

ABD (ALL BUT DISSERTATION) YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

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ABSTRACT

How will the process change and should it change, given all possible technologies available with ETDs. What would they like to see? Today the ABD is driven off into a corner to do your research with only your local committee hanging over you. Then the final painful paper which is printed on the best cotton is placed (lost) in only your library and placed (or lost) at UMI. The paper most times ends up at the bottom of the new Ph.D. File Cabinet. ABD Today is both the old method described above and the new ETD method as it exists today. There are varying ways that schools deal with the period between generals and the degree. Also there are all the ways that schools, societies, professional groups and individuals are trying to get attention or control of what new research is coming out from their new graduates. ABD Tomorrow is a discussion session of what it should be like given all technologies that we would like to see in this research process with the new ETDs. A wish list of how this dissertation or theses should be stored, presented, and made available as part of the NDLTD in the near future. Should the process change? What problems are still on going and where are we all at? Also other questions, for example, should your committee just be on your campus in one department or should ABDs have access to all experts available in their area of research as part of their committee? How private should a dissertation project be? And for how long? Should ETDs be started long before they

now are started? Should a graduate student work on a paper before he has passed generals with a private electronic password account all his own?

ABD(All But Dissertation) YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

I attended the last conference on electronic dissertations and theses at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, May, 1999. At that time I was struck by the lack of Ph.D. students who attended from other universities. Administration, faculty, librarians, specialists, and staff were represented; some with lots of technical knowledge and some with little to none. All were interested in the subject of electronic dissertations and theses. The authors of dissertations and theses, present and future, were barely represented. *We*, the most important element in this data collection the authors, were not there.

This conference, that was called a workshop, turned out to be fun and a very good way to bring people together with a common interest. It also allowed me to meet the three people who had headed the set up at the Virginia Tech's beta site for electronic dissertations and theses: one came from administration, one a library scholar, and one faculty person interested in technology. I am speaking about John Eaton, Gail McMillan, and Edward Fox. I found them to be very intelligent and friendly people. They, together, had been awarded a FIPSE grant.

Passing general exams can be a big rush, which can be followed by the biggest silence. Your committee members are telling you that you are now switching hats from doing courses and learning your craft to **being a researcher**. In the beginning, you almost feel complete

isolation from your committee. In my case, I was forbidden to talk to anyone but my chair. The others, my chair said, were too busy with more important things than talking to a neophyte. These were the same people who taught my classes and with whom I had developed a comradeship. I was also told that I could not “bother” the administration about information for my dissertation topic. I got the feeling that I was mere mud on the rung of the Ph.D. ladder. “What ever you think doesn’t matter,” the chair continued to say. “Just write the first three chapters of your dissertation for the proposal and tell us what everyone else has to say about your topic in your research. You may not even hint at what you think about the topic. Just describe what everyone else who has gone on before you has to say”.

My first trip was to the library to examine what dissertations had been produced by former students in my department. I was hoping most of all to see format, style, and tone. I had already written a paper that more or less was a review of the literature. I had also seen other dissertations that were on a subject and research style close to mine from other schools. In our library at LSU since 1996, except for UMI microfilm, there are no archival copies. Microfilm, that machine which charges only twenty cents per page to reproduce and worse yet at Louisiana State University there usually only is one machine that works. This is the only way that one can view a previously written dissertation. The machine is of course is located in the basement where you can get in a long line to use it. All of the previous paper shelf copies of dissertations I wanted to see were not to be found anywhere in the library. Most had been relocated (?) and were on the library’s to be found list. Thank you interlibrary loan for bailing me out of this situation.

Next came my chair that had decided that since everyone on my committee was “so busy”, I could not talk to other members on my committee about my dissertation proposal. I noticed then that the first big mistake I had made was in picking my chair that had turned from being a good teacher prior to generals, to being a tyrant when I became “a researcher”. I have since written my proposal all on my own in what probably is the loneliest and most isolated moment of being an ABD. The only thing that I could think of on the bus back to Louisiana from that workshop is that **this system has got to change**. There has to be a better way than isolating you with one person while you write who does not communicate with you at all.

Yesterday

According to UMI, "the first American Ph.D. program was initiated at Yale University in 1860. The first recipient was James Morris Whiton, whose dissertation in Latin was on the proverb 'Brevis vita, ars long' was accepted in 1861. The document was six pages long and handwritten. What has evolved since then is a changing system of what a dissertation should be and look like and what this period called research should be. The old school conjures up a kind of self-consuming totem of the research period for future Ph.Ds that are ABD. This is a lonely period of self-denial and chastisement. According to faculty, research should be the product of the long periods of grueling personal isolation and self-criticism which results in a completed these or dissertation.

Today

Jacks, P., D.E. Chubin, A.L. Porter, & T. Connolly. (Spring, 1983). The ABCs of ABDs: A Study of Incomplete Doctorates. Improving College & University Teaching, 31,2, 74 - 81.

Says that the dropout rate after qualifying/general exams is nearly one-half of the students who passed. The period between qualifying/general exams and the final defense is called ABD (all but dissertation). Behind every graduate is the shadow of a student who did not graduate. This is a terrible waste of money, resources, and time for society. Students who are ABD and drop out are not intellectually inferior to those who do graduate. For ABD students who do stay, each years delay for whatever reason increases the danger that they will ultimately be a drop out. There are all kinds of everyday living problems to contend with such as finances and that chair. A study presented by Narad, M. & J. Cerny: From Facts to Actions: Expanding the Educational Role of the Graduate Division. Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Atlanta, Georgia. November 2 - 5, 1989, concluded that 54% of ABD students finished their degree requirements. This study compares the University of California at Berkeley to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. They studied doctoral students that were students working in the social sciences and humanities. These are two areas that classically require dissertations as part of their requirement to graduate and earn the Ph.D. There are as many ways to complete getting a Ph.D. as a discipline or department can conjure up, however the humanities and social science are the most likely to require dissertations.

Your chair should be a mentor. A real live helping mentor . Professors should not be

allowed to forget what being ABD was like. Returning to the study at the University of California at Berkeley and at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor concluded that lack of mentoring is a major factor in student dropout rate. There should be some fun in researching as well as being challenging on a personal plane. A strong sense of kinship should be developed with other ABD students. Hopefully this will spill over to a faculty member or two. Further, traditionally a chair may consider chairing six students at the same time according to the literature. A better program will allow the ABD student to help in the professor's own research, offer fresh insights, and write journal articles to jump start the ABD student's career.

Many institutions formally did little to formally or systematically allow doctoral students to socialize as a group or even to have a support network of their own to deal with problems that are unique to students who are ABD. Many students simply lose the momentum they had with regimented class and fade away. Often the ABD student is expected to be sequestered off in a remote corner to engage in his research work for his dissertation.

Excuses that are given for why the system is what it is.

(1) There are too many students today. A study by the National Research Council shows that there were 33,755 new Ph.D s in 1973 and in 1991 there were 37,451 Ph.D.s awarded. These statistics came from the National Science Foundation and National Research Council Summary Reports of U.S. Universities for those years. This is hardly a significant increase given the growth of the college population as well as the general population between those years.

(2) Students are not mature enough. This leads to unrealistic perfection as a view of their student's dissertation. Often faculty are indifferent and not very supportive. Students are students and most of them, to have survived all previous classes and degrees must have managed their lives and times quite effectively. Intellectual and psychological experiences have however, changed from generation to generation and will continue to do so. We are asked to change from the position of consumer of education to researcher and that is a definite process that needs patience and nurturing.

(3) It is easy to find a subject to do your dissertation on. Chairs expect inexperienced researchers who have a chair and numerous other committee members who are catching their every move to find a topic easily. Few dissertations are truly cutting edge in research. Moreover a truly cutting edge paper would be difficult to defend given the available research literature on that topic. The ABD program in the sciences often follows more of an apprenticeship mode. Science students are assigned or design a topic to be investigated and then write up their findings. Often one's math ability may be more important than selection of words or use of grammar.

However, many Ph.D. and ABDs that I interviewed said that they sort of knew what they might write about early in their dissertation studies. I have been looking at Electronic Dissertations since I was a graduate student in Library and Information Science School in 1996. That was a year before I received my degree in Library and Information Science and three years before I went ABD in Vocational Education with an interest in technology and adult education. Although a dissertation is rarely a book, the information researched while

being ABD may fuel years of future research, articles, and work. This question needs more research (Hawley, 1993).

(4) There are no differences in psychological needs. A person to person confrontation while writing is loaded with incoming baggage on the part of both faculty and student. Some faculty feel that if it is not cognitive then it is not important. People perceive balancing writing and other tasks differently. Writing can be in an intensely emotional, ego threatening, or even painful situation. The political environment can be highly charged and changing around the student in the department. Learning how to deal with the game can be the most important thing that an ABD student learns. At that point then there are the problems of double messages being hurled at you. Often faculty protect each other rather than nurturing the needs of the student as he writes. Intellectual combat can be present in the department. The ABD student does not know how to react except timidly and passively from being a student. Sometimes the doctoral student feels that he must literally wrestle the degree away from the faculty. Additionally the student is expected to balance the teacher side with the researcher side while being in limbo as the next step of his metamorphoses as junior faculty sets in.

(5) The Women or the Gender Gap representation has improved. Women have made significant gains, but they still are significantly behind in many fields. Notably they are behind in physical sciences and engineering. Education is the only field that women slightly outnumbered men. According to the figure reported by the National Science Foundation and National Research Council Summary Reports it is harder for women to get financial aid and it

takes them a little longer to complete studies. Writing a dissertation is still mainly a male activity (Shlain, 1999). This makes finding good mentors for women still quite difficult. It may also mean that the language that the dissertation is written in may be more attuned for males than females.

Tomorrow

The future of the ABD is to prepare for a new profession. A person who will be playing a crucial role in influencing our young, inspiring new leaders, producing research, and conveying the heritage of the past to a generation of new students who will ultimately be placed in their hands as ABD students. They will be required to be computer literate which is something today's generation of scholars may or may not choose to be.

The wonder of electronic dissertations and theses are upon us. How can a student graduate in the information age and not know how to use a computer and the various kinds of software that come with it? More importantly, how can a committee member in today's university not be computer literate? Where have the faculty been hiding all this time?

Part of my job as a pesky doctoral student was to talk to faculty that I knew and trusted about electronic dissertations and theses. Individually, they were happy to talk about the idea, but as a group they were not interested in the idea. It was a threat to the system as it had always been as they knew it (since about 1960s). ETDs are the end of the world as they know itYou pass your general test, you select your chair and your committee, you write a proposal, you write the big paper, you defend the big paper, you submit the big paper, and then

it is filed in the dustiest part of the library where few can see it except for future students in the same department. And God forbid that it be put up there in the sky for anyone to read and see the signatures of the people that were responsible for its intellectual honesty. Better yet, that paper is meant only for your file cabinet bottom drawer where only you the writer know where it is hiding from the view of all and it is only a subtle reminder of a period in your life which has gone on before. This commentary was probably the most honest response I got to “the problem” of why faculty were not too happy to see the new age of electronic dissertations and theses dawning prior to their looked forward to retirement as faculty.

Electronic dissertations and theses are only a medium of preservation that allows global access with possibility of full Boolean searching. ETDs are also a library access vs ownership issue. What better time to have the dissertation evolve as it always has into ABDs using technology for presentation and presenting their work for the job market, business and other researchers to access as a whole or in part.

Just **visualize the future** that I am a new researcher for the moment and that the topic I have chosen for my dissertation is the Sand Cricket muscles. I have been given a password to my own electronic account for writing my dissertation. I received it prior to general exams at a time when I could collect what I would like to think about as research. I have direct access electronically to my committee all of them as equals who can see what I am doing anytime day or night. They can add electronic posted notes as suggestions to me about what to do or read or any other kind of mentoring. Some of my committee now includes guest consultants at globally remote locations who are experts or interested in Sand Cricket muscles that can assist

me in my research. They might come from academia or business. Each can give me posted suggestions just as my committee can on ideas for proceeding with my collaborative research.

I would like to present my work as a map of the habitat, color and 3D graphs, tables, figures, colored photos and lastly as an appendix video and audio film of my research that is also graphically animated with 3D pictures. Or I can just sit down and write thousands of words of text about my dissertation subject of study until my committee understands them. The dissertation the dissertation has becomes a pure writing exercise

Should a system be used to eliminate 50% of applicants in the last stage prior to Ph.D. called dissertation research be allowed to continue based on the whim of one person (a chair), in some cases the only person available to be chair and the students finances. Or can we dare to look at a new way to make dissertations, with the authors approval, becoming a new stage of real research with real mentors available in ones field from other departments, universities, government, and businesses? Can we give the neophyte a chance to spread his wings and try them out in an open environment of a new paradigm and thus end the isolation of being ABD and a cocoon. And lastly, I would like to give the doctoral student doing research from the bayou's of Louisiana the same opportunities that the doctoral student from the Piedmont of Virginia has and the same opportunities that the doctoral student has at MIT, Harvard, or any other place doing the best research. This equality for the doctoral student who is ABD may never happen but the age of electronic dissertations and theses is the beginning of a new era to see this visualization develop. As for future dissertations, I visualize "plain vanilla" and/or a

banana split of multimedia. Electronics that adjust across new systems. Millions of dollars are lost every year in ABD research in the world as we know it!

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