

SCROOPE

The Cambridge Architecture Journal

Issue 23

Summer 2014



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Devil Inside/The B-Side: Postscript from a Triple Crisis-Survivor

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A PhD has its deadlines, rituals and formalities to which every professional must adhere – a fact particularly evident to those who are dependent on funding. But at the outset of research, doctoral students are ill equipped to understand what these rituals and formalities actually consist of. While most students will consult the classic methodology manuals or attend research workshops and seminars designed to assist them in navigating their research projects, they will not necessarily understand what they have been told. This may be in part due to the fact that supervisors and trainers often use jargon to convey simple concepts (a seemingly standard procedure in academia) and/or because students have not previously ventured into the specific area of their field that they intend to investigate. Because of these obstacles, it is no surprise that many PhD students find themselves encountering a series of crises throughout their research or as most will agree, the process of writing a thesis can be said to be all about crisis.

To illustrate this idea I place before you preconceived notions and guidelines often considered unalterable and incontestable:

Funding doesn't bias our research. We are often told that funding does not change our choice of topic, our research results or our research perspective. However, the possibility of funding is central to organize an investigation and provide continuity. And funding itself cannot guarantee what is most needed for research: time and dedication.

Do not expose opinions or 'feelings' in your research. Usually we are taught that research -scientific or otherwise- does not require the formation of opinions, and that feelings or, heaven forbid, passions should be left out as far as possible. Exposing 'feelings' is thus synonymous with poor academic product. According

to this perspective, deliberately taking a position involves 'politicising' the investigation, which would therefore undermine its seriousness. An archetypal example of this is can be found in the reports written by economists, which purport to be 'objective' solely because they speak through variables.

Never argue with a supervisor, even if convinced that he/she is wrong. It can feel uncomfortable or even disrespectful to disagree with the ideas of one's supervisor. This is particularly true when the thesis student and supervisor are connected by a work relationship. If one fails to strictly follow their supervisor, they risk damaging their relationship at the expense of their reputation in the field or even their future career.

Do not dare to innovate, either in your methodology or in your theory. These are areas of innovation only permitted to the 'grown-ups' and not for those just starting out. The young woman/man who tries to do so may be treated as arrogant or misguided, and will have to contend with the judgemental gaze of both peers and non-peers.

One must cite those who 'know' as references, even when unnecessary/irrelevant. References are supposed to serve the purpose of demonstrating the depth and breadth of our reading in our specific fields, however they often serve as mere superficial tokens of recognition to the already well-known academic canon. And regardless of the discipline, it is always recommended to quote your supervisor in order to avoid offending any sensibilities/egos. 🍷

One must always work alone. Science is usually organized from individual actions. Thus, the PhD student seems an automaton, splintered off from social relations. The expectations are that progress in one's research will

only happen when we are working 'seriously', i.e. by ourselves, at our desk and in silence, surrounded only by our books and thoughts.

My personal journey through research soon led me to question these precepts, and has led me (after three thesis/crises) to believe the following:

Facing the reality of funding. Being a thesis writer requires a favourable economic position in order to access and successfully thrive in academia, even when funded. The obligation that the beneficiary of a funding body feels often provokes a dedication to their work that extends well beyond the normal working hours and many thesis candidates work at home, unable to conclusively differentiate the period of work from that leisure. This generates confusion about any progress in production or productivity as all possible reference points are lost – not to mention the loss or restriction of sociability that can be offered by a workplace. Scholarship holders are perceived as 'students' and 'beneficiaries' rather than workers who, like any other worker, are perfecting and deepening their knowledge. Meanwhile time goes by without financial contributions to a future security – a future towards which the body is slowly, and inevitably, moving towards. Rare (if it exists at all) is the funding scheme that includes pension contributions, paid leave or bonuses – benefits that one would normally receive if formally employed. In short, the combination of economic restrictions and working conditions can be seen to constitute a form of discrimination, limiting those able to embark on their own thesis adventure.

Clarifying both one's opinions and one's 'feelings' is both necessary and inevitable. From the beginning to end of the research project, one cannot and should not avoid paying attention to one's opinions or feelings. For instance, there can be no overstating the importance of looking for a topic that truly interests you. No worse marriage exists than that between a student and a thesis that one does not want to do! In the instance that one cannot choose the topic, an effort must be made to

be shape it into a project that one likes – passion for the subject you are working on is not only desirable but makes the research process infinitely more enjoyable. It is also important to remember that all researchers are influenced by the personal histories that underpin the framework within which they work, whether consciously or unconsciously. Students do not start of from an unbiased perspective – they have a position, which (as every position) is political, even when convinced they are doing science, just 'pure' science. And yes, like any other human act science is politics, however much one tries to disguise it otherwise. What, if not, are the 'recommendations' for future action that we find at the end of so many documents? Can any product of academia ever be considered truly apolitical?

For the thesis and the thesis student to grow, an open dialogue with her/his supervisor is necessary. The presence of horizontal and supportive relationships is not necessarily a given just because we are part of an academic community. Growth is a product of interaction, discussion and questioning. Hardly anyone can grow without either stating their findings and reasoning or being open to the thoughts of others, even though they may intuit and later confirm that these are not shared.

Innovation is desirable. To 'read less and write more' may be one of the most valuable suggestions one can follow. Sometimes it is good to close the books of others and give credit to one's own imagination, to the ideas that emerge from one's own daily investigations and the experiences enabled by it. This will produce an end result of quality, not just a thesis without formal defects. It is through writing that one learns to write, increasing in both skill and self-confidence.

What, after all, is the true function of citations? Citations are necessary to support arguments based on issues not directly under investigation but relevant to our thesis. If a citation exists only to inform the reader that the writer is 'well read' the thesis will achieve, at best, an exhaustive summary of the area in question (and not

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'The lines on these pages unfolded in the form of a catharsis. Although as thesis students we write almost exclusively about our topic, little is known about us or our experiences'

even a full one at that – it is impossible and unnecessary to even try). Once stripped of other authors' voices and repetitive or irrelevant quotations we stand before the implicit responsibility of our own role – to develop our argument.

Progress in one's research does not only take place at the desk. Research can be a very lonely process. The time thesis writing demands tends to cause the author to be invaded by a diverse range of sensations in turn. Euphoria can give way to discontent, joy to sadness and one's deepest convictions transform into uncertainty. There is nothing wrong with 'getting lost' and 'playing with the dimensions' of a thesis -although if this lasts too long it can be counterproductive, not just for academic deadlines, but above all for the health of the author. Support from colleagues is both necessary and encouraging. Usually the most rewarding moments that occur in the highly celebrated 'academic exchange' are fortuitous instances, random and informal - in hallways, at desks, in the kitchen (literally speaking – the backstage of academic production), or in telephone conversations where a discussion of theory and praxis was not the central objective. These exchanges will result in a more consistent thesis since debate reinforces and refines key ideas while challenging the validity of any preconceptions that may have informed its design. The value of institutionalised academic exchange should not be dismissed or underestimated (workshops, conferences etc.) even if they have a tendency to distinguish themselves by their ossified conclusions.

The lines on these pages unfolded in the form of a catharsis. Although as thesis students we write almost exclusively about our topic, little is known about us or our experiences. Time runs away from us, lost to our youth and our longings, our dreams and desires. The condition of the thesis writer is varied and ephemeral; we are not alone and forever thesis writers. But when we are in it's grip, we forget to write or even think about the backstage. For many, this happens because the growth we experience during the process is akin to discovering one's hair has grown – we accept it without deeply considering it. Although my musings may have presented more questions than answers, if there is anything that can be taken from my own experiences, it is that a thesis is most enjoyable and most meaningful when it is a sincere act, in which a writer is forthcoming on his or her own position beyond what is theoretically supported. Although risky, this act of intellectual honesty demonstrates a researcher in the process of maturing. The thesis is much more than an academic product. It is primarily a test of the one writing it. Above and beyond all else, it's well worth the attempt!