

Thoughts on teaching and learning research in a PhD Program

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Research methods and statistics is not an easy read. When you find yourself getting confused, remember that you have a good many colleagues in the class, at least half of whom are convinced that they enrolled by mistake in a course in translating cuneiform writing, and that we're heartless taskmasters for assigning as much work as we do. Some students are always going to be ahead of the pack, others behind — the “miracle of the bell curve”. Remember, classes are always pitched a bit below the estimated median skill level of the class, given the principle that the slower students take more time to bring along.

These methods courses in the PhD program may be structured somewhat differently from others you have taken, at this university or elsewhere. They're more technical, and the material is often complicated and hard to fold your brain around. Thus, the amount of material provided for your reference is substantial — in fact, there is always more material in the Background than we expect you to read.

Since these are complicated courses, different people learn the material in very different ways. An article that speaks well to one student may mean nothing to another. In a face-to-face class, the instructor has the opportunity to get direct feedback from students and tailor his/her presentation in different ways on the fly, presenting the material often several times in the same class from different angles. That is not possible here. Thus, our approach is usually to present a wide range of materials, with no expectation, let alone requirement, that you read or even access all of it. We want you to have exposure to a range of ways of presenting the material, on the hope that at least one of them will speak to you. In general, this works. Student feedback tells us that different folks do in fact find different things helpful. In every class there are a definable number of students who can't make head or tail of any one piece, and find some other article or presentation on the same topic effective.

Thus, beyond the “required readings”, the background material is not a “reading list” in the traditional sense. It is simply not useful to print out all the suggested readings and then try to sort them out. The courses are designed to have you scan the material on line, identify things that seem helpful to you in filling in your loose ends (students come to these courses with extremely varied backgrounds), and only if absolutely necessary print something out. Printing is not a good use of the Internet, nor of your time. We can't guarantee that any one item will be effective for you. Thus, for each module, you should check out the Case and the Project requirements, then begin to consult the Background material. Look over as much as you can, skimming quickly.

But the courses themselves are only a relatively small part of the graduate student experience, and probably not even the most important one. In the old university, students who began to experience frustration with the formal class process would just take to hanging around with more senior students, eventually find a faculty member who appreciated them, and become part of the inner circle that way. In my own graduate program — which was, incidentally, at a fairly

rigorous and prestigious school in the field of organizations, the University of Michigan, I found myself in my second year significantly bored with my classes. I latched onto one of the professors who really engaged my attention, and became a sort of unpaid intern or volunteer personal assistant — I did coding for him, some programming, sorted papers, eventually got to manage some of the analysis — and in the process, got an inside view on what research is really like. After about three of these faculty experiences, I had learned an enormous amount about the craft of research.

Unfortunately, we haven't yet figured out the perfect analogue for that sort of thing in our case. Remember, we're only a few years old in an educational niche with no peers and no established models to fall back on, and thus, as I've observed on more than one occasion, we're in a continuous learning mode. We are continuing to think about how we can expand the opportunities of the "research craft" to online students — your thoughts and ideas along these lines will be warmly welcomed!

Regarding assignments (forget grades — that's a sophomore practice, and shouldn't really be involved in a doctoral program), my own approach is to prescribe enough measurable activities that I get a good sense of where you are relative to the material, and leave it to you to find your own level of comfort with the material. Since I always give considerably more background material than anyone can or should read, I have figured that students who wanted to dig into things more deeply would start following trails that I laid with the readings, or come to me with questions and requests for leads. That's generally been the case — I've had a lot of students who wanted to extend their learning come to my (virtual) office and hang out. And I like that.

What I can tell you is that graduate school at our university, like grad school anywhere, is what YOU make of it, not what your professors make of it. The essence of a PhD program is gradual preparation for self-directed learning at the dissertation stage. Some students won't develop that capacity; some could but for various reasons don't want to, and the rest will, by degrees, become full-fledged scholars by assuming responsibility for what they learn when they want to earn it, and then pushing the system to work with them to make it happen.

From here on out, the material will become progressively more complex, and you'll be asked to deliver various assignments relating to the minimum expectations. Whatever you choose to learn beyond that minimum necessary to finish the assignments is up to you. It's our job to provide you some "trailheads" into the intellectual jungle of these concepts — and after that, it becomes your job to hack out your own trails, Internet search tools in hand, remembering all the while that you have an emergency radio back to base (called "email to the faculty") and a willing group there happy to engage in whatever kind of intellectual exploration you want to engage in. Just don't expect us to do it for you.

What I'm getting at is that the "classroom" experience in a PhD program is only the simplest and usually least interesting part of your education. There are many classes, some better, some worse. We're engaged in an across-the-board restructuring and reorientation of our classes to strengthen and expand the research components; things are getting better generally. I would hope that all of you (a) you hang in there with us, (b) engage in some energetic exploration of each topic beyond the simple limits of the formal assignment, using the extended background material as your

trailhead, and (c) take to pestering us faculty with questions or requests for referral to a new trailhead when you need it. We're happy to help, but we can't read your mind about what you need, particularly in virtual space.

And please feel free to engage in whatever communicative acts that may help you to wring out of the school all the intellectual juices you're paying for. I assure you that they're there.