

Full name *Dr. Diana Marie Hilliard*

What subject did you study *Education*

Year of Graduation *2013*

Current Job Title *CEO and Founder*

Current Employer/Organisation Name *Argue to Think Ltd.*

Can you give us an overview of what you have done since you completed your research degree?

Since leaving Exeter I have been engaged in two different but related activities.

Firstly, I have worked within universities as a freelance researcher picking up opportunities to contribute to projects either within the research phase or during the writing up process. I have also worked on a zero hours contract basis helping with Postgraduate researcher mentoring and assessment processes.

Secondly, I turned my PhD research into a business venture. I knew my research had value because it had resulted in practical strategies that would help students improve both their written and verbal argumentation. I didn't want it to simply sit on a library bookcase slowly mouldering away. I am not sure how, but I became aware that there were university backed initiatives that advocated getting research into the public domain in different ways.

One of the initiatives was run by SETSquared, the enterprise collaboration of the universities of Bath, Bristol, Exeter, Southampton and Surrey. I went along to the Innovation Centre with the germ of an idea and was told to engage in the SETSquared Researcher to Innovator (R2I) programme that was running at that time. I found it a really interesting programme – we would meet monthly in different parts of the country where the universities involved in the scheme would help us discover and learn the practicalities of turning university research into business opportunities. Once I had graduated from the R2I programme I applied for a funded place on the Innovation to Commercialisation of University Research (ICURe) programme. For six months September 2015 - March 2016 I was funded to find out whether there was any commercial potential for my PhD Research.

It was an intensely challenging, stimulating and exciting time and I ended up forming a company in February 2016. Since then I have been trying to build my company further by exploring potential leads and delivering training where and when I can. This has taken me all over the country and I have met many fascinating and wonderful people. I am now looking to scale up my business by taking my business online. This intention was predicated before COVID but has now become an imperative.

How did you become interested in the area that you work in?

I have always been passionate about the study of History and becoming a teacher to share my love of the subject seemed the logical thing to do. What I discovered, however, was that I wasn't just sharing my love of History but finding out that the teaching and learning processes are immensely complex and fascinating and that the classroom is a truly amazing place to be.

After I qualified as a teacher in 1995 I took further degrees – a Master's in Education from Cambridge, to understand on a deeper level the barriers to student learning, and how to promote and instil learning on the most profound levels, and then I took a Bachelor's course in Psychology from the Open University – where I concentrated on the construction of memory and how to create meaningful, learning experiences. It was during these studies that I became increasingly aware that the nature of talk within a classroom is fundamentally important to the learning process of every individual student within the class. This is when I realised the significance of a dialogic form of education.

My studies coincided with my continued practice as a classroom History and Politics teacher and as an A level tutor. In 2009 I saw an advert asking for applications for PhD studentship to explore the links between spoken and written argumentation in History and I was fortunate enough to win a place to continue my studies. This enabled me to focus on the problems History students have writing argument in their essays. It also enabled me to devise, test and trial classroom strategies that would help improve students' verbal and written argument. I was privileged to work with the A level teachers and students of 5 very different educational establishments as I tested both my theory and my practice. My PhD was essentially the culmination of both my practical and theoretical experiences of being a History teacher.

How did you find opportunities in the area you work in and how did the recruitment process work?

Finding opportunities to work in my area came about because I was already a very experienced teacher before I applied to undertake my PhD at Exeter and so I was able to contribute to the History PGCE programme at Exeter, which meant I made a lot of contacts that were not associated with the PhD programme. Because I found research partners within the History PGCE programme at Bristol as well, I have been able to work with researchers in both universities who were keen to try out my research. Attending national and international History conferences I was able to find other academics and teachers who were keen to benefit from working with me.

When I became involved with SETsquared I met fellow PhD researchers from a variety of completely different academic disciplines from across several universities – not just confined

to Bath, Bristol, Exeter, Surrey and Southampton – which led to other people becoming interested in my research. This allowed me to develop different aspects of my research i.e. dialogic engagement and my memory research, with nationally acclaimed dementia researchers, as well as finding that business entities found my argumentation research valuable.

As such there was no formal recruitment process that I engaged in other than applying for the PhD and for ICURe: the opportunities came from networking and accepting invites to present at conferences, after-dinner speaking events and early morning breakfasts.

What does your current role involve?

As CEO and founder of my own company I am involved in everything to do with running and building a business: from creating social media content and campaigns to meeting with clients and creating programmes for them; from booking train tickets and travel arrangements to bookkeeping; from networking to find clients to working with collaborators who have synergy with what I do. And then I deliver training days and 1-2-1 support to meet the needs of my clients.

What skills are involved in your work and how did your research degree help develop them?

My research degree gave me the confidence to chase down an idea, to develop and run a project or two and to talk to and meet potential clients and collaborators. These skills came about as a direct consequence of my PhD where I was responsible for liaising with teachers and students to ensure that my research was created, tested and trialled and then further developed. My determination to make sure that my research worked for my students was fundamental to the completion of my PhD and the creation of my company. The organisational skills that are essential to the completion of a PhD are directly transferable to the running of a company. The academic training that helped me find the gap in the research in my field is exactly the same skills set that an entrepreneur needs to find the gap in the market.

What do you enjoy most about your role?

No day is ever the same and I really enjoy the variety of challenges that running a business throws up. It is also a privilege to be able to work with different people and to know that I am making a difference – that matters to me.

What are the challenges in your role?

The hunt for funding and trying to make the business a success – particularly in a COVID world. It can also be rather lonely when the buck stops with me!

What has surprised you about your role?

I am not sure anything has surprised me about my role – I knew it would be challenging to run a business – and it has indeed been an interesting and fun ride. I suppose what I have found most interesting is the way that opportunities present themselves from unexpected events and sources. There are very real opportunities to work with international students as well as multinational corporations.

Did you engage in any additional activities or roles (i.e. organising conference, entering PGR Showcase being a PGR rep etc.) during your research degree, and how did these help prepare you for a career beyond academia?

I undertook my PhD when I was in my fifties and with family commitments so I was limited in what additional roles I could undertake. I also lived some distance from Exeter. However, I was determined to make the most of my time at the University. I took part in conferences, although I did not get involved in organising the JURE conference, I was certainly involved in running it. I also took care to be involved in any event that allowed me to showcase my research as it developed – so staff student conferences, PGR showcases – I did them all and also went to conferences in other universities as well.

What skills and experiences have been most useful for your career?

For me the ability to be able to go out and meet people, to be able to talk to people about my research and to be able to share it with students and business clients has been the most useful experience of my PhD career. The academic skills – the critical thinking, reading and writing were fundamental to my PhD success especially given that I was researching argumentation. These academic skills are essential life skills and I use them daily whether I am relaxing watching TV or working on my business.

What advice would you give to a current PGR who wishes to pursue your career?

If you want to run your own business, I would recommend going to the Innovation Centre and talking with the advisors there. That is the first step. Then – if they think your idea has legs – get involved with the Enterprise Team and look out for opportunities from SETsquared and other schemes run by Innovate UK.

Fundamental to your success will be your ability to network with fellow researchers but also with other networking groups who may be able to further your idea. Take advantage of the support you will get from the university and get involved in the PGR events – they support you as you learn this crucial skill.

If you get an opportunity to put together a bid for your research do so because writing bids is an essential part of running a business – funding is crucial.

What are your plans for the future?

In the short term I will be writing bids to enable me to move my business online. I will also be writing books to support my various programmes and building online resources.

I am always looking for potential collaborators and partners who would be happy to work with me as I develop the business further.

Needless to say I am looking for clients whether they are PhD researchers who might want a little more support as they develop their PhD thesis or if they are business clients who would benefit from engaging with someone who can streamline their communication practices as well as support them as they improve their business writing to gain greater success.

In the long term I want to get my business to be in great shape so that I can be bought out.

Do you have any tips or advice for beginning a career or working in your industry/sector?

I am passionate about helping my students and my business clients – it matters to me that I can help them improve their written work so that they can be successful – either in getting better grades or in winning more clients. Running a business isn't easy and if I didn't care so much I would give up – COVID is making it difficult for everyone. If you want to run your own business helping others be prepared to work long and hard hours. Crucial to my success has been the contacts I have made whilst at university – so make the effort to join the societies, attend the networking events and the opportunities to work with and meet new researchers. It matters.

Good luck.