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

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

Each class began with a 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 in the profession. Having the dissertation 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 questions. The listeners learned the content of the presentations and received practice in asking questions. Students were not forced to ask questions; the session was interactive and involved an audience in the proceedings. The audience was encouraged to ask questions that 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.

Graduate students often have different topics for 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 to make a case for 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 revise. 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: 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 did I learn from a dissertation? Students came up with ideas 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?

Strategies for the timely completion of a dissertation were addressed, and students read 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 learn to give in to the flow; the metatheatrical system that encourages you to stay focused and organized. Files may include, for example, individual sections and subsections, topics, problems, weaknesses, alternative strategies, potential questions, references to be checked, dissertation abstract formulations, discussions with committee members and other scholars, and future book ideas. This last important feature, 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.

In order to time their preparation of their MA-style presentations, I devoted one of the earlier sessions entirely to the analysis of CVs. It was not boring. Indeed, I was forewarned that the first 19 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 suggestions might be gleaned from 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 AUP 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
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 upcoming years.

Students reviewed draft dissertation abstracts in the penultimate session, an important exercise not only in writing skills but in formulating 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, students will need to approach alternative career opportunities, which seem both more attractive and more promising, would be well worth a session or an ongoing 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 turn 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 provocative comments in response to the economic objections 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 market, 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 school settings, there may be only two or three dissertation writers in a given year, such a doctoral colloquium could be offered biannually 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.
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.

Each half of each 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 languages and literatures.

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 on strategic concerns as well as 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 insights 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.

Pre-requisite: Students must have passed their candidacy examinations. 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.)


Week 1 Introduction to the course. Intro. in defining, researching, and writing a dissertation, part 1.
Week 2 Discussion of Showerman 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 Helberger 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 one-page 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.
Week 6 Professional organizations, conference papers, grant proposals.

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

Week 11 Navigating an offer: balancing teaching, research, and services; preparing for promotion and tenure reviews; professional ethics. Please read Helberger and Vick 141-69.

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