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Demystifying the thesis: equipping students for postgraduate research

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Victoria University, Melbourne

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Demystifying the Thesis: equipping students for postgraduate research

Professor Ron Adams
PGSE National Symposium
8 April 2016
CONTEXT HAS CHANGED

- Before—the ‘master-apprentice’ model for completing a thesis
- Now—accommodating a larger and more diverse mix of students
CONTEXT IS NEW—BUT AIMS ARE THE SAME

• To inspire, empower and equip students for research

• Problem: there are unprecedented institutional challenges

• Solution: equip students to assume greater control over their own research training
DEMystifying THE THESIS

What it *is not*
- a blueprint
- a replacement for the supervisor

What it *is*
- a means to empower students to ask the right kinds of questions
- a framework to equip them to arrive at the right kinds of answers
- a model for working productively with their supervisor
DEMystifying THE THeSis

Comprises four programs:

• 1-day *Beginning a Thesis*
• 3-day *Demystify Your Thesis*
• 2-day *Demystifying Thesis Supervision*
• 6-day residential *Performing the Word Writing Retreat*
DEMYSTIFY YOUR THESIS

- Getting the most out of your supervisor*
- Being an independent researcher is more than completing a thesis
- What is a thesis*
- Developing a *Research Question*
- The Literature Review: when to start & when to stop*
- Finding your voice in what you write
- The architecture of a thesis*
- Controlling your chapters*
- What examiners look for
SESSION 1: GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR SUPERVISOR

Overview

While the thesis ultimately is your product and responsibility, the role of the supervisor for achieving a satisfactory outcome can be critical. This session provides strategies for you to manage more effectively the student-supervisor relationship. It shows the importance of understanding and meeting supervisor expectations, and of balancing your rights and responsibilities as a student vis-à-vis the rights and responsibilities of your supervisor.
STRATEGY 1

Establishing an honest relationship with your supervisor

- If in doubt ... ask
- E.g. ‘Phooco’?
STRATEGY 2

Following up on your supervisor’s advice

- Supervisors expect you to treat what they say seriously
- ... and follow up on their leads
SESSION 3: WHAT IS A THESIS?

Overview

A ‘thesis’ can mean different things to different scholars because of the varied ways in which research across various disciplines is viewed. There are, however, some common elements that any thesis, from whatever discipline, will display. In this session, a perspective on the thesis as a written document and as an argument will be advanced, and attention given to writing the argument and presenting evidence.
STRATEGY 3
Using theory to link evidence and thesis

- Scenario 1: Position of female workers in Thai silk industry—Marx or Weber?

- Scenario 2: Sex industry workers—Liberal Feminist or Radical Feminist?
Female workers in Thai silk industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
<th>THEORY</th>
<th>THESIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• hours worked</td>
<td>Weberian: class (income)</td>
<td>The position of women workers has improved significantly over the last decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• regularity of work</td>
<td>status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• security of employment</td>
<td>power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• childcare provision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• role in trade unions</td>
<td>Marxist: one’s position in society is defined in terms of one’s relationship (ownership &amp; control) to the means of production</td>
<td>The position of women workers has not improved significantly over the last decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• wage rates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• management responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• shares in the industry, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same evidence</td>
<td>Different Theories</td>
<td>Different thesis/argument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Sex industry workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
<th>THEORY</th>
<th>THESIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• interviews with women working in legal sex industry</td>
<td>Liberal feminist: ‘sex is just another kind of work perspective</td>
<td>Women have freely chosen to work in this legal industry &amp; their experiences are potentially empowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sex worker activist pamphlets &amp; literature</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• memoir &amp; confessional narratives</td>
<td>Radical feminist: anti-prostitution feminists supporting criminalisation of buying of sexual services, who view the legal industry as coercive, exploitative &amp; violent</td>
<td>Women in the industry do not freely choose to work there &amp; their experiences are potentially harmful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• public health records &amp; research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• legal &amp; police data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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SESSION 4: DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Overview

One of the first steps in a successful research project in any discipline is the crafting of a clear and concise research question. The research question should be developed early in the life of the project because much of the project design and the candidature proposal will be based upon it. This session will provide a framework for arriving at a research question that encapsulates the essence of the work in relatively few words.
STRATEGY 4

Moving from a broad topic to a precise Research Question

- Typical of social science theses
FROM TOPIC TO RESEARCH QUESTION

**TOPIC**
Chronic illness
↓
Psychosocial adjustment to chronic illness
↓
Psychosocial adjustment to Huntington’s disease
↓
Psychosocial adjustment to Huntington’s by:
  ● recently diagnosed people
  OR
  ● sufferers with early signs
  OR
  ● sufferers with developed illness
  OR
  carers/family
↓
Psychosocial adjustment to Huntington’s by sufferers with early signs of the disease
↓
**FROM RESEARCH QUESTION TO ANSWER**

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

What are the variables determining why some people adjust well and others do not adjust well to being diagnosed with Huntington’s disease?

Such a question entails two sub-questions:

- **How did they respond?** [Description]
- **Why did they respond in this way?** [Analysis/ Interpretation]

Note how a **structure** is emerging.
Overview

Many students are not immediately familiar with why they review the literature, and this session will deal with the meaning and importance of reviewing the literature. You will be introduced to the notion of working in a ‘field of knowledge production’, and presented with strategies for producing critical but appreciative reviews.
WORKING IN A FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Literature
(= existing knowledge)

Guided by supervisor

Student’s research
(= new knowledge)

Student articulates how the new knowledge they are producing adds to/ changes/ questions existing knowledge
STRATEGY 5

Reviewing the literature to show how you are building on and going beyond what others have written

- Using a 4 step template strategy to avoid simply summarising ‘who said what when’
**STEP 1: SUMMARY OF WHAT THE AUTHOR HAS WRITTEN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central issue Text 1</th>
<th>Central issue Text 2</th>
<th>Central issue Text 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Gaps)</td>
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### STEP 2: HOW AM I BORROWING FROM, BUILDING ON THE TEXT?

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### STEP 3: HOW AM I GOING BEYOND THE TEXT?

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### STEP 4: SIGNIFICANCE OF MY NEW KNOWLEDGE?

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<th>Theory</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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SESSION 7: THE ARCHITECTURE OF A THESIS

Overview

For many research students, the early development of a strong structure for their thesis is one of the most important factors contributing to a successful and timely research outcome. This session will introduce you to some of the key components of thesis design and provide strategies for writing within and between chapters.
STRATEGY 6

Making most use of a chapter’s introductory and concluding paragraphs
FOUR POSSIBLE FUNCTIONS OF INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

1. Show the relationship of the chapter to the thesis
2. Introduce or signpost the block of text about to be read
3. Provide a link with the preceding chapter
4. Link with this chapter’s second paragraph
FOUR POSSIBLE FUNCTIONS OF CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

1. Reiterate how this chapter (the block of text just read) was related to the thesis

2. Provide a sense of completion or conclusion for this particular block of text

3. Provide a link with the following chapter

4. Link with this chapter’s preceding paragraph(s)
The preceding chapter suggested that the sources for Chinese medicine are not ‘static’, but change over time according to the new contexts in which they are read. This dynamic and fluid aspect of the sources of Chinese medicine can be seen in relation to the ancient medical concept of *ke* or possession (Sivin 1987, Harper 1982, Unschuld 1980). As this chapter indicates, the concept dates to early Chou times and has remained a key idea for ‘traditional’ medicine, though not in the same way. As this chapter argues, since Chou times possession has been apprehended according to the changing contexts of social life, in terms of which it has assumed various meanings and translations.
By focusing on the notion of possession, practitioners are introduced to other ways of understanding how qi can also be an evil influence. The discussion returns practitioners to ‘unfamiliar’ ways of understanding illness causation and how this informs our understanding of states of being. This chapter has shown how evil qi or possession can be understood differently at different times and still have meaning for people. The following chapter focuses on more familiar emblematic structures such as yinyang, qi, wu xing and liu jing, giving emphasis to how true qi is said to move and change in the body. Comprehension of these and other Chinese medical ideas builds upon the metaphor and symbols which inform and structure discourse on the nature of qi.
STRATEGY 7

Using concluding and introductory paragraphs to link chapters
The Oromo may be forgotten, unrecognised and ‘nationless’ in the somewhat old fashioned sense which still informs most of the world’s élite and the subjugated Oromo nationalists. Nevertheless, in this small park in inner-city Melbourne a nation – perhaps a postmodern nation—expressed itself in celebration. Like the gaddaa condolence ritual and the transgressive speech at the African cultural festival, it is in such collective activity that Melbourne’s Oromo transform their standing. Such performances function as a virtual cipher for the carnivalesque: the elements of play, celebration, transgression and subversion enabling Oromo people to turn (momentarily) the ‘natural order of things’ to their own ends (Buchanan 1997b, pp. 177-8). As argued throughout this thesis, language provides the common link in all of the performances. But what is striking in the performances, like the women’s at the barbeque, is the critical role of music. As the following chapter elaborates, music serves to provide a focal point in the transformation of Oromo individuals into an Oromo nation, as the transgressive carnival moves beyond extraordinary singular occasions to the quotidian ‘everyday’.
Melbourne’s Oromo singers/musicians Shantam Shubisa, Afandi Siyo and Ture Lenco are displaced musicians whose identities have been largely built around their music and the Oromo Liberation struggle. For these musicians, identity has been eroded with their displacement from rural Oromiya and the immediate struggle. At the same time, they must keep identifying with the struggle, which gives cohesion, not only to these musicians but more generally to Melbourne’s Oromo community, for whom it is a unifying factor. Because so many people have paid such a high price for the struggle, they cannot imagine life without it. Music feeds their imagination by providing points of connection with a rural world and the struggle of the past. Indeed, the re-creation of rural identities in Melbourne largely depends upon these musicians and their music. For many of Melbourne’s Oromo, music does not merely evoke nostalgic memories of a place now gone but, rather, serves as the primary means by which they are able to maintain connections with the land (biyya). Via a fusion of fantasy and real bodily practices, musical activities affectively define a space without boundaries—enabling Melbourne’s Oromo to materially relocate themselves from marginalised city-bound people to city-based Oromo with rural identities.
STRATEGY 8

Using the series of chapter introductory paragraphs to draft your thesis Introduction
IMAG(IN)ING THE INTRODUCTION

• Cutting and pasting the series of introductory paragraphs will show:
  • → what each chapter covers
  • → their relationship to overall thesis or argument

• ... and help student conceptualise the thesis
Introduction
STRATEGY 9

Linking paragraphs for continuity and flow

- Links can be achieved by:
  - repeating a key word
  - or using a synonym
  - or rephrasing a concept
  - or personalising a category
  - or temporal development
[last sentence para 4] ... At the end of four days Nakapok engaged a kinsman, *Yumanga*, to kill the trader.

[first sentence para 5] *Yumanga*, having worked as an indentured labourer in Queensland, was reluctant to commit what he knew would be counted as a ‘crime’ against a British subject....
LINK BY USING A SYNONYM

[last sentence para 12] ... The *prisoners* remained locked up on board.

[first sentence para 13] Among the thirteen remaining *hostages* was a local dignitary, Nawanbus Ferau, who is reported to have stated under examination ...
LINK BY REPHRASING A CONCEPT

[last sentence para 1] ... The event was to be the hanging of a Tannese youth at the mast head of her Majesty’s Ship Beagle on September 25, 1877—at the very spot where Cook had ushered in the era of Tannese-European encounters a little over a century before.

[first sentence para 2] An execution is almost by definition a moment of tremendous dramatic and symbolic importance, representing as it does the climax of a process of confrontation ...
... He was a small-time trader living in a grass hut with his native wife and child, swapping guns and powder for the coconuts which were rendered into copra by a handful of indentured labourers brought in from other islands.

For over five years Easterbrook had lived peaceably enough at Sulphur Bay, just adjacent to Tanna’s volcano on the east coast, where more coconuts were to be found than on any other part of the island....
[last sentence para 6] ... He died about 10.30 that *same night*.

[first sentence para 7] The *next morning* Neilson and another missionary, William Watt, up from Kwamera to collect his mail from the *Dayspring*, buried the body with due ceremony ...
Overview

Sometimes students express the concern that they’re not receiving constructive feedback from their supervisor on their written work. This session includes a practical technique for you to better manage the design and development of chapters as a way of eliciting more helpful feedback from your supervisor, and at the same time increasing your control over your own writing.
STRATEGY 10

Using dot points to review a chapter before submitting to your supervisor
THE TECHNIQUE

- Identify and highlight point of each paragraph (5-10 words)
- End up with series of dot points = synopsis of text
- Confirm that order is right
- Is anything missing?
- Is any point repeated?
- What needs to be signalled in introductory paragraph?
- Submit list with draft chapter to supervisor
BENEFITS TO STUDENT

- Gives student greater control over the writing process
- They can see—often for the first time!—what their overall argument is
- They decide on order and sequence of points
- They decide on which points need to be emphasised or further developed
- They decide that the text clearly expresses exactly what they want to convey
BENEFITS TO SUPERVISOR

- We tend to receive better (revised) work
- It tells us that the student has reflected on their work
- By having them exercise ‘quality control’ over their own work, we are encouraging student to be responsible for their own improvement
- We can assess if they are communicating what they think they are communicating
- We can focus on working with the student where their intended meaning is not being communicated
GETTING THE FEEDBACK THEY NEED

- Supervisor is better able to give feedback on whether student is:
  - establishing the main point of each paragraph
  - establishing logical sequence of paragraphs
  - establishing and adequately supporting/explaining the argument
  - being repetitive or omitting key points
  - sufficiently cross-referencing within and beyond the chapter
  - accurately introducing and concluding what the chapter covers
DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE, TRUST AND MUTUAL RESPECT

- Strategies encourage a greater sense of connectedness and professional engagement
- Supervisors know that they are addressing students’ needs
- Reduces supervisor workload
- Develops students as independent researchers and writers
- ... which is, after all, the raison d’être for completing a thesis!