

Title page

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Title: ‘This object really touched me’: Using Le Guin’s Carrier Bag Theory to explore stories of the self on an international professional doctorate development programme.

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Abstract

This piece reflects on an innovative introductory workshop for an international professional doctorate development project based on Ursula Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (2019). In the session academic supervisors from four participating countries shared stories about their own experiences of doing a doctorate using a bag of everyday objects which reminded them of their time as students. The exercise gave the group an opportunity to begin to get to know each other and to appreciate the complexity and challenge that completing a doctorate whilst working and balancing other personal and family responsibilities entails. Drawing on humanist pedagogical approaches which value the inner world of the learner (Khatib et al, 2013) and taking inspiration from previous arts based approaches to identity work for education students and practitioners (Kendall et al 2015) the piece argues for the importance of making space for story-tellings about the self from the outset of professional doctorate programmes.

Keywords

Professional doctorates; working students; carrier bag theory; Le Guin; story-telling

Carrier bag stories and the doctoral journey

The activity described and reflected on in this piece formed part of an early workshop for an international project called Digi-doc involving academic tutors from education departments in universities in England, Vietnam, China and Indonesia including the authors of this article. The aim of the Digi-doc project is for academic tutors from the four countries to develop a digital professional doctorate programme for working postgraduate students across the participating HEIs and beyond. Working students who embark on a professional doctorate in education face a multitude of practical and emotional challenges (Pappa et al, 2020). In recognition of this, a workshop based on the novelist Ursula Le Guin's (2019) carrier bag theory of stories was devised and trialled to allow participants to share and explore some of their own experiences of completing their doctorates whilst working in paid employment and/or having family responsibilities. The carrier bag activity took place on-line at one of the first collaborative meetings of the Digi-doc project team, all of whom had previously completed doctorates. This had the dual purpose of helping the team to get to know each other as we began working together on the project, and also to introduce an activity that could be adapted and used with working postgraduate students in the different countries who would be embarking on the digital professional doctorate programme that was being developed.

In line with humanist pedagogies developed by theorists such as Veugelers (2011) and Khatib et al (2013) previous research has established that valuing postgraduate students' individual experiences and challenges within a supportive academic environment has benefits for the student experience, student well-being and for retention (Skakni, 2018). Additionally there is a growing appreciation of the role of identity work such as sharing symbolic objects and creating identity boxes with new groups of student practitioners in education in order to nurture group relationships and allow participants to feel 'seen' (Kendall et al, 2015; Nutbrown, 2011).

As the participants in the project came from a range of cultural backgrounds and had different experiences of postgraduate study, it was important to find a way of sharing our stories of doing doctorates that allowed as much freedom as possible in form and content, but that was meaningful to all participants. For this purpose, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (2019) written by the late American science fiction novelist Ursula Le Guin was adopted and adapted for use in one of our first international professional doctorate development workshops.

Le Guin argues that the most important and illuminating stories are often found in the metaphorical carrier bags of experience filled with memories of the past that we all carry with us - our 'bag of stars' (2019, p.37) as she terms it. Her 'carrier bag theory' encourages us to rummage in these bags to find the 'untold' stories. These are the stories that are not always about winning and making linear progress towards goals, but that are about the objects, ideas and experiences that we gather along the way and that can tell a different story about being human, about struggling, learning, nurturing and helping one another.

In this sense Le Guin reimagines stories as bags for collecting, carrying and telling the 'stuff' of living: 'A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient' (2019, p.32).

Using these ideas we asked the project participants to choose 3 items which related to their experience of doing a PhD, to put them in a bag and bring them to our on-line workshop. The items could be anything at all that reminded them of the time in their life when they were working towards their thesis. These were then shared with the group, one at a time, along with the stories associated with each object. These stories were fascinating, varied and illuminating and provided precious insights into each others' experiences and cultures that helped foster a shared understanding and cohesion amongst the group.

Below are nine short descriptions written by participants of some of the objects that were shared in the 'carrier bag' workshop, along with an explanation of their significance. The individual pieces are unattributed, although all contributors gave permission for their stories to be included and are named as co-authors of the article:

(1) I am a Chinese researcher having completed the doctoral education in Belgium. In my views, study abroad is not just about pursuit of academic achievement, but also involves living independently in a culturally and linguistically different country. For me, this bag is one of my close companions in Belgium which I carried always to and from the supermarket. It recorded an important part of my lives during those challenging yet enrich years of doctoral training, so I took it back to China to keep the memories as fresh as before.

(2) Doing my doctorate has been the most challenging time in my life. Although I enroll in my PhD program as a full-time student, I still have to work as a lecturer in a university. Therefore, it has been very hard to balance my studying and my work. Whenever I feel stressed and want to give up my study, I always look at a painting drawn by my son. The painting shows an image of a rainbow and myself, and his message to me is, "Mommy, try your best". This object really touched me and reminded me that I could do it and keep me going with my doctoral program.

(3) My fourth daughter was born at the end of first semester of my doctoral studies. Since it, I have relied on this item (baby milk bottle) for my baby while I was away on campus. I also brought this item to campus to accommodate expressed breast milk. Why must I bother? Because for me, exclusive breastfeeding is very important for my baby (6 months) and continued breastfeeding until she is two years old. My studies

must not sacrifice the interests of my children/family. So, to this day when I see this thing, I always remember my struggle to pursue doctoral degree by raising 2 toddlers as single parents because my husband and my two big children still live in our hometown. Keep spirit for all doctoral students that having toddler.

(4) In my PhD student's life, reading books and papers has always been my all-time favorite activity, and finding a worth-reading research is like discovering a hidden gemstone. Among all the materials I have read, "Leader Eat Last" is the one which has the most special meaning to my life. The book has talked about great leaders create environments in which people naturally work together to do remarkable things. Moreover, there are chapters which educate us about how we should treat people around us. Every single word is carefully chosen and concise, all of which are arranged in a poetic way so as for people to memories and understand.

(5) One of the image that i always think of during my pHD journey is my bed. It is not that I am lazy but my bed had become my working station because at that time I was on maternity break. My first daughter was just over a month old when I started writing my thesis. In Asian country, the woman will have at least one month or more confinement after delivering their child depending on the living condition. Therefore, most of the time, I had to stay on my bed. Everytime I was done with my baby routine (pumping, feeding, putting her to sleep), I would take out my thesis things (papers, journals, notes, laptop) and work on bed until my next routine round come. Now that it seems to be a bit much when I recall the memory but i think it would be an unforgettable one when my children grow up.

- (6) *Here is the bag that I carried to and from my supervision meetings. Inside I always carried my notepad that documented my journey through my doctorate with notes from each meeting, reflections and ideas and plans for chapters. It became very heavy over time as the notepad filled up with bits of paper, articles, draft chapters and charts. I usually carried a book by Margaret Archer that was a catalyst for my thinking and a snack to keep me going!*
- (7) *I decided to start my PhD during a relatively busy time in my life. Being a mother of a second child, changing jobs from an institute that has been worked for many years and beginning a study all make me much more stressful. I don't remember where I got this mug with the smiley face from, I just know that since the beginning of my PhD journey, I've been using it everyday. Whenever I'm sad or depressed, I get strength and inspiration to love life from its innocent smile. I have carried it with me from my old workplace to my new one and I hope it will always be with me as a friend to support me in completing my PhD in the next 2 years.*
- (8) *My friend, the laptop. Since I started taking the PhD program on educational management, we have met with each other even more often. It's a great tool for searching documents, analysing data, and lessening my pressure in study. These days with the Covid pandemic, it has become even more useful with online conferences and workshops. This friend is my partner in my life and study.*
- (9) *I was a doctoral student in educational management at Hanoi National University of Education. Because I worked and studied at the same time, I had little time to sleep. To stay awake, I had the green tea. In Vietnam, Thai Nguyen Green Tea is very famous and I often use it in the mornings. The Green Tea & teapot was used during my PhD course. I also keep the habit of drinking the green tea when I have meetings*

with colleagues. We will make tea into the hot pot, pour out many small cups to for colleagues.

Overall out of the 16 participants in this workshop; five shared a cup for tea or coffee, four shared an item or image relating to their children, two shared models or images of animals which had 'kept them company' during their doctoral journey, two shared inspiring books, two shared bags which had carried important items (files, papers, groceries) and one shared their laptop – a very pragmatic choice! Each item carried a story and each story shared contributed to the growth of mutual understanding between participants. There were also many laughs and positive responses to each others' items.

We found this activity to be a useful way to begin our work together. The process of sharing objects and stories helped us find our common ground, and allowed the group to come together as a community of practitioners. It also allowed the Digi-doc team to learn an effective warmer technique to use with new groups of working postgraduate students on the digital professional doctorate programme that was being developed.

In her introduction to Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', Haraway (2019, p.10) notes that: 'It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what concepts we think to think other concepts with.'

Our experience of using the carrier bag theory activity with the Digi-doc project participants aligns with this. It seems that encouraging and allowing new groups of practitioners to rummage in the metaphorical carrier bags of their lives, to find forgotten or seemingly unimportant stories to share can add a depth and richness to the learning experience that falls beyond the boundaries of an educational programme or course.

In order to fully support students embarking on the challenge of a professional doctorate, it is imperative that we accept and honour the fact that bags full of stories are carried with them.

With this in mind, the 'carrier bag' activity is an apt place to start as it can be adapted to be used with any group of working students embarking on a professional doctorate, or with groups of academic tutors, who can be asked to share objects relating to previous periods of study and/or current practice.

The final word here must go to Ursula Le Guin, herself a mighty story-teller, who reminds us of the complexity and depth of the experiences that make up any one life:

'...it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.' (2019, p.33)

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