didn't finish properly, thinking about who you are at the different sort of stages, I think it's a really rich area to reflect on as you go. And you can forget how much you've maybe changed, I was invited to kind of draw more of my sort of self and my reflection on self as a social worker self in terms of just philosophical interests, and life experience, as well as professional roles into the final sort of written thesis by the examiners, where I'd kind of maybe try to keep more of that separate. And I just think it does really offer so much to what you're bringing to the research to reflect on that. And think about how you've kind of maybe changed and the areas that have really strengthened rather than changed. Rather than, you know, in terms you don't lose anything, but it's some areas of your identity, I think really strengthen much farther and through a journey like this, which at the end of the day is deeply personal. And I think most people that I know that have been studying doctor, it's a hugely passionate about the work that they're doing, which is usually why they've kind of gone on to do it. You know, lots of people don't have to do these things. But the, you know, the really, really inspirational studies that people are doing through the professional doctorate route, so that's kind of a three top tips, but they all weave together.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 16:44

There's three great tips. Thank you so much.