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The Future of the Dissertation (in the Social Sciences)

In preparation for this presentation and discussion, I sent email on December 13, 2015, to 20 anthropologists I have worked with. 12 already have Ph.D.s and 8 are working on them at the moment. Of those with Ph.D.s 3 are tenured, one works full-time at a VA Hospital, and 8 finished their doctoral degrees within the past 5-6 years. Four are archaeologists, one is a primatologist, two are linguistic anthropologists, one was an engineer and computer scientist but now works full-time as a sociocultural anthropologist, one is simultaneously a lawyer, 4 work at the intersection of social anthropology and public health, one is a filmmaker as well as a medical anthropologist, two have worked in (or shown exhibits at) museums, and 5 work at the intersection of state institutions or agencies and the people they serve. Most are women (17) as is increasingly common in anthropology, and 5 come from underrepresented sectors of U.S. society. All those with Ph.D.s are employed (and 8 of them have tenure-track or tenured positions in the academy).

I wrote to them because they are people I have advised, or at least worked with closely over the years, or they are people who have taken my Professionalization and Career Seminar over the past 16 months and I thought that the chances were high that they would respond. In fact, 5 (25%) had already responded within 48 hours of getting my email, and more came through after Finals Week.

Below are the questions I asked them (and in italics some summarized answers):

(1) Can you imagine a different format or length that could work to prepare you for a life as a professional with a Ph.D.? *All replied that they could.*

(2) Would any of the following seem appropriate as SUBSTITUTES (or alternatives) for what we require now?

(a) a documentary film (of at least 60 minutes) accompanied by a written text (of 30-50 double-spaces pages) explaining choices made in the filmmaking, the research on which it is based, and the reasons for making the film? *Many like this alternative, especially for people in visual anthropology.*

(b) 3-4 sole-authored articles accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals--on different, though related, topics? *Most think that this is a good alternative, though they worry about the length of typical peer-review processes in the U.S.*

(c) 5-6 sole-authored article-length manuscripts SUBMITTED to peer-reviewed journals--on different, though related topics? *Many think that this is a good alternative, especially because they fear peer-review but appreciate the need to get published.*

(d) a blog on a specific topic maintained (and with readers) over a period of 1-2 years? *Most*

object to this as evidence of expertise, including the one who has had a blog for 2-3 years.

(e) a sole-authored book manuscript accepted for publication by a scholarly (and not "vanity" press)? *Most think this is quite appropriate, though daunting.*

(f) 10-12 book reviews on a subject (each 1000-2000 words) written for and submitted to a journal (print or electronic) that publishes book reviews? *Most object to this as evidence of expertise, even though many have written one or more book review.*

(g) 10-12 conference papers on different (though related) topics given at advisor-approved scholarly conferences? *Most object to this as evidence of expertise, though by now all have presented conference papers. The main objection seems to be that conference papers are not developed enough.*

(h) 2-3 years of full-time teaching at an institution of higher education in the United States? *So far, most object to this as evidence of expertise.*

(i) 2-3 years of full-time teaching in English at an institution of higher education outside the U.S.? *So far, most object to this as evidence of expertise and do not seem to consider the "outside the U.S." part of this especially understandable.*

(j) 2-3 years of full-time teaching in a language other than English at an institution of higher education? *So far, no one has actually commented on this.*

(k) 2-3 years of funded research on a topic approved by a committee of advisors and with a funding source (s) approved by a committee of advisors? *Most wonder if doing the research is enough and whether there shouldn't be at least some writing about the findings.*

(l) a sole-edited book manuscript accepted for publication? *People seem somewhat split on this as an option, though many have no experience of the work entailed in editing a volume.*

(m) 10-12 accepted journal articles or book chapters in which you appear as first, second, or third co-author? *People in less science-oriented areas of my field find the number listed here daunting, though they do not usually publish multi-authored texts.*

(n) a co-edited book manuscript accepted for publication? *People seem somewhat split on this as an option, though many have no experience of the work entailed in editing a volume.*

(o) 6-8 completed Senior Theses or Masters theses that you have supervised/directed? *Most respondents so far do not consider this as enough evidence of expertise.*

(p) 1-2 inventions for which you have received a patent? *Those who have commented on this say they think this might work for people in the sciences.*

(q) directing a field school for 3-5 years? *The non-archaeologists have nixed this, but I have not yet heard from enough archaeologists.*

(r) publishing at least 3 sole-authored articles or book chapters in a language (or languages) other than your native or dominant language (and not simply translated by someone else)? *This may work but a number of respondents have said that they do not understand the value of this.*

(s) envisioning, running, and securing funding for 3-5 conferences/symposia lasting at least one full-day (with 3 required if sole-organized and 5 if co-organized)? *Most respondents have said they thought this was not sufficient evidence of expertise.*

(t) testifying as an expert witness or consultant 5-6 times in court or at an approved state-level, national-level, or international tribunal or institution? *Some respondents said this could be a very attractive option, especially for people wanting to work with NGOs or policy in general.*

(u) 1-2 medium-sized museum exhibits on a particular topic at an accredited museum and with you as the leader, accompanied by a catalog you author or co-author? *Many people thought this could and should be a good option for archaeologists or museum studies experts.*

(v) anything else?

OBSERVATIONS/ REALIZATIONS FROM THIS EXERCISE

In my email on Dec. 13, I added “think 5-10-15 years from now, too. And notice that all of the above still assume that a PHD is a degree given to someone who has shown evidence of being, becoming, or being regarded as an expert on a topic.” I realize that this last statement might well have been directive enough to affect some of these answers, but I also realized as I was imagining future alternatives to the doctoral dissertation that I felt strongly about what a PhD signifies (and should continue to signify), namely, expertise in a topic & the ability to imagine, design, & figure out how to work on a topic in the future.

That these continue to be, to me, the hallmark of a Ph.D. is important. Should the Ph.D. at some future time stop being seen as the highest degree a university gives, I am convinced that the academy, the government, or the corporate world would come up with some other form of training deemed necessary to generate the level of expertise and competence that we now deem marked by completion of a Ph.D. In fact, I often think that something like this is already happening in a variety of fields in Europe and in the natural/physical sciences in the U.S., where people with doctorates typically get post-docs (and not Assistant Professorships) upon completion of their Ph.D. If time to completion is taken into account across many fields (including significantly different subfields of anthropology), it seems that 8-10 years is the norm for someone to go from starting graduate school to being deemed expert enough to get a job as an Assistant Professor in their field.

But in the social sciences (and certainly in social, cultural, medical, legal, and linguistic anthropology) most of that time occurs prior to getting the Ph.D. and the Ph.D. now stands for what I said above, namely, that it is a degree given to someone who has shown evidence of being, becoming, or being regarded as an expert on a topic.” Hence, the question remains whether a doctoral dissertation is the only way, or even the best way of ascertaining that level of expertise and accomplishment, and I am not convinced that it is, though I imagine that it will

continue to be seen as the necessary marker of such expertise and accomplishment at least for the next decade. Tertiary education is often quite slow to change, so I approach the future of the dissertation with a mix of imagination and practicality.

OPENINGS

I am aware of some possibilities that already exist in some departments in some graduate schools in the U.S. For example, I know that some time in the late 1980s or 1990s the American Studies Program/Department at the University of Iowa decided to allow their doctoral students to make a documentary film or similar audiovisual project in addition to a shortened written text in lieu of a standard doctoral dissertation. I also know that the vast majority of doctoral students in that program/department have continued (since then) to write standard-length doctoral dissertations.

I also know that already by the 1980s some science departments at Duke (where I began my faculty career) were requiring published articles instead of a standard doctoral dissertation before they awarded the Ph.D. If I am not mistaken, this included the Duke physics department, which required their Ph.D. candidates to have published (or have had accepted for publication) 3 articles (with, I think, the doctoral candidate as first author) plus a review of the scientific literature in the field and some kind of introduction and conclusion bound together before they awarded the Ph.D. And I know that the biological anthropology doctoral students in my own department are at the moment being led in that direction, although there is no rule in my department that requires publication prior to getting the Ph.D.

Since the Master's degree in my field already went through significant change in many Ph.D.-granting institutions since the 1980s and 1990s—with many of these departments not even granting them to graduate students or switching to requiring a paper in lieu of a thesis—I think it is highly likely that there will be some change, some alternatives, indeed some openings in the next decade in Ph.D.-granting departments in the U.S. in the social sciences. But what these will be, and what these should be, is the question.

POSSIBILITIES

The options I gave my current or former students via email on December 13 are ones I consider plausible, though I think some of the suggestions seem more imaginable than others—and some of the numbers I included in my original email could easily be adjusted. For example, how many articles could count and how many book reviews could count, or how many different college-level courses could count?

The doctoral dissertation in anthropology is, as I usually tell my student advisees, both the last piece of student work they do & a proto-book. There is little question that it is the last piece of student work, but I am less sure that publishers consider doctoral dissertations to be proto-books. It has been clear for several decades that most scholarly publishers in the U.S. do not even consider unrevised doctoral dissertations for publication as books, so why do we require them & should we continue to require them?

The length of a typical doctoral dissertation in my field is between 230 and 400 double-spaced pages. It is supposed to be original scholarly work, based on first-hand research that advances the field or some subfield of the discipline. It is supposed to be based on many months of first-hand research, and to include both new data (not yet generated by others) and analysis of that data (that relates to work published or at least publicly presented by other scholars). To this end, doctoral candidates are almost always required to relate their research question, data, and analysis to the work of other scholars, and this typically leads doctoral candidates to write many pages reviewing or analyzing relevant bodies of literature. Sometimes they do so in a chapter of the doctoral dissertation that is just that---namely, a review of relevant scholarly literatures. And sometimes such a section is more embedded in a longer introductory chapter that includes such a review. It is often these chapters or sections that publishers find most objectionable, and yet increasingly over the past 3-4 decades these chapters or sections of dissertations have become longer and longer, at times being as much as one-third of a dissertation. If a dissertation is not actually deemed good enough by publishers to consider publishing them, then I am probably wrong to consider it a “proto-book”—either that or perhaps it serves a different function and I should change my description of it or, alternatively, we could change the way we direct doctoral candidates in the writing of their typical doctoral dissertation.

Consider yet another problem, one that may not be shared by all the social sciences but I doubt it is unique to anthropology: namely, that many doctoral dissertations have a great deal of new and original data but not much of a thesis or argument. Colleagues may argue that this is fine, if the data they do include are indeed original contributions to scholarship but I, for one, do not consider that sufficient. So, while I would consider all of the options I offered my current or former doctoral students, I think U.S. graduate schools should consider changing doctoral dissertation requirements, certainly in several fields including anthropology so that the final requirement for the Ph.D. better meets our expectations of what the Ph.D. means. Based on my own experience of more than 30 years of training and producing PhDs as well as the feedback I have gotten from the 20 anthropologists I contacted in preparation for this presentation, I could imagine giving doctoral candidates options, perhaps based on their goals & areas of expertise, and requiring their doctoral committees to approve of the plan.