

# Early Days

[Ides of March](#) 2014

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Apparently it is mandatory for pending PhD students to make at least one blog post detailing the time between acceptance into the program and formally beginning studies. When in Rome...



## ONCE UPON A TIME

Once upon a time I realized that I needed to finally get my PhD already. It had been 18 years since I earned my [MFA](#), I had reached my adulthood's adulthood and could not be more ready, so I initiated a search for an online program which would allow me to write about the things that interested me and still felt like I was getting a legitimate education. I am an [Assistant Professor](#) and my "terminal MFA" allows me to teach at the University level, but the writing on the wall clearly states that the terminal degree is terminal to a long and promotable career. As a rank junkie this was unacceptable. Knowing that my weakest professor-y area was research made obtaining a research degree the most useful way to turn an obligation into a useful and rewarding quest. Step 1: find a program which would allow me to live my life, earn my degree and learn something meaningful.



## BACKUP PLANS

After exhaustive searching, (research?) I found the holy grail of Hybrid PhD programs, [Michigan State University's Educational Psychology and Educational Technology program](#); hybrid, highly regarded and hopefully happy to have me. First piece of encouraging datum, the deadline to apply for the next cohort just passed allowing me to apply for the next one, starting in sixteen short months. Ugh.

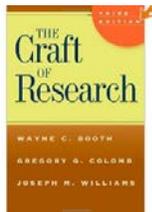
Patience is not my strong suit and the long wait gave too much opportunity to imagine problems. I



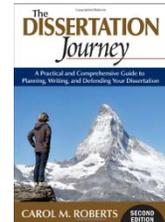
learned that they only accept about one in five applicants! Alarm! Must have backup school... So I resurrected my search and after an exhaustive second search came to a second conclusion, EPET was still the best option, by far. Rats. I would have to put all my eggs in one basket. Either they would take me or not. At this point I had a whole host of vague cinematic day dreams about making speeches and sending letters should my petition be denied – pure fantasy.



At this point I would like to point out that my life is not otherwise empty of activity, this program mania is not a result of boredom, but a kind of fixation on making meaningful use of my time. I am still juggling the aforementioned dog, plus child, wife, full time job and (since I work from home) maintain a household. However, since I have been accepted I must distract myself from the fact that I am really bad at waiting. As I dug into these activities the basic shape of research and dissertation craft began to take



shape in my mind. This process also validated what I had long suspected; *it is infinitely harder to master interface and tools while also trying to master content.* Seems self-evident, but instructional design rarely addresses this phenomenon (video games do, but that is another topic in and of itself). My online students often have to adjust to a new [GUI](#), a new teacher's eccentricities and all the content of the course



simultaneously. (A strong argument for standardized course interface) In my case I was energized by the fact that my time was spent learning how to use web tools like Mendeley to track research papers, [Webs.com](#) to build a scholar page and textbooks to instill in me the most basic understanding of what would be expected of me in the next 3-5 years.

## PIPELINES

More than all this, I found a scholarly version of my own production pipeline. If I find something research relevant online I mark it with [Diigo](#) or save it as a PDF into [Mendeley](#). If it is inspirational or immediately useful it goes into a document on my computer. When I have enough on a topic it becomes a blog post. When the post has rich enough supporting content I write and submit a paper. If it gets accepted and I need to make a presentation, I use [Camtasia](#) to record myself for time and generates a video I can post to important concepts with pen, real or virtual and then type up the really super-duper wisdom stuff in a side document. [Lather. Rinse. Repeat.](#) This fairly complex (some might say convoluted) system would not likely have evolved under deadlines to produce and pressure to master content. Now that this pipeline is in place I can digest vast quantities of material in a meaningful and somewhat efficient manner.



For folks who like lists:

1. Gather web notes on cloud or tangible book notes in book
2. Condense verbosity into wisdom nuggets on computer document notes
3. Computer notes inspire ideas which turn into blog posts
4. Blog posts inspire ideas which turn into papers
5. Papers turn into presentation video for timing and audio/ visual accoutrement

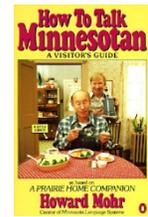
## KLOUT



Given my media background it came as no secret that the hardest part about content creation is distribution. Faced with the prospect of building my scholarly presence 2.0 it behooved me to find ways to draw attention to my work. That is when I was introduced to Klout.com. In and of itself this social network influence ranker was not profoundly impressive, but someone created a leader board with my soon-to-be peers on it, and then added me. WHAT!?! You can't do that to a lifelong gamer. Epic virtual battle is on and over the course of about a week I fought my way up from 54<sup>th</sup> rank slot to 9. Once there no amount of huffing and puffing on the internet was going to blow away social mavens 1-8, their brick cyber-lebrity far surpassed my own. At this point Klout, like Woody in the second act of the first Toy Story, found itself back in the online toy box, to be trotted out when my imaginary scenarios demanded a hierarchy cowboy doll. Back to books, websites, research and \*gasp\* real people.

## MIDWESTERN MORES AND LESSES

I basically grew up in Southern California; Chino, to LA to Sherman Oaks to Woodland Hills etc. My wife is from Minnesota though, so about ten years ago we moved to the Midwest for a four year tour. At this point in my story folks tend to raise their eyebrows and comment on the weather. Yes... it does get colder there, but my adjustment period to this new land of Caribou coffee and homicidal mosquitos were more about adjusting to cultural norms. I shan't go into them here, but these cultural differences run deep and if you have encountered them you know what I am talking about. Well, fast forward to six years after my return to the Golden State and my memory had conveniently stored everything I knew about communicating with the Midwest on a dusty shelf somewhere behind a box of 80s song lyrics and the proper sequence of actions when performing CPR. After a few initial culture clashes I was able to track it down open it up and play my part, but I am eternally thankful for the four years of prep I am able to call upon for this purpose. For those who are unfamiliar with the cultural difference I will illustrate with two pieces of typical first meeting dialogue. SoCal Sally, "Look what I can do! You should do it too!"  
Midwestern Marvin, "Welcome. OK then."





## **MOVING FORWARD**

Well aware of the haunted gazes of PhD Students mid dissertation, the abandon all hope, ye who enter here mentality of many mid-degree folk. But here is my mindset. I have been so sick I nearly died. I have tried with tepid success to break into the film industry. I have experienced every critique, criticism, rejection, runaround, delay, terror and ambiguity known to man or beast outside of war. Will there be doubt and hard times? No game worth playing appears easy to win. Any good story contains a moment where all seems lost, but so far the story of my life has turned out all right.

As a parting thought; here is how I define fun: *an enjoyable activity whose outcome is valued yet uncertain*. The process of earning a PhD sounds like fun to me.