

Stop the Dissertation!

DAVID C. WILLIAMS

WHEN those responsible for the preparation of educational leaders confront the question, "To transmit or to transform?" the issue of the dissertation comes into sharp focus. Especially is this so when large numbers of classroom teachers begin their careers with master's degrees or obtain one shortly after they begin teaching. How can one project a more adequate program of professional studies at the post-master's level without calling into question the practice of requiring dissertations or doctoral projects?

Most doctoral programs require students to complete dissertations—pieces of original research intended to contribute substantively to a discipline or field of specialization. Even the "doctoral projects," associated with the Ed.D. degree and developed initially as alternatives, have taken on the dissertation aura of "respectability" in most institutions.

Yet the practice is in trouble. More than half of all doctoral candidates quit the rat race before picking up a degree, and ten universities and the Ford Foundation have jointly committed over \$200 million to reform programs aimed at reducing the dropout rate.¹ The effects of their efforts are yet to be seen.

Unbelievable shams and hypocrisies are implicit in the process of obtaining a Ph.D.

or Ed.D., and perhaps even in the advertised reforms themselves. Overdue are real changes that will stimulate alternatives affording both students and their disciplines more marked accomplishment than now evident.

Henry James advised that a difference that makes no difference is no difference. The graduate student might reasonably assume that he is able to make more than a passive difference in his own education and the lives and careers of his colleagues. Yet the dominant design for graduate training, revolving around the dissertation or substituted project, would lead one to conclude otherwise. Indeed, the process is shot through with distrust and hypersensitivity. In many respects, it is strongly reminiscent of fraternity initiations and "destroy it to save it" types of military victories.

In an analysis of the "implicit assumptions" in graduate education in psychology, Carl R. Rogers unearthed several barriers to creative professional work among graduate students.² Among these are popular institutional beliefs that passing examinations is the best indication of professional promise, that the student cannot be trusted to pursue independent learning, and that he is best regarded as an object for manipulation.

¹ Ford Foundation Letter 1 (4): 2; September 1, 1970.

² Carl R. Rogers. *Freedom To Learn*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969. pp. 169-87.

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These insightful speculations may be generalized to fields other than psychology. In any field, students may demand more of the same after they have become conditioned to "academic spoonfeeding." Also, curious and self-motivating students are uncomfortable to have around, and frequently are not tolerated.

While education as a field of study has made efforts to become more "scientific," many elements of what might be thought of as a humanistic approach seem to have been submerged not only in our social research, but similarly in most professional approaches to society.³ M. Brewster Smith has suggested that experimentalists have lost interest in the problems of the real social world. University faculties in education and cognate fields have, in turn, followed this lead in acting out considerably more concern with methodologi-

cal controversy in research than with human values in the classroom.

Students and many thoughtful practitioners entering upon graduate work who take issue with this trend are commonly labeled as "irrational." Rationality becomes synonymous with the existing way of doing things; new observations are expected to fit preconceived imagery and an essentially technological vocabulary, or risk not being credited as observations at all. In this regard, the dissertation or the "rigorous" doctoral project requirements may be used to elevate and escalate prejudices that have experienced declining effect and control on the level of mere coursework. Thus, an old practice becomes a new fiat for decaying idiosyncrasies.

This charge, which can be documented in institution after institution responsible for advanced professional training, should not be construed as an indictment of empirical research. Rather, it should be viewed as a revolt against requirements, as forced

³ See: M. Brewster Smith. *Social Psychology and Human Values*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969; and Herbert C. Kelman. *A Time To Speak: On Human Values and Social Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1968.

marches into the land of sophisticated statistical analysis and data processing which manifest little other than contrived and unimaginative self-serving capabilities.

An examination of dissertation abstracts at many graduate schools of education will reveal, more than anything else, the bizarre generation of amazingly tangential relationships to the human condition, which are usually of negligible social and personal impact. Robert Paul Wolff identifies one facet of this situation:

It would be absurd to suggest that Kant was somehow remiss in waiting eleven years after his Inaugural Dissertation before publishing the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Indeed, it is usually counted to his credit that he chose to withhold publication until he had solved the deep problems which stood in his way. But the doctoral candidate is urged, cajoled, seduced, and pressured to finish his dissertation quickly. He is told to take a "manageable" topic, limit it rigorously, work efficiently—and produce something original and worthwhile!⁴

Such procedures might be dismissed as a mere waste of human resources, but there are more severe effects, as Wolff reveals in his perusal of the lives of dissertation writers: "No one will ever total up the marriages ruined, the children neglected, the anguish suffered, and the years of fruitful work blighted by the curse of the unfinished dissertations."⁵

Yet, while calling for the much-needed abolition of the Ph.D. in favor of professional certification for college teachers (differentiated from researchers), Wolff becomes entrapped in an elitist plan through which "promising" students receive priority rewards if they engage in "original research." Marc Green, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard, has pinpointed the consequences, in the midst of a glutted market, as pressuring students to secure such priorities to enhance their status and employability ratings.⁶

⁴ Robert Paul Wolff. *The Ideal of the University*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. pp. 26-27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶ Marc Green. "Review of *The Ideal of the University*." *Harvard Educational Review* 40 (2): 347-52; May 1970.

Green goes on to suggest that we broaden the range of definition for the dissertation, to include greater freedom of choice in research pursuits. His proposal might just as easily apply to Ed.D. projects, which have taken on all the traditions of the dissertation process in their efforts to become more "hard-nosed." Such an embellishment seems to necessitate finding another word for the degree. Better still, why not challenge the student to create his own style *in toto*? Ivan Illich, among others, has been warning us against merely redefining words and conditions to make them more tolerable.⁷ Clearly, there is a need for more action in graduate schools than the rehashing of terms implies.

Smith's suggestions seem to be the most liberating at this juncture, as he encourages educators to adopt multiple perspectives and to "glean insights and hypotheses from many sources." He finds value in the merger of substantive research with social interpretation: "Given the aridity of much of our research literature, I think there is a legitimate place for armchair speculation."⁸

There are other problems in the dissertation process that deserve attention insofar as they contribute to the perplexity of our contemporary society. For one, the security measures surrounding some government-sponsored research have confined knowledge of dissertation findings to the writer, his "doctor father," as the Germans call him, and sundry government bureaucrats. Such secretiveness, running counter to the tradition of open discussion in the university, illustrates the unfortunate willingness of academicians to do almost anything for the right price.

In another problem area, one might ponder the pettiness the student could encounter when he really does produce a creative piece of original work. One is reminded of C. Wright Mills' odyssey in search of a committee that could (or would) understand him. Few universities have not found ways to handle students who, like Mills, persist in

⁷ Ivan Illich. "Why We Must Abolish Schooling." *The New York Review of Books* 15 (1): 9-15; July 2, 1970.

⁸ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 7.



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developing ideas that do not "fit" the local criteria of rigorous research.

If doctoral students are to confront problems logically and express themselves intelligently, a modicum of human contact and personal reflection is likely to prove more nourishing than the dissertation or doctoral project. This is not to say that doctoral committees are inhumane, nor that empirical evaluations and conscientious efforts to understand the future through measuring effects in the past and present are to be regarded as evil. The point is that these can, and must, take place within an atmosphere of freedom if they are to make an impact on the individual. And such freedom is hard to find within the institutional press of most universities offering advanced work in education.

To foster this freedom for the learner should be the aim and process of all advanced studies, even if that means the occasional demise of the sacred "business of education"—dissertations and doctoral projects in-

cluded. The value of what one knows has been subverted too often in post-master's work by the false values of where and how one gained his knowledge.

We would be wiser to invest resources in opportunities for what Erik Erikson has called "psycho-social moratoria," time to delve into nonevaluative living-learning experiences, rather than to continue to throw good money after bad in mounds of computer time, doctoral committee meetings, and frequent humdrum coursework that has a principal function of insulating students and professors from the splendor and filth of the humanity around them. And as for those who love teaching, we might begin to understand that they are more likely than anyone to be able to teach others to love. We might begin to recognize by our deeds that their missions are infinitely more important than any publications, dissertations, or reports on projects that they are currently forced to grind out to retain what contact they have with their real rewards.

Ironically, the promise of the Ph.D. or the Ed.D. has been the kidnapper of dreams. Our choice, finally, is either to force payment of the inflated ransoms or to face directly some of the values we claim to hold about dignity, equality, and richness of experience. Recognition of mutual needs through individual differences and reward systems that respect the equality of differences would be more fitting foundations for educational environments designed to foster advanced professional growth.

To do less than examine critically what currently goes on in the name of doctoral research, whether it be a dissertation or doctoral project, would be to surrender to the idea of advanced study as transmission rather than transformation. This valuable time must become a springboard of consciousness, not continue to be a hurdle of distaste and mediocrity.

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