**From Transcripts to Text: How to get started the fun way**

Hannah Rumble

On my hit list of people who really irritated me during my PhD (other than my supervisor, who was a strong candidate at times) Phillips and Pugh are most definitely on the list. I should have known that they would irritate me, just by their book's title: 'How to get a PhD'. As if *getting*a PhD was naturally obtainable! When I had completed my fieldwork, which involved interviewing many bereaved people who supported natural burial in Cambridgeshire, the great pile of interview transcripts in uniform Times New Roman, font size 12 and double spacing certainly did not promise enticing material that could lead to the production of a thesis. I felt inadequate and lost amongst all my rambling material. I had no hypothesis I was looking to test or a theory I was setting out to critique. I didn't even have a list of key themes or terms. How was I ever going to turn all my interviews, which seemed so disconnected from each other, into a compelling narrative that would offer some original insight into how and why Britain is the home of natural burial; the latest disposal innovation to radically change how we view and engage with our dead? I couldn't see how my copious pages of interview transcription were ever going to constitute what Philips and Pugh outline in Chapter 6 of their book and terrifyingly refer to as 'The form of a PhD thesis'. This chapter filled me with dread and paralysed me. In short, I just cried and stashed my dense pile of transcripts behind the sofa hoping that they would vanish from memory.

Then a friend I had always looked up to because she had the good sense not to entertain my vices that often made logical thought harder (i.e. hangovers) appeared on my doorstep to shake me out of my despair and inertia. Her advice was simple and very effective so I shall reiterate it here for any of you who are in that (unenviable) stage where you feel lost and scared, perhaps *very* scared, because fieldwork is over. There is no chance to go back and get more (and let's face it, *better*) data. You have to make do with what you have got (those rambling notes to self and rantings in what is supposed to be the 'fieldwork diary' and people's complete life stories captured on a voice recorder with absolutely no mention of the subject you are interested in). How on earth do you compose an original and intellectually rigorous 'story' using these composite sources into anything that might slightly resemble a PhD thesis?

Well, you could get some coloured pens, post-it notes in various colours and huge swathes of paper. Ideally, paper that comes in sheets as big as wall paper rolls. Then, go and buy your favourite tipple and snacks - for me this was a bottle of Tesco's cheapest Pinot Noir (I didn't discriminate between place of origin) and Nairns oatcakes with stilton - and have what you'd politely refer to friends as a 'quiet night in'. This involves getting comfortable on the sofa with all food and beverages within reach and the great pile of transcripts on your knee, pen in hand. Get gently sloshed as you read through those transcripts numerous times and start identifying recurring topics between the transcriptions. Make a note of these as 'themes' and assign each theme a colour and mark appropriate sections of the transcript with the appropriate corresponding colour....yes, this is dirty 'coding' before such a term was formalised in Nvivo.

After such an evening I had built up a relationship and familiarity with my transcripts and even had a list of themes. I was elated...and a little tipsy.

Then I cut up my themes and relevant sections of interview text and started to play around with them on the paper that I had fixed to the floor under piles of books on the curling corners. I began to consider how I might group the topics into clusters that would become my thesis chapters. It actually became fun. I enjoyed moving the topics around; exploring how each little thread was attached to another. I arranged my themes with pertinent interview excerpts underneath so that they could be used as ethnographic evidence to draw upon in discussion, and grouped these under larger, more encompassing themed clusters. I then assigned an order to my clusters which became ranked from 1-7 as seven discrete units (i.e. 'chapters'). Next, I constructed seven descriptive working chapter titles, which encapsulated the purpose of each chapter; i.e. was the chapter in the thesis to provide context, an introduction to a topic or particular terminology, analysis of a problem or data, or reflection and discussion.

All of these little bits of paper were then glued onto my giant piece of paper that was then given some added panache with some hand-drawn arrows to convince me there was some 'flow' and 'sequence' to my story, and then I hung this flimsy skeleton of a thesis above my desk. In the year I took to concentrate on writing the thesis I referred to this poster numerous times and took great delight in drawing a large cross through sections I had used. It also allowed me to see, very clearly and visually, where I had referred to particular bits of interview text elsewhere and in what context. Aside from re-naming all the chapters, adding an additional chapter six months into the process and amending or deleting sub-themes in the discussion, a lot of this poster actually became my final thesis. In fact, a year on from the PhD, I still hold onto this poster because it encapsulates a positive turning point in the thesis generation process; one where I suddenly felt, albeit momentarily, empowered and capable of writing the thing.

There was no science in my method and it was far from a system advocated by the likes of Phillips and Pugh, but I still managed to produce an ethnographically rich PhD thesis in less than 3 years with only minor corrections using a highly inductive, flexible and creative process. It helped me to fashion a story that would give me a narrative thread for a thesis that, from the outset, had no definitive questions to answer.

I sometimes look back and wonder what a lot of my despair was about, but I know now that it is because I have come out the other side and no longer see a PhD thesis with intellectual mystique. It really doesn't matter how you get there, just so long as you do, and I hope sharing my 'method made simple' will help you do that.

If there's anything you can take away from reading this, then just remember that when in doubt and despair, there's no harm in sketching and experimenting with wall-size posters, coloured pens and post-it notes!

**Hannah Rumble** recently completed her AHRC funded Collaborative Doctoral Award at Durham University. Her PhD is entitled *"Giving something back": A case study of woodland burial and human experience at Barton Glebe.*