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# The Doctoral Colloquium as a Community of Learning and a Forum for Professional Development

Mark W. Roche

THE percentage of ABDs who leave our profession before completing a dissertation is high. Though the numbers may vary by field and institution, anecdotal evidence suggests a problem. On the one hand, some ABDs may be late bloomers on the scale of self-recognition and may justly depart a profession that is not the best match for them; others may step out for equally good or for purely contingent reasons. On the other hand, some otherwise excellent students may have difficulties coping with a grand and independent project after having received extensive guidance through earlier parts of their graduate career, and others may be daunted by the array of obstacles before them as they approach the job market.

Graduate students who do finish their studies are often well prepared in literary interpretation, literary history, and cultural theory. Many also receive excellent guidance in how to teach foreign language or composition courses. But when it comes to other matters of professional development—how to express one's topic in intelligible terms to a broader audience, how to approach a publisher with a book manuscript, how to prepare a syllabus for an advanced class in literature—many of our students learn simply by osmosis or not at all.

The doctoral colloquium I propose is designed to help students develop their dissertations in a communal setting and help them make the transition from graduate student to assistant professor. I offered such a colloquium in my former department at Ohio State University, and I believe it could be a model for others as well. The course provided practical advice for students writing dissertations and approaching the job market; offered a forum for discussing common intellectual, theoretical, and methodological issues; and allowed for exchange on individual topics.

Half of each week's three-hour class was devoted to a student's dissertation project and the broader issues and common concerns it evoked. The second half of each

class stressed practical concerns and professional development: defining, researching, and writing a dissertation; writing cover letters and preparing CVs; investigating professional organizations and writing conference papers; obtaining fellowships and writing grant proposals in the humanities; approaching publishers; writing effective book reviews; preparing course syllabi; interviewing; writing the dissertation abstract; upholding professional ethics; anticipating future concerns (such as how to negotiate an offer; how to balance teaching, research, and service; and how to prepare for promotion and tenure reviews); and evaluating current debates in foreign language departments and culture studies generally. Students made one presentation, read selected materials, actively contributed to the discussions, and occasionally prepared sample cover letters, CVs, and syllabi.

The prerequisites for the teacher of such a course strike me as fourfold. First, the faculty member must have a certain breadth of scholarly and methodological competence, to be able to ask spirited questions of the students, who may have a considerable range of dissertation topics and methodologies. Second, it must be someone who can think on his or her feet and ask enough substantive questions to help fill, in a meaningful way, the large amount of time given over to discussion of individual projects. Third, the teacher should be familiar with the current debates of the field, both intellectual and professional. Finally, the person must know something about the pragmatics of the profession—how to prepare a good CV, how

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*The author is Dean of Arts and Letters and Rev. Edmond P. Joyce, C. S. C., Professor of German Language and Literature at the University of Notre Dame. This paper is based on his presentation at the 1996 MLA convention in Washington, DC.*

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to write persuasive letters of application, how to approach a publisher, and so forth.

Each class began with one student's twenty-minute presentation—either an informal introduction to the topic of the dissertation or a polished conference-style paper. The presentation was followed by questions from the other students and eventually from the teacher. I required every student to ask at least one question of each presenter. This tactic allowed for a range of questions, and it gave students practice in what will be expected of them later in the profession: how to elicit a good discussion following a public lecture. Whenever the students ran out of questions, I formulated questions that helped the presenter reflect more deeply on his or her project and work with topics that might be raised by a future audience. Anticipating questions—in this case through practice—is the best strategy for performing well and for higher-level discussion, for if one has thought through a question beforehand, one can concentrate on the nuances of the question as it is being asked, instead of searching from scratch for something remotely relevant to say.

These ninety-minute sessions have several benefits. The students received practice in delivering their papers and in handling follow-up queries. The listeners learned the content of the presentations and received practice in asking and anticipating questions. And the discussions were substantive, covering thematic and methodological issues and ranging into strategic concerns such as the choice of topics for chapters yet to be written. After each discussion I met privately with the student to discuss additional questions that could arise and to offer formal advice.

Since the subjects of the presentations varied, let me focus here on the professional topics we discussed. In the first class we weighed whether or not to have such a course at all. In other words, I challenged the students to argue why such a course might make sense. If no compelling arguments had been given, the course would have been canceled—one of the liberties one has as chair. This technique served two purposes: first, the students had an investment in the success of the course and were able to focus on and articulate their goals; second, it allowed me to see some potential benefits of the course that I did not anticipate and could subsequently stress. The points brought forward by the students were formulated on the board as follows: emotional solidarity; intellectual community; the technical aspects of writing the dissertation, including the sharing of tips; receiving feedback and experimenting with one's topic; grasping (common) methodological issues in the field; learning specific content from one another; creating an extra level of structure and guidance in working on the dissertation; strategic considerations in the job search and beyond; and gaining leadership practice and becoming more active and participatory in intellectual debates. The course was offered for these reasons and two others: the notion that so

few ABDs finish nationwide and as part of the department's overall plan of restructuring designed to create better bridges from course work to the dissertation and the profession (this plan included, for example, a revision of our candidacy examinations, stressing independent reading lists and refined writing rather than generic reading lists and in-house exams, and a teaching apprenticeship program that featured course offerings on literature pedagogy).

Two sessions addressed issues in defining, researching, and writing a dissertation. One question asked was, What do we expect from a dissertation? Students came up with answers that helped them define what they expect of themselves, including, for example, the ability to do research and write, the ability to handle a larger project, and the moment of originality. Because some students in the class were preparing for their candidacy exams but had not yet written a dissertation prospectus, we also explored the question, What are the principal considerations in choosing a dissertation topic?<sup>1</sup>

Strategies for the timely completion of a dissertation were addressed, and students found David Sternberg's *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation* useful in both an emotional and a technical sense. Particularly helpful in my eyes are the suggestions to create a private and exclusive space, to keep a regular schedule and log one's hours, and to introduce an elaborate filing system that encourages one to stay focused and organized. Files may include, for example, individual sections and subsections, subtopics, problems, weaknesses, alternative strategies, potential questions, references to be checked, dissertation abstract formulations, discussions with committee members and other scholars, and future book. This last and important file contains ideas that are relevant to the topic but that are best pursued when revising the dissertation for publication. In this way one remains intellectually honest while at the same time recognizing the spatial and temporal limits of the dissertation.

To give students time to prepare their MLA-style presentations, I devoted one of the earlier sessions entirely to the analysis of CVs. It was not boring. Indeed, I was surprised to see that in the first 1½ hours of class time we had covered only two CVs. There is much to discuss, and we focused on three areas: first, specific suggestions concerning matters of style and presentation, including symmetry, the order of entries, what should be included and what not, and what should be highlighted and what not; second, what stands out in a given CV; and third, what questions might be elicited by certain entries in a CV. Students presented to me individually, and subsequently rewrote, letters of application since these should have the personal marks of the students.

In a session on professional organization, the class discussed not only the AAUP and the MLA, which most students already knew, but also organizations generic to the field, such as the American Association of Teachers of German and the German Studies Association; those

that target particular groups or concerns, such as Women in German, or authors or periods, such as the G. E. Lessing Society; and those in neighboring disciplines, such as the Popular Culture Association or the Society for the Philosophic Study of the Contemporary Visual Arts. Related to this topic was a discussion of conference papers, including strategies in writing abstracts and the advantages and disadvantages, both intellectual and professional, of visiting one type of conference or another.

Despite the helpful list in PMLA's annual September issue, some advanced assistant professors, let alone graduate students, are not familiar with all the grants for which they could compete. Our discussion of grants included the simple strategies of encouraging students to draft proposals early and have the proposals reviewed by colleagues, of having students ask for copies of approved proposals, and of learning how to place projects within the field and explain them in terms of their intellectual biographies. We also weighed the seemingly simple question of whom one should ask for reference letters.

Publishing and writing are important issues for such a colloquium. One needs to encourage students to get to know the various presses and their lists, to shoot for the best press, and to time their approach strategically and stagger their inquiries. They also need to know what to include in a letter of inquiry and the accompanying prospectus,<sup>2</sup> how to follow up if the press is too slow, and what is considered legitimate in peer reviewing and submissions. At some universities, one may be able to find an acquisitions editor willing to make a guest presentation on the subject, especially if the presentation is opened to a broader audience. But there are also helpful books on the subject (e.g., Derricourt; Luey; Parsons), and useful reference works and resources exist, such as the *Association of American University Presses Directory*; the *MLA Directory of Periodicals*; the *MLA Directory of Scholarly Presses in Language and Literature* (Hamer); and *Advice for Authors, Reviewers, Publishers, and Editors of Scholarly Books and Articles*, a pamphlet prepared by the MLA Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities (MLA Committee).

One also needs to talk about article publishing. Which journals publish what kinds of work? Which are considered the best in their subfield and why? Which kinds of articles might be appealing to a given journal? What is the role of journal publishing in the academy in general? Sometimes some simple advice is important: address the editor by name and know precisely the expected number of copies and length.

In the session on book reviews I asked each student to copy for the other students two book reviews, one that seemed particularly successful, and another that was unappealing, and to give reasons for their analysis. This exercise led to a helpful discussion on the ethics and strategies of reviewing books. We focused on three questions: What is absolutely necessary for an adequate book re-

view? What characteristics make a review especially effective? And, finally, what are the most difficult aspects of reviewing a book, what strategies can be designed to cope with them, and what risks follow from certain strategies? In this session we also talked about how to approach book review editors and which journals are most often consulted for their reviews.

Extremely rewarding for the students and stimulating for the instructor were discussions of sample course syllabi prepared by the students. The discussions ranged from such pragmatic issues as how many pages to assign each week and what kinds of prereading exercises are effective to the question of what makes an excellent course, an excellent syllabus, and an excellent teacher.

Very stimulating as well were general discussions of what the most important current debates are in the field and what topics worthy of discussion are not being addressed. These ranged from broader thematic issues—for example, American versus German *Germanistik*, the claim of invisibility in the profession, the why and whereof of German studies—to more practical matters, such as dwindling enrollments and how to combat them, arguments for and against a language requirement, content-based language instruction, and the integration of language, culture, and literature in the advanced curriculum. We also addressed some more philosophical issues, such as the value of literature and literary criticism.

In this context we did several mock interviews, which did not replace the more formal mock interviews orchestrated by our director of graduate studies, for our interviews included questions from fellow students and were openly analyzed afterward. We developed a list of sample interview questions, and we were ruthless in asking the tough questions, which allowed also for moments of good humor. It struck me that there are at least three important criteria in preparing questions. First, they must address all essential aspects of the profession: teaching, scholarship, and citizenship. Second, they should be stimulating. For example, one might ask, Who was your best teacher and why? and not simply, How do you teach? Third, despite the need for symmetry with all candidates, some questions should be tailored to the individual's CV or background, and some should consist of follow-up queries to the candidate's responses.

The process of thinking through interview questions has at least four advantages beyond the merely strategic consideration of preparing for the profession. First, it forces candidates to take stock of their commitment to the field and ask a number of questions about why they study what they study and what each hopes to accomplish in his or her career; thinking through such issues has edifying moments. Second, one can sharpen one's thinking in general and on particular projects. At no other time in one's career is one so much the focus of questions and advice from entire departments looking for the best candidate; one wants to be prepared for these

intellectually exciting encounters. Third, armed with knowledge of the school in question and good questions themselves, the candidates can use these interviews as an opportunity to explore different departmental and university strategies in wrestling with generic scholarly, pedagogic, and administrative concerns; during the interview process one learns about the successful or less successful policies and activities of other institutions. Finally, successful candidates will have some good questions ready should they be named to search committees themselves in the coming years.

Students reviewed draft dissertation abstracts in the penultimate session, an important exercise not only in writing skills but in formulating in concise and accessible language the essence of one's work. In a final session we addressed some general questions about upholding professional ethics, balancing the three areas of the profession, and preparing for promotion and tenure reviews. Paula Caplan's work appealed to several students in this context. In this forum we also addressed the issue of negotiating with a potential employer. A handy guide is the pamphlet *Advice to Graduate Students: From Application to Career*, with its companion, *Advice to Universities and Graduate Programs on Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities*, both prepared by the MLA Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities.

Two areas we did not systematically explore but that could enrich such a course, especially in a semester setting that allows for more weeks and correspondingly more topics, are the use of technology in instruction and alternative careers. The expectations and opportunities for technology-assisted instruction are increasing rapidly and range from e-mail discussion lists to interactive video in the foreign language classroom. One session, perhaps with an expert visitor, could point students in some of these directions, drawing their attention to ways in which they might enhance their knowledge of the field. With the availability of good recent publications, such as those by Howard Figler and Mark Johnson, introducing students to alternative career opportunities, which seem both increasingly necessary and promising, would be well worth a session, again primarily as a workshop to guide students to avenues of further knowledge. Even those who do not pursue such a path would benefit in two ways: first, it would help them in advising liberal arts graduates of all kinds; and second, it would encourage them to tend to some of the virtues elevated in other professions and occasionally neglected at the university, such as writing accessibly for a broader audience.

Let me close with some proleptic comments in response to the economic objection that we cannot afford to offer an extra course of this kind. Departments and universities invest a great deal of faculty time and material resources in graduate students, and they do so over a period of four to eight years. If such a course would help students finish and help them compete effectively on the job mar-

ket, then such a course is well worth its cost as a follow-up investment to those students and to the institution that is already committed to supporting them. In smaller, private schools, where an individual department may have only two or three dissertation writers in a given year, such a doctoral colloquium could be offered biennially or shared among language and literature or area studies departments. This would allow students to draw on ideas from other units and would bring students from diverse fields together for productive debate. At most state schools, especially those that are moving or have moved in the direction of responsibility-centered budgeting, budgets derive from a combination of enrollment and quality. University-wide revenues are normally tied to enrollment in two respects: tuition dollars and state subsidies. Graduate students do not normally bring in tuition dollars, but state subsidies are often graded according to a formula, such that higher-level students bring in more dollars. In such a system, a doctoral colloquium can pay for itself. More important, enlightened budgetary models fund not only enrollment but also quality. If a doctoral colloquium demonstrates innovation and aids students with placement, the cost may be recuperated through the program's enhanced reputation and corresponding infusion of funds. Economically, strategically, and—most important—philosophically, such a course makes eminent sense.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The process of determining a topic involves asking questions such as, What are a student's strengths (in methodologies, genres, time periods, and kinds of projects)? Where has the student done interesting work? What skills does the student bring to the table? What will interest him or her for two or more years? What issues need to be addressed? What will appeal to audiences? What will provide the student with a base for beginning publications? Ideally, students were encouraged to let the dissertation emerge from seminar paper or candidacy examination topics.

<sup>2</sup>Normally, such a prospectus includes a brief abstract; a longer description or outline of the project; and discussions of methodology, the relationship to the dissertation and to other scholarship, the potential readership, the qualifications of the author, and the manuscript's physical characteristics. The mailing should also contain a letter of inquiry linking the work to the publisher's list, a CV (appropriately edited and abbreviated), a table of contents, and a self-addressed stamped envelope.

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Parsons, Paul. *Getting Published: The Acquisition Process at University Presses*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989.

Sternberg, David. *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*. New York: St. Martin's, 1981.

Prerequisites: Students must have passed their candidacy examination. Other students may enroll if they fulfill two conditions: they must receive the permission of the instructor, and they must take the course as an overload. (NB: The course is expected to be offered every other year.)

Required texts: Mary Morris Helberger and Julia Miller Vick, *The Academic Job Search Handbook*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996); English Showalter et al., *The MLA Guide to the Job Search: A Handbook for Departments and for PhD and PhD Candidates in English and Foreign Languages* (New York: MLA, 1996); David Sternberg, *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation* (New York: St. Martin's, 1981).

Recommended texts: Paula J. Caplan, *Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman's Guide for Surviving in the Academic World* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993); Robin Derricourt, *An Author's Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996); Joseph Gibaldi, *The MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (New York: MLA, 1998); Claire Kehrwald Cook, *Line by Line: How to Improve Your Own Writing* (Boston: Houghton, 1985); Beth Luey, *Handbook for Academic Authors* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987); Paul Parsons, *Getting Published: The Acquisition Process at University Presses* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989); Bruce Ross-Larson, *Edit Yourself: A Manual for Everyone Who Works with Words* (New York: Norton, 1985); William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

#### Schedule

- Week 1 Introduction to the course. Issues in defining, researching, and writing a dissertation, part 1.
- Week 2 Discussion of Showalter et al., *The MLA Guide to the Job Search* (please read for class). Discussion of CVs (please copy your CV and distribute to entire class by Monday afternoon; also feel free to consult faculty CVs on file in the departmental office). Please skim Helberg and Vick 1-116.
- Week 3 In lieu of class this week, I'd like to meet with each participant for a half hour discussion. (Please prepare a sample letter of application, and I shall discuss it with you.)
- Week 4 Student presentation. Issues in defining, researching, and writing a dissertation, part 2. Please read Sternberg 1-192.
- Week 5 Student presentation. Professional organizations, conference papers, grant proposals.
- Week 6 Student presentation. Publishing. Please read Sternberg 213-26. Please skim Derricourt, Luey, or Parsons and each of the following: the *Association of American University Presses Directory* (New York: AAUP, 1996); the *MLA Directory of Periodicals: A Guide to Journals and Series in Languages and Literatures*, 8th ed., (New York: MLA, 1996-98); and James L. Harner, *MLA Directory of Scholarly Presses in Language and Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: MLA, 1996).
- Week 7 Student presentation. Book reviews and writing skills. Please copy two book reviews and distribute to entire class by Monday at 5:00; be prepared to discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Please read Cook, Ross-Larson, or Strunk and White.

Week 8 Student presentation. Course syllabi. Please skim *Teaching at the Ohio State University: A Handbook* (Columbus: Ohio State U, 1995). Please prepare several course topics with brief descriptions as well as one or two sample syllabi. Please distribute a sampling (no more than 5 pages total) to entire class by Monday at 5:00.

Week 9 Student presentation. Interviewing. Please read Helberger and Vick 119-40. Current debates in foreign language departments. Please read at least two of the following: David P. Benseler, Walter F. W. Lohnes, and Valters Nollendorfs, *Teaching German in America: Prolegomena to a History* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988); Walter F. W. Lohnes and Valters Nollendorfs, *German Studies in the United States: Assessment and Outlook* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1976);

John A. McCarthy and Katrin Schneider, *The Future of Germanistik in the USA: Changing Our Prospects* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1986); Frank Trommler, ed., *Germanistik in den U.S.A.: Neue Entwicklungen und Methoden* (Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1989); John Walter Van Cleve and A. Leslie Wilson, *Remarks on the Needed Reform of German Studies in the United States* (Columbia: Camden, 1993).

- Week 10 Student presentation. Dissertation abstract. Dissertation defense. Please draft dissertation abstract if you have a dissertation topic and distribute to entire class by Monday at 5:00. Please read Sternberg 193-212.
- Week 11 Negotiating an offer; balancing teaching, research, and service; preparing for promotion and tenure reviews; professional ethics. Please read Helberger and Vick 141-69.

## Appendix

### Abbreviated Sample Syllabus

Course description: The course provides practical advice for students writing dissertations and approaching the job market; offers a forum for discussing common intellectual, theoretical, and methodological issues; and allows for exchange on individual topics.

Half of each week's class is devoted to a student's dissertation project and the broader issues and common concerns it evokes. A student begins each session with a twenty-minute presentation—either an informal introduction to the topic of the dissertation or a polished conference-style paper.

The second half of each class stresses practical concerns and professional development: defining, researching, and writing a dissertation; writing cover letters and CVs; investigating professional organizations and writing conference papers; obtaining fellowships and writing grant proposals in the humanities; approaching publishers; writing effective book reviews; preparing course syllabi; interviewing; writing the dissertation abstract; anticipating future concerns (such as how to negotiate an offer; how to balance teaching, research, and service; and how to prepare for promotion and tenure reviews); upholding professional ethics; and evaluating current debates in foreign language departments and culture studies generally.

Course goals: The course is designed to aid doctoral students with the development of their dissertations and to help them better prepare for the job market and the profession. It introduces students to basic aspects of the job search and professional development, focusing thereby on strategic concerns as well as ways in which aspects of the profession might best be fulfilled or revised. Beyond these overarching issues, each student should receive feedback on his or her dissertation project and insight into different kinds of research, their possibilities and limits.

Student requirements: One presentation; active contribution to the discussions; and occasional written exercises, such as the preparation of cover letters and CVs.

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