Episode 66 – I'm Freaking Out About My Dissertation Defense!

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor as well as my network of students, colleagues and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

This is part two in the series on the dissertation: what it is, what is becoming, and what it could be. Part one focused on what a dissertation is and some of my thoughts on what it should be. But the written document is only half the story. You have to DEFEND your dissertation in front of a committee. That's today's topic: the dissertation defense.

I invite you to first review the oral presentation part of Episode 46 – "I Failed My PhD Qualifying Exam" – not because you're going to fail your dissertation defense, but because I talk about how to prepare for an oral examination in general. Those main points apply here, too: practice, practice, practice; and prepare for the question and answer session. The Q&A is even more important for the dissertation defense, because this is where your committee will make its judgment on your standing as an independent scholar.

You're probably freaking out because you think you might fail your defense. Let me reassure you that this is highly unlikely. Have I seen people fail dissertation defenses before? Yes, I have. It's not common, but it can happen. The good news is that those people eventually got their degrees. It came down to correcting some kind of mistake or error, probably in the written document itself, but it could also be because of poor performance in the Q&A session. Whatever the reason, they fixed the problem, talked to the committee members individually, then tried again at a later date – and passed. What is more common is to have a "contingent" pass, even though that is not technically an option. That means that there are corrections to the written document committee members want to see before they will sign off on your dissertation and defense. These might be simple typographical errors, major rewrites, or the addition of another section. But those things come after the defense. The point is that even with objections to your work you can find a path to completion. But first things first. When do you know that you are ready to defend your dissertation?

It's pretty simple, really: you're ready when your thesis or dissertation advisor says you are. If you have a good research advisor and mentor – which I hope is the case for all of you – then trust their judgment. It may be that you think you've been ready to complete your dissertation and defend for the past six months but they think you're not ready yet. Conversely, you could be hesitating because your dissertation isn't 100% perfect or you're struggling to make a compelling story, but your advisor thinks you're ready. In either case, follow their advice. Do advisors sometimes have ulterior motives? Sure, but I stipulated that you had a **good** research advisor. An ethical advisor will let you defend even if they need one more set of experiments for that upcoming grant renewal, and they will let you stay another semester even if they don't necessarily have the funding. They will find the funding. Need to complete remotely and come back for the defense? I've seen that done, too. Heck, I even did that myself. What I don't recommend is starting a job when your dissertation isn't even close to done and promising to complete it at a later date. That's a recipe for disaster. I've seen that done, too, but I've also seen people let go from their jobs because

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they didn't complete their PhD. Those are extreme examples, though. Going forward with a defense because your advisor thinks you're ready is far superior to trying to defend when your advisor doesn't support your decision.

Have I seen students defend without their advisor's consent? Yes, I have. It can get really messy, but this is where university administrators earn their battle scars. This gets into the realm of the advisor-advisee relationship and is not so much about the defense itself, but if you have an intransigent advisor that is keeping you from going forward with what is otherwise a completed dissertation, then seek out an administrator for guidance. This will typically first be your program chair, followed by a school or college dean followed by a dean from the graduate school, depending on the administrative structure of your institution. You are probably a student in the graduate school as opposed to the school or college in which your department resides, so you will likely end up talking with someone there after first starting with a program representative. If you don't find satisfaction after talking with the graduate school or equivalent, there is probably some kind of ombudsperson at your institution that can help you resolve your issue. You are **sooooo** close to being done. People want to see you complete and move on to even greater things. Use this to your advantage.

So, you've decided you're ready to defend. You submitted a copy of your dissertation to your committee well in advance of the defense. I always expect a copy of the dissertation two weeks ahead of the defense date so I have time to read it, but some committee members may request even more time. Here is the sad, sad, truth, though: no matter how far in advance of your defense you give your committee a copy of the thesis or dissertation, chances are they will not read it. Faculty colleagues – you can save your outrage at me for another topic. You know it's true. If you're like me and you read each and every dissertation whose committee you served on from the beginning to end of your career, then you get a gold star. Here it is. But by my estimate less than half of the committee members I served with ever bothered to read even part of the dissertation. I could tell by the questions they asked and their lack of reference to the written document during the Q&A period. Candidates, take this into consideration as you prepare for your defense. You may have to answer a lot of really obvious questions.

But now you've gotten past all the administrative hurdles and you are ready for the final presentation itself. Here's how most dissertation defenses go in the United States: there is an open presentation section, followed by an open question and answer session from anyone in attendance, followed by a closed session with just the committee and the candidate, followed by banishment from the room while the committee deliberates for an unnecessarily long time, followed by hugs and handshakes. The definition of an "open defense" varies by institution. Without getting into all the legal aspects of why the term "open" is used and how it is different than "public," suffice it to say that anyone in the university community should be able to attend any dissertation defense. Friends and families of the candidate are often allowed, too, although whether you want them there is a personal decision. If you are a close friend or family member and your candidate loved one asks that you not attend their defense – respect their wishes. Presentations can be difficult enough without the added pressure of performing for someone you care deeply about seeing you in your professional setting for maybe the first time.

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Get the technology piece worked out ahead of time, too. Many defenses include some remote component, whether it's you, members of your committee, members of the general viewing audience, or recording for posterity. Make sure this part will work flawlessly, especially if you've never had to set up a remote meeting yourself before. Go to the actual room where you will be giving your defense. Is there a camera where the remote participants can see both you and the presentation, or will you have to use your laptop? If so, can remote participants see both the screen and the live feed? Will the other participants be able to see all the committee members, especially when they are asking questions? Will audience members be miked if they ask a question? What is the internet connection in this room - hardwired or WiFi? What's plan B if that internet connection should go down or is spotty? Do you have the necessary access to the technology that room supports, like Zoom, Teams, or some other remote meeting software? Will you be using your own computer/phone/laptop for these connections or are you required to use the hardware in the room? Is there a whiteboard – electronic or otherwise – available for you to jot things down or do that derivation you've been practicing? Do you need a laser pointer? Will it work on the monitor (you'd be surprised). Think these things out ahead of time and do a dry run with the technology, including getting a trusted friend to log on remotely and give you feedback on the listening experience. There are a thousand things that can go wrong with technology, but you can work most of them out ahead of time with just a little preparation. You don't want a rechargeable battery to stand between you and your degree.

The day has come. Get a good night's sleep the night before and eat a good meal several hours but not right before the event. Work out if that's part of your daily routine. Dress professionally. Institutional and disciplinary cultures vary widely on personal expression in professional settings. Think things like piercings and tattoos. I'm a "let your colors show" kind of person, but not everyone is. Know your committee and the culture. I'm not saying to conform or be less than you are, but there are times and places for everything. Just be informed. Get to the meeting space early. If the event space is being used ahead of you and the event runs over time, be prepared to work quickly but calmly to get things set up. It's okay to start a few minutes late in these circumstances, but all the preparation we talked about earlier will help minimize the chaos. Wait for your committee chair to introduce you. They will give some glowing remarks about you (hopefully), where you are from and where you are going, then turn it over to you. You're on.

Thank the attendees for coming. Thank your committee members. Save the other acknowledgments for the end. Do all those things you've been taught to do for an effective oral presentation: eye contact, minimal fidgeting or pacing, firm and confident voice. Go a little more slowly than you think you need to. Breathe. Dramatic pauses can not only help you catch your breath but be an effective tool to help your audience re-engage. The convention for questions during the presentation varies by discipline and institution. Follow the lead of your committee chair – they are technically running the show and should defer questions if that is the convention. The length of your presentation will also vary. Again, have this worked out with your advisor ahead of time. You race through your presentation and you've made it to the end. Thank everyone again. Smile. Wait for the committee chair to explain to the audience what happens next. But, you already know: Q&A followed by deliberation. Still nervous about the closed session? Don't be. Here's why.

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Let me use a personal anecdote to explain why you shouldn't be nervous about the defense in general and the closed session specifically. I used to hate oral presentations as an undergrad and young graduate student, and it showed. I was self-conscious, unsure of myself, and I got really, really nervous. As I was preparing for my master's thesis defense way back in the dark ages – I had prepared transparencies and a projector for my presentation if you can imagine that – I was trying to think of all the questions I could possibly get, and how I could address any questions, concerns, or criticisms the committee might offer. As I was standing outside the room waiting to set up for my thesis defense presentation, I suddenly realized that I was ready. I couldn't think of anything else that needed doing. I knew everything I needed to know. My anxiety vanished and I felt at ease. I've never been nervous about a well-prepared presentation since. My realization was simply this, and it goes for you, too: You know more about the topic of your dissertation than anyone else in the world. **You** are the expert, not the committee. Not even your advisor. **You** did the work. **You** know the quality of the work. **You** know its importance and implications to society. All you have to do is convey that information to your committee in a calm and professional manner, and you'll do just fine.

You made it! Congratulations! Maybe there's a brief ceremony afterwards to toast your accomplishment; someone else should be taking care of that on your behalf. We used to have cake and bubbly in our program. I would spring for the good stuff, but really it's the thought that counts. I had one colleague who would keep one empty bottle from each dissertation defense and put it on a shelf in their office. The cynic might say that's self-aggrandizing, but I see it as recognition that each defense was an individual accomplishment to be remembered. In some ways, this is the ultimate reward for the faculty research advisor. There is no greater joy than seeing one of your doctoral students successfully defend their dissertation.

Thank you for joining me today. Visit my website at grad-post.com for more information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree, and check back for more episodes on theses and dissertations.

Every degree counts. So does every presentation, but none more so than a successful dissertation defense.

Links

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