Networking on the Network: A Guide to Professional Skills for PhD Students

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Acknowledgements

Chapter 4

Networking and Your Dissertation

What is the role of your dissertation in all this? After all, many people are mystified that graduate schools expect their students to spend years preparing an enormous document that will get stuck on a library shelf where maybe five people will ever read it. (Speaking of which, you should be one of the five: go to the library and look at the structure and language of some dissertations, just so your goal will be concrete in your mind.) I do realize that many people go on to chop their dissertations into journal articles or revise them into books, and in some fields one prepares a dissertation by publishing several articles and then binding them together. I have no problem with any of that. Nonetheless, a narrow focus on publication misses most of the point of writing a dissertation.

Here is the profound fact: when you produce a dissertation, the most important thing you produce is yourself – that is, yourself as a new member of the research profession generally, and of a particular research community. Becoming a new member of a research community is not simply a matter of doing some research, nor is it simply a matter of getting a publication accepted by a journal. It's much deeper than that: becoming a member of a research community means knitting yourself into a web of relationships and dialogues. Remember all of that work you did in the library to identify people whose research was related to yours? Those people are going to become your professional colleagues. You are accountable to them: you have to give them credit for their work, and the institutions of research will turn to them when it's time to evaluate your work. You are going to be engaged in a conversation

with them: the papers you write will be, among other things, responses to what the people before you have written. As you read those people's work, and then later as you converse with them, their voices will take up residence in your head, and your voice will take up residence in their heads.

Establishing this very complex set of relationships to this enormous cast of characters is not easy. It takes time and practice. And that is what your dissertation is for. Your dissertation should of course report important original research. But just as importantly, it should represent in great depth how that research is related to all of the relevant research that other people have done. It will represent those relationships in obvious ways through your citations and reviews of related literature. But it will represent them in a hundred more subtle ways as well. Certain words will have acquired specialized meanings and connotations, for example through their association with particular authors and their views, and by using those words in certain ways you will define yourself in relation to others who have used them (or not used them). People whose intellectual background and assumptions differ from yours will probably misinterpret many passages from your first draft, and one purpose of getting comments and making revisions is to anticipate those misinterpretations and search for language that will convey your meaning to all the diverse sorts of people who will hopefully be reading it. In the course of making yourself intelligible to those people, you will be constructing a relationship to them.

In short, you are rehearsing a professional voice. This is hard work, and many people who are developing a new professional voice will feel that they are being torn apart by the huge variety of seemingly incompatible demands that come from every side. After all, you will be joining a research community in which people disagree with each other, in which people have read things that you couldn't possibly have time to read, in which everybody holds assumptions that they have not articulated fully, and in which some people are hard to get along with. And yet you are supposed to talk in some way that takes this whole buzzing confusion into account while simultaneously expressing what you want to say, in the way that you want to say it. It can be done, because innumerable people have done it. It takes time, though, and iterations and revisions, and feedback from professional colleagues. Reading and rereading those colleagues' written work is a good way to anticipate their thinking, but it does not substitute for personal contact. So make those contacts. And as you build your community, and as you take seriously the comments you get on drafts, your voice will evolve. You will no longer have

the sense of being pulled apart. You will be able to identify the emerging themes that knit your work into the community, and that start to make the community seem unitary. Your ability to articulate those emerging themes is a sure sign that your project is part of a community, and that your audience will understand what you are talking about. It means that you have established a deep underground continuity between your own project and the projects of your professional colleagues. It also means that your project will be noticed, and that it will not fall through the cracks. This is the goal. Along the way to this goal, you will of course make a couple of mistakes. You will say some dumb things. You will get a bit of criticism. But that's life. When the bad stuff happens, make mid-course corrections and carry on. Everyone else has been there too.

It helps if you understand the structural reasons why graduate school can be so difficult. In passing through graduate school and joining the research community, you are making a transition from one social identity to another, and from one professional persona to another. In a sense you are becoming a new person. But you face an irreducible chicken-and-egg problem: you can't do research without being a member of a research community, and you can't be a member of a research community without doing research. This chicken-and-egg problem is typically at its worst in the middle phase of graduate school, after you finish your required coursework but before you narrow down a dissertation topic. During that middle period, the whole world can seem chaotic. All of your candidate topics will seem impossibly gigantic. It might feel like you are pretending to do research rather than really doing it. People will keep asking you, "when is your thesis going to be done?". You might be seized by paranoia about people who will persecute you publicly as soon as you try to present your work. These are common feelings; understand that they result from the structural situation you are in, and not from your own personal failings or (necessarily) the failings of other people around you.

Once you understand the structural chicken-and-egg problem, you can set a strategy for overcoming it. Start by looking for ways to watch the professional world in action. Ask your advisor for suggestions. You might sit in on a program committee meeting, serve as a referee for conference or journal papers, coauthor a survey paper, host some visiting speakers, have coffee with a visiting fellow in your department, or volunteer to help with the logistics of a conference. These tasks require labor, of course, some of it mundane. But they will also help you become comfortable with the rhythms

and styles of your new professional community.

More fundamentally, though, you will overcome your chicken-and-egg problem through iteration: starting small and then working back and forth between the chicken side (defining your topic, rehearsing your voice) and the egg side (building your network, getting feedback). That's why you should start building your network just as soon as you have a conference paper to present, but no sooner. You needn't pursue a hundred network contacts on the basis of that first small paper, and you probably shouldn't. Contact a few especially promising individuals, just to get some practice. Then work up to more ambitious public presentations of your work and more ambitious levels of socializing. If you follow this plan then your dissertation, once it is finally done, will be your masterpiece: your proof to yourself and others that you finally have a professional voice, and that you are finally knitted into the professional network that you want to join.

Here is another way to understand it. Many beginning scholars experience a conflict between their own personal interests and the demands that the institution places on them. They feel that the politics of their department or discipline prevent them from pursuing the ideas that they care about, or that funding imperatives push them toward boring research topics that are geared to someone else's agenda, or even that the research world in general is cynical and filled with self-interested poseurs. I'm not here to tell you that the research world is a thoroughly beautiful place. It's a human place, with all of the virtues and vices that come with that. What you have to understand, and you have to trust me about this, is that most of the bad feelings that I have described are simply consequences of the structural process that you are passing through. If you really do your homework, and if you really do your networking, and if you really take the trouble to study and internalize the ideas and voices of the researchers in your field whose work you respect, and if you really get out there and become involved in the activities of your profession, then eventually that inner sense of a conflict between yourself and your environment will dissipate. The great thing about the research world is that you get to choose your environment, which consists in large measure of the members of your network. Of course, this also means choosing the topics you work on, the language you speak, the values you embrace, the dialogue you participate in, and so on. You choose the whole package. You make it. You build it.

And as you do so, you and your environment will become aligned. Internalizing all of those other people's voices will change you. The changes will

happen almost automatically, and for the most part you won't even realize that it's happening. You may not even remember the time when you felt that your research interests were incompatible with the professional environment around you. Of course, you will not be completely free, the way you'd be if you had a million dollars. You will still have to build networks, write grant proposals, and so on. But you will be woven into the institutional structures that make all these things possible, so that doing them will be the most natural thing in the world. That is what your dissertation is for. In fact, your dissertation is, in a paradoxical way, a time of great freedom. It is the moment when you choose where in the great sprawling fabric of the research community you are going to knit yourself. So take the time to read widely, reflect deeply, talk to lots of people, and choose the topic that will propel you into the life you want, rather than the life that someone else might stand ready to choose for you.

This understanding of the dissertation suggests strategies for dealing with several common problems that arise with dissertations. I will describe three of them, in the beginning, middle, and end of the process.

Beginning. Graduate students who are writing thesis proposals often try to bite off too much – their proposals describe a life's work, not a couple of years' worth. Paring down the initial proposal to a manageable size can often be a dispiriting process; it feels as though you are surrendering your ambitions and ideals, step by step, until you have compromised everything that was valuable about your original vision. I have seen this many times. The underlying problem is a misunderstanding of the way that research is evaluated. People will evaluate your research partly for what you have accomplished: which theorem you've proved, which ancient city you've discovered, which grammatical patterns you've explained, or whatever. You do need to accomplish something, of course. But more fundamentally, people will look at the methods by which you did it. They will ask not only "what did s/he do?" but "what direction does s/he point?". If you prove a big theorem by means of a tortured calculation that provides no useful guidance for proving other theorems then you won't get a lot of reward for it. Your ideas and methods should generalize. They should map a previously unsuspected territory for research. This matters in job-hunting terms, since your prospective colleagues will want to know whether you have a practicable research program laid out. So when you write your dissertation proposal, don't assign yourself an infinite task. Instead, ask yourself what fragment of that task would make a relatively self-contained project, and would also provide

a clear illustration of the more general project that you see ahead of you. Present your thesis study as an example, a case study, an illustration, of the more general theme that you have identified, and take care to draw out and explain the generality of that theme. If you follow this strategy then the dissertation itself might resemble a staircase: it begins with the overall research direction that you are announcing, and then it steps down into successively more specific applications of that overall approach, laying out the theoretical concepts and relevant literature at each step, until finally you present the specific results that you've obtained. Then, having presented your results, you can work your way back to the top, step by step. This is not the only possible architecture for your dissertation, but at least it's one approach to managing the complexity.

Middle. In writing a dissertation, and especially when writing a talk about the dissertation research, one often encounters points that need to be stuck in the introduction or conclusion. Terms need to be defined, methodology needs to be explained, objections need to be anticipated, patterns need to be identified, distinctions need to be made, and unanswered questions need to be acknowledged and posed as problems for future work. Of course, everyone tries to assign these points to a suitable place when preparing an outline. But many students find that the points just keep coming, as if a volcano were continually erupting in the middle of the thesis, causing a disorderly mass of troublesome junk to flow out toward the edges. The sheer mass of this junk can be overwhelming, and it can seem as though the whole thesis is going to turn into a hypertrophied introduction and (to a lesser extent) conclusion, with the actual substance of the work left as an afterthought. You should plan for this process, and realize that it is crucial for the formation of your professional voice. What's happening, believe it or not, is that your mind is reorganizing itself. You are integrating all of the many voices that will lay claim to your topic, and you are sorting out a conceptual framework for your research program that addresses all of those many voices in a coherent way. You may not think that you are engaging with other people's voices, since the depths of thesis-writing are a very personal, even isolating process. But if you are at the point of writing a thesis then you have already done a great deal of reading, and so you are familiar with established patterns of thinking on many subjects. Those are the voices that you are integrating at this point of the process.

End. Writing a dissertation is like living at the bottom of the ocean: the project itself is so large, and the process of imposing intellectual order on the

project and on the thesis document itself is so enormous, that you become accustomed to a kind of total immersion that is unusual in other areas of life. This is mostly a good thing, or at least inevitable. A dissertation is a big accomplishment, and if you can finish your dissertation then everyone knows that you can do research on your own. Nonetheless, students often get into trouble as they resurface from the bottom of the dissertation ocean – a kind of intellectual bends that can be painful and confusing if you don't understand it. When you are living down there amidst the infinite details of your dissertation project, you can forget that everyone else isn't living down there with you. As a result, you can lose your ability to explain your project to other people. You will begin your explanations at the fourth or fifth step of the argument, leaving out all of the premises that explain what the project really is, why it is important, what all the words mean, and how the whole thing fits into something that your audience can relate to. You may never have learned to explain your project to anyone outside your research group, and as a result you may find yourself confronted with basic questions that you can't answer. A well-run research group helps dissertation authors to return to the surface of the ocean in a controlled way by offering them constructive advice about the sorts of questions they will get in the outside world. But even the best research group cannot predict these questions in the necessary detail. This is one more reason why it is important to keep building your network, even as you deal with the pressure of writing and deadlines.

During the final days of your dissertation project, you may run into another distressing circumstance: you will be reading someone else's work, and you will suddenly develop a powerful sense that this other person has already done your project. When this happens, realize that you are probably suffering from a thesis-induced delusion. Except in the hardest of subjects like mathematics, it is rare for someone else literally to have done the same project as yours, or even a project that makes your own obsolete. It happens, yes, but it's probably not happening to you. What's actually happening is much more interesting: because of your total immersion in the logic of your research, you are engaging with the other person's work in greater depth than you are probably used to. As a result, you are tuning into their thinking at a deeper level than is normally possible. This feeling can be scary and intimidating, but roll with it. As you first get your mind around what the person is saying, you can feel as though your entire worldview is being transformed. You may then go through a phase in which it seems like your whole dissertation needs to be rewritten. This is probably a delusion as well.

Go ahead and allow the other person's work to be a corrective to various mistakes and thin spots in your own thinking. If you're really getting lost then get advice. Eventually the storms will die down and you can identify the specific revisions and extensions that will be required to give fair credit to the other person, as well as improving your own work. You may even go through a few cycles of this. It's normal.

My conception of your dissertation as an occasion for professional network-knitting may sound different from other people's. But I think that my conception is the right one. A much more common approach is to keep your head down, staying in the lab and the library until your dissertation is done, and only then making contacts with others in your field. In my opinion this is a terrible strategy. It works only if your dissertation advisor is doing all of your networking for you, and only if your dissertation advisor is capable of anticipating and telling you about all of the reactions that everyone in the relevant world is going to have to your work. Making yourself dependent on your advisor in that way might actually suffice, but it is not something to count on. Unless you have already joined the research community, which you haven't, you cannot yet be certain that your advisor is sufficiently talented at networking and communicating. By all means develop a good relationship with your advisor, but use that relationship to help you build your own community. If you don't have a community then you can't be confident that anybody will understand your work, or that anybody will care about it. And without that confidence, you will probably not be able to get a job.