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Planning For Your Oral Defense

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Abstract

The oral defence is an opportunity for a doctoral candidate to defend his or her dissertation. This paper attempts to develop an insight into the preparations that a doctoral candidate needs to make before he or she is going to defend the dissertation. The advantage of oral preparation is that it promotes confidence among the students who are going to defend their work. The paper further looks at the defence procedure involved when an oral examination is conducted. A number of institutions have rules governing the conduct of the examination. This is followed by a discussion of the questioning criteria for oral examinations. A variety of questions both general and specific could be asked.

Introduction

The tradition of the oral defence of the thesis or dissertation is long – standing and likely to engender some anxiety in most postgraduate students. The defence ranges from a congenial ritual in which the student publicly presents his/ her findings to a gathering of receptive colleagues to a more excruciating examination of the quality of the thesis or dissertation and grilling of the candidate by an unsympathetic faculty (Madsen, 1992; Underhill, 1987).

The oral defence is an opportunity for you to defend the research. It furthermore gives you a chance to think about and articulate the implications of your study to your own discipline and to be challenged by your committee to claim your right to sit among them as an acknowledged expert in the field of your study (Engelbrecht, Personal Communication, 15 January, 2002).

Preparing for the oral defence

To make the oral defence experience a positive one, there are a number of reasonable preparations you can take. Certainly being fully familiar with your study is crucial. It is likely that by the time of the oral defence you will be a leading authority on your own particular topic. The more familiar you are with the details of your study, including relevant literature in the area, the more you will appear as the expert.

Preparing for an oral defence is something that can take several weeks or even months. The student have to read his/her study well before the oral defence (Underhill, 1987). The advantage of oral preparation is that it promotes confidence among the students who are then equally familiar with the content and procedure. Apart from knowing the content of your study, so that you can respond readily and authoritatively to questions on your objectives, literature, methods and conclusions, there is a subsequent need to prepare yourself psychologically for this whole process. Sometimes, unfortunately, the orals become an opportunity for faculty to build up their own egos at your own expense. One recommendation for meeting this challenge is to take control of the situation as much as possible and move out of the victim position (Madsen, 1992).

One student for example have scouted the site of his/her oral beforehand, rearranged the furniture in the room according to his/her preferences and then greeted the committee personally as they entered the room (Rudestan & Newton, 1992).

As you enter the examining room there are two encouraging thoughts for you to bear in mind: (1) You know more about your thesis or dissertation than anyone else; (2) Everyone presents wants you to succeed.

A little elaboration may be needed to convince you of the truth of these observations. If you reflect a bit, however you will realise that your academic preparation and your months, perhaps years of intense reading and research have given you a specialized knowledge of the topic that few others possess. You have had opportunities to consult with the supervisors on your committee, you know how they would assess, both the thesis's or dissertation's strengths and shortcomings. If you heeded their advice, you addressed their misgivings in the document itself. If questioned on any of these matters in the course of the examination, you can only review your written comments. Of course, when a question is asked to which you have no answer, you should be quick to say so. Chances are, however, that you will be able to respond to all the committee's questions.

There is no doubt that everyone involved in the oral examination truly wants you to succeed. This fact should illuminate the proceedings even when questioning becomes a bit spirited. The better the thesis or dissertation the deeper the committee may probe. They may even challenge you a bit to see whether you have the courage to support your conclusions. On your part, you should not hesitate to reveal you own enthusiasm for the project. After all, you have expended enormous amounts of time and energy in producing the thesis or dissertation.

Supervisors are playing a crucial role in guiding and nurturing the students while conducting the research. They consequently spent a lot of time in each other's company and as such become good friends. Although the accomplishment is the candidate's own, his/her professors are bound to feel part of the student 's success. Inevitably, the student's performance reflects on the professional competence of his/her advisor in ways both subtle and indirect.

Defense Procedure

When all the participants are present, the chairman may begin the proceedings by asking you to step out of the room while the ground rules are discussed. A few institutions have rules governing the conduct of the examination, even to the point of specifying the amount of time allocated for each departmental representative to question the candidate. Usually all the representatives or examining committee members are holders of the Ph.D. degree and the rank of assistant professor or higher. Some universities may appoint a representative from another institution. In fact a few insist on outside representation (Madsen, 1992).

When you returned and the procedure is explained to you, the examination begins in earnest. The chairman is usually granted with the courtesy of asking the first question. The practice has the advantage of giving you a chance to relax a bit and gradually warm to your subject. Presumably you will feel most at ease with the chairman (if the chairman is also your supervisor) and your close working relationship will make unforeseen challenges unlikely. At the same time, the other members of the committee will take their cue from the chairman, whose demeanor sets the tone for the rest of the proceedings.

Questioning criteria for oral exams

As the examination continues, you should be prepared to answer a variety of questions, both general and specific. The early ones are often designed to reduce any feelings of anxiety and to draw you out. You might be asked to summarise the thesis or dissertation in a few sentences. If you have been at pains to produce an exemplary abstract, this task should pose no problem. Anticipating such a question, many students have in mind a twelve to fifteen-minute summary they can call upon if necessary.

In a similar vein, you might be asked to discuss your major findings. Again the intent is not to challenge you, but rather, to let you appear to your best advantage. Other questions in this category deal with your plan for further research; ideas for publication of the thesis or dissertation either in whole or in part, and implications of the study for the work of another scholar or group of scholars (Ackermann, Engelbrecht, & Smith, 1998; Rudestan & Newton, 1992).

The examiners may also ask you how the thesis dissertation qualifies as an original contribution to knowledge, what its major weaknesses are, and why a particular method of analysis was chosen.

You may even be asked to suggest a research question to be used by someone interested in carrying the study beyond the limits of your own investigations. Sometimes examiners will ask such questions as “Are there scholars who might disagree with your conclusions?” “In what ways has this work on the thesis or dissertation contributed to your growth as a scholar?” “Were you to start afresh, would you do anything differently?” “Are there courses you think ought to be added to our curriculum that would have been useful to you in preparation of your manuscript?” (Rudestan & Newton, 1992, p.112).

Sometimes a question will require a response that goes beyond the data or findings of the study. There is no harm in expressing an opinion if you are asked to do so. However it should

be clearly labelled as such (Galant, Personal Communication, 20 November, 2001).

If you wish, you may bring a copy of the thesis or dissertation to the defense, no doubt the committee members will have their copies with them. Minor editorial changes or other small adjustments in the text might be suggested during the course of the examination. Before any alterations are made at this stage, however you and the members of your committee must agree that they are appropriate and necessary. When each member of the committee has had a turn, the chairman will call for further questions. If there are no further questions, you will be dismissed to wait outside or in the supervisor's office while the committee members deliberate and finally put your performance to a vote.

Conclusion

The most likely outcome of any oral examination is a pass with the request for minor revisions. Minor revisions are changes to the thesis or dissertation that do not challenge the central thesis or dissertation, perhaps some additions to the references, some further analyses, some elaborated discussion. Major changes are more substantive alterations to theory and method and thus troublesome. The general antidote to the request for major changes is to keep your committee fully informed about the thesis or dissertation throughout the process. The more you request feedback during the five years or so of thesis or dissertation work, the less likely that committee members will sabotage the entire thesis or dissertation at the oral stage. Be wary of the committee member who remains on the fringe of your project and does not have time to read your thesis or dissertation. This is a likely person to ask questions about statistics, because asking these sorts of questions does not require knowledge of your field or even the content of your dissertation. Have a good understanding of why you used each statistic for each analysis. The process of evaluation should not be seen as mere formality, however. Each member of the committee will wish to make a comment or two; sometimes the more impressive the thesis or dissertation and the candidates general performance, the more prolonged the discussion. This may also be the case when things have not gone well, of course. Nonetheless, you should not become alarmed if some time elapses before your supervisor calls you back for the committee's decision.

Time will dull the memory of any uneasiness you may experience while you await the committee's decision. What you will never forget is the overwhelming sense of achievement that is yours as you accept the congratulations of your supervisors and realize that you have now been admitted to the fellowship of scholars, the company of educated men and women.

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