

## Thinking the “PhD Way”

JD Eveland PhD

*[This was originally prepared as a guidance to the PhD students in our business/management program. While there are some references to program specifics, I believe that the issues described are generic to all PhD programs and students.]*

The PhD is qualitatively different from undergraduate and Master’s degrees. This difference may be approximately summarized as the distinction between problem solving and problem expansion. While pre-doctoral training is about learning how to characterize situations and to apply principles in order to change them for the better – what one might see as a “microscope” model of knowledge application — doctoral training, by contrast, is about generalizing from situations to classes of situations, about probing the less precise edges of knowledge, and raising new possibilities – more of a “telescope” model. Students need to be made aware of this quantum difference in the governing assumptions of their program from Day One.

In general, effective PhD-level study and analysis is more likely to generate new problems than to resolve existing ones. The mantra “Further research is needed” is not just a catch-phrase but the soul of the program. Thus, the overall emphasis in each and every corner (although not always with equal emphasis) is on research – its generation, its conduct, and its implications for problems. PhD education is about framing problems, about “learning how to learn”, about an overall mind-set of self-directed and self-motivated learning that sees research and research skills not as something distinct from the world of work, but rather as integral parts of its working strategy. Over the course of the whole program, students become self-directed and self-motivated enough to assume the greater share of responsibility for their post-candidacy education.

This “PhD Way of thinking” underlies our whole program. We have undertaken a far-ranging process of integrating the Way into all the parts of the program that the student touches. This “doctoral seminar” is an expression of The Way in action. There is a significant need to smooth the crucial mid-program transition from pre-candidacy to the dissertation; from course-directed study to individually-directed study. Students need to be aware of and to prepare for this transition. The period in the program up to the achievement of candidacy is in large measure indistinguishable from the structure of the educational process from pre-K years -- courses, tests, assigned papers, and the like. After candidacy, the responsibility for the student’s education shifts in large measure from the program to the student. While a student writing a dissertation is far from isolated, s/he is functionally more of an autodidact than at any point in most student’s experience. The program needs to emphasize the skills and attitudes that are needed to weather this transition and to operate effectively in this new autodidactic world.

This transition is dramatically embodied in the formal process of dissertation proposal preparation and approval. Suddenly the student is thrown into a whole new world of Chairs, drafts, committee members, and self-directed unstructured exploration, without the familiar structure of courses and deadlines imposed from without. The purpose of this Seminar is to provide some aspects of structure and support at the beginning of the dissertation process, and to establish some continuity between what has been and what will be the rest of your student career.

After the Dissertation Proposal Seminar, you will be done with course work pretty much forever (unless you decide to go for another doctoral degree, which is generally considered evidence of primary dementia in most of at least the First and Second Worlds (the audience is still out on the Third and Fourth...)) This seminar has tried, in a rather halting way, to move you toward the transition to another way of thinking about academic pursuits — one centered not on external structure and validation, but on inner direction, self monitoring, and internal rewards. Some of you are more comfortable with this new environment than others; some of you aren't comfortable with it at all. But like it or not, that's where you are.

Whether or not you complete your dissertation from now on is no longer a problem of the faculty. It is yours. It's entirely up to you. None of us will nag you, lean over you, send you harassing notes about things being overdue. If you want to write a dissertation and graduate with a PhD, we'll be thrilled with and for you. If you don't want to, we'll be sad, but we'll understand that people's priorities change, and that the PhD isn't a goal that turns everyone on enough to complete the process.

The one thing that we won't let you do is to write a bad dissertation. You must remember, if we let you out of here with that piece of paper in your hand, we're essentially certifying you to be, at least potentially, our professional equals. If we let people finish who have done second-rate work, our colleagues are going to look at us and assume that we don't know the difference between good and bad research. We do know the difference, and we won't let you damage our reputations by conveying the opposite impression.

I'm sorry if this sounds harsh and unfeeling. It isn't intended to be — it is intended to convey the depth of feeling that the faculty, both full and part-time, have for the quality of your work and the message that it sends out to the world about TUI as an institution. We have an investment in you, just as you have in us, and we don't want that investment to become devalued. Thus, if you decide that you do want to go forward toward the degree, you must realize that (a) you will be subjected to considerable criticism about the quality of your ideas and their exposition, (b) this criticism will in only small measure take into consideration what a great person you are and how much you'd like to get finished and out of here. (c) If (c.1) you take it seriously and apply it toward your work, you will create a great dissertation that we're all proud of, but if (c.2) you slough it off and try to game it, (c.2.a) you won't finish and (c.2.b) no one's going to be happy. You most of all.

Sounds like a simple choice, no? Win or lose? Happy or unhappy? Well, it's amazing how many students elect to take the lose option, blame everyone but themselves for not finishing, and generally console themselves with the opinion that the faculty are a bunch of over-zealous research fanatics who won't give a guy a break. True. The breaks that we've been freely passing out all through your academic career end now. The dissertation is going to be good, or it's not going to happen. Period. End of story.

Well, not quite. We do care, and we will help, to the degree that you let us. But it's really now your show. All birds get kicked out of the nest sometime, and this is about it for you. Dust off your feathers and prepare to fly out there. We'll follow your progress, help as we can, and be there, but it's your show from here on out. Best of luck — but remember, mostly you make your own!