

Be Passionate, Positive, and Persevere:

My Research Journey as an International Graduate Student

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Be passionate, positive, and persevere. This is what I have learned through my research journey as an international graduate student. I believe being passionate about your research project is the most important thing, and that is the reason my supervisor often encourages me to choose research topics that I am truly interested in. Apart from your passion, you also need a positive attitude to help you go through the difficult times in this long journey. Research has shown that international students experience many difficulties in adjusting to university life in foreign countries, and those difficulties are “compounded by being in an unfamiliar culture and surrounded by challenges of communication and language” (Tas, 2013, p. 2). As an international student, I have met many challenges, such as language barriers and cultural differences. However, I strive to keep a positive state of mind by focusing on my strengths and using them as catalysts for achieving my goals. In addition to passion and a positive attitude, you also need a tremendous amount of perseverance to keep you going for as long as it takes to succeed. Since research can be a hard and lonely journey, perseverance becomes a key factor for academic success.

My research journey started four years ago when I came to Canada and began my Master’s in Education at Memorial University. After I graduated from my two-year Master’s program, I entered a Ph.D. program and continued to pursue my passion for research. I never thought that I would become a doctoral student before I came to Canada, but I gradually changed my mind. I became more confident in my reading and writing competences and I found out that doing research is my passion. In the past four years I have had many unforgettable experiences and I have experienced both good and tough times. Many of my experiences are emotional experiences. Recent studies address the important role that emotions play on students’ academic achievement. They suggest that positive emotions can help students achieve their academic goals, while negative emotions may lead to students’ exhaustion and burnout (Cotterall, 2013; Rigg, Day & Adler, 2013). In my paper, I would like to critically examine my emotional experiences instead of ignoring them or suppressing them. Since visual arts are highly effective for generating emotions (Leavy, 2009), I use four photographs that I have taken to describe my personal and professional life over the past four years. I hope these photographs can help me express the thoughts and feelings that might be hard to put into words and also help my own experiences resonate with the experiences of other students.

My First Year in Canada

My first year in Canada was the most exciting year for me since everything was new to me. I really enjoyed the courses that I was taking since they were very inspiring and engaging. The photograph below was taken in a class in which the professor gave students the chance to lead class activities and a fellow student invited us to show how we perceived teachers through clay. The sculpture on the right was what I made and the classmate next to me made the other. It was interesting to see that we all portrayed teachers in different ways, and I learned a lot through interacting and collaborating with other students in class. In my first year of study, I not only gained the knowledge and skill that I need for doing educational research, but also learned the importance of embracing teaching as an opportunity to inspire, engage, and empower students.



Photograph one: The most inspiring learning experience I have had

My Second Year in Canada

I began my to write my Master's thesis in my second year. My thesis was about exploring the development of teacher identities, and my participant was an English-as-a-second language (ESL) teacher who had taught for over thirty-eight years. I interviewed her once a week and after each interview I went back home to transcribe the recorded interview. The picture below was taken on my way home. There was a snowstorm that day and nobody was on the road. It was then that I realized that living abroad by myself was not easy. Although people around me were very supportive, I still felt a sense of loneliness in my research process. This was the time that I learned to build my inner strength. According to Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, and Ramia (2008), all human beings feel lonely or isolated at some time in life. However, many factors intensify the feeling of loneliness that international students experience, such as the unfamiliarity with the local environment and the lack of family support and social networks (Sawir et al., 2008). In order to reduce my sense of loneliness, I took part in many volunteering activities, which provided me with the opportunity to make more friends and build my network in the local environment. I agree with Sawir et al. (2008) that "the creation of stronger bonds between international and local students in the educational setting... is key to a forward move on loneliness" (p. 148).



Photograph two: If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

My Third Year in Canada

I started my Ph.D. program in my third year in Canada and I was very excited about this new journey. However, doing a Ph.D. was much more stressful than I had imagined, especially at the beginning of the program. I was fine with completing assignments and presentations, but I got very frustrated when I found it hard to join in the class discussions. Lack of oral proficiency in English and fear of making mistakes were two big barriers for me to actively participate in the class discussion. Liu and Jackson (2008) point out that lack of proficiency in English is not the sole factor that leads to student reticence in second language classrooms. Fear and anxiety can also hinder students' active participation (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Therefore, it is important for international students to be aware of how fear and anxiety can negatively impact their academic performance. In addition, I was not very familiar with the topics discussed in the class and there were many theories I had not heard of before. I wish that I had had more background knowledge surrounding the theories and concepts before taking this course. My suggestion for future international doctoral students is to search online for simplified explanations of the theories that you do not understand or watch online videos that provide brief introductions to those theories. Through enhancing your background knowledge, you can better prepare for Ph.D. coursework.

I eventually got through a difficult part of my Ph.D. program, and in the process of doing so, I developed a strong relationship with my supervisor and other professors. As Tseng and Newton

(2002) suggest, "the relationship between the international student and faculty (especially one's major academic advisor) has a significant effect on international students' learning" (p. 595). The picture below was taken at the end of semester when the professors and students had a potluck together. For me, it was a celebration of my hard work, my courage, and my positive attitude that year.



Photograph three: A little celebration of my hard work

My Fourth Year in Canada

Now in the fourth year, I have become used to living in Canada, and I regard St. John's as my "second home." Currently, I am preparing for my comprehensive exam and working on the research proposal for my dissertation. The picture below was taken in last September when I walked along the East Coast Trail for the first time. I think a research journey is like a hiking trail. When you stand at the starting point, you are not sure what you will experience, whether you will see good scenery, and how long it will take to finish your journey. I see new research projects as a new journey. No matter how much research you have done before, it is great to start with a fresh mind and to allow for unexpected experience.



Photograph four: Standing at a new starting point and no shortcut

I think a research journey is full of excitement, surprises, challenges, and uncertainties. The process of doing a Ph.D. program is like an emotional roller coaster since you may experience many emotional ups and downs during this process. However, I never regret doing a Ph.D. program and continuing my research journey. What I need to do is to keep working hard and to be passionate, positive, and to persevere.

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