
3. external thesis advising

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Date: Tue Oct 2, 2012 7:14 am ((PDT))

Fellow faculty

I'd like to offer some thoughts a topic that has concerned me for some time: graduate students requesting external advice on thesis topics.

I,m sure many of you go through similar exchanges with students from other institutions, especially during the fall semester when they are developing thesis proposals. The email request typically goes something like this.

"I am a graduate student doing my thesis on X and would like your ideas on the topic and what you think I should read."

Invariably, the topic is massive in scale. A slight variation on this approach is to supply a lengthy set of interview questions, each of which raises an issue that is doctoral dissertation-worthy in scope and supported by its own floor of the library. There are a number of concerns raised by these inquiries.

First, it is in the DNA of graduate students to be unfocused and overly ambitious during the early stages of their research, but it is the responsibility of their supervising faculty to rein them in before passing them on to others. When I ask these students, "What is your research question?" few can answer. One student even suggested in a series of three increasingly persistent email messages that I should provide her with such a question. It is very difficult for an outsider to help in refining topical definitions without knowledge of the student or curriculum and it takes an enormous commitment of time if done well. This is the work of resident faculty.

Frequently in these exchanges, students reveal that they have little or no mentoring in their masters program; that they are left on their own to frame an investigation and to produce a demonstration project with only occasional critiques by someone on the faculty. This raises questions about whether graduate programs are adequately staffed, whether approved topics are within the realm of institutional expertise, and whether required coursework appropriately supports the kind of study associated with a terminal degree.

I am very enthusiastic about student access to a community of faculty scholars beyond the borders of their institutions, but standard content of any graduate program should be how and when to approach others with well-formed research questions. And schools must support graduate programs with the kind of supervisory resources needed for students to succeed in framing such questions.

Second, many of the requests for bibliographies are lazy shortcuts for doing the hard work of a literature search and review. External faculty would be much more responsive to the student who asks what they think of a particular text or expert,s opinion or about something the person they contact has written. But many of these inquiries feel like email as the next step after one failed Google search. Still others reflect no interviewer knowledge of the person being interviewed. I recently received a set of email questions about my

thoughts on the “crisis in industrial design practice,” despite my lack of training or practice in industrial design (I didn’t even know there was a crisis!)

There is no substitute for digging through the library to determine what literature is seminal and the depth of current writing on a topic. There are ways to go about this without reading every book on the shelf, cover to cover, and students need instruction in how to take that journey, not some stranger's pre-sorted list of books. Compiling a bibliography is a skill graduate students need to learn. External reviewers can certainly add to a bibliography, but they shouldn't be the starting point for that search. And almost every faculty member has some bio on his/her university website that should be required reading before the student contacts someone for an interview.

Third, an increasing number of thesis projects appear to be centered in areas outside of design in which students apparently have no expertise. So when a student says he/she intends to change teaching practices in K-12 schools, for example, I want to know what the student knows about public education and teacher preparation other than having been a child in the classroom a decade earlier. Design has a role to play in K-12 education, but the education system is a large and complicated beast, so the student needs to focus attention on something specific that can be mastered in a semester or two and about which he/she has some expert knowledge. One of the first things graduate students can do is map the system in which their topic is located and then work on a researchable topic that has design at the center of the investigation. In doing this, they will understand the scope of what they don't know.

Other students talk about proving things, but they rarely have the research methods or audience access necessary for work at the level of proof. I recently spoke with someone interested in doctoral study who wanted to continue her master's work based on a simple observation that people walked behind anyone in the street who is pointing a camera. In the student's mind, this phenomenon was enough to support a range of claims about design shaping human behavior.

Studio-based master's work, on the other hand, is typically speculative and explaining to a student the danger of unsupported research claims is the work of their resident faculty. In email exchanges of this kind, outsiders never know how far into the project the student has gone; who has encouraged them in the enterprise; and whether the outsider is challenging the basic assumptions of an investigation that is semesters long in the making. My perception is that we're approving topics that are better addressed by others and then leaving it to outsiders to challenge the viability of such studies or to build superficial understanding of topics for which students are academically unprepared.

Finally: the issue of surveys. Writing a good survey or conducting a revealing interview requires some skill in constructing questions, even when the author is well versed in the topic. The terminology must be clear and the questions focused. There has been a proliferation of student-authored surveys in recent years, but in many it is difficult to imagine what conclusions could be drawn from the ambiguous nature of the questions. And I worry about thesis investigations that are simply compilations of others, random opinions. It is not uncommon for student questions to arrive by email in the spring semester with a panicked letter that pleads for an immediate response because graduation depends on having processed the information in the coming weeks. Therefore, what meaningful synthesis can occur beyond tabulation?

I recently received such an inquiry from a student in design management who said his project was to “map the fringes of the field.” In that case, it would have helped to first see what he thought was core territory, with the idea that he would expand, contract, or reconfigure things on the basis of his discussions with people. But instead, it appeared that his representation would be based solely on what a few people had to say in response to four questions. One question included color theory, ergonomics, management structures, and Alvin Toffler in the same sentence.

Compare this inquiry to a wonderful study by Hugh Dubberly titled, *How do you design?*, in which carefully selected firms diagrammed their design process. In Hugh’s work (available on his website), it is possible to follow the trajectory of a field over time and to make process comparisons among engineering, interaction design, and strategy firms.

Should a master’s student have the insight to ask a single question that is this revealing and to select the right firms to interview? Probably not. But what Hugh’s work illustrates is that you learn a lot from one really good question and that analysis is about looking for pattern and detail, not just about compiling things.

I certainly don’t want to discourage students and their faculty from expanding learning resources beyond the boundaries of their home institutions and I take very seriously my responses to student inquiries. It is interesting to me to see what other schools are doing and to read the enthusiasm for design study in inquiries by students who are just beginning their research and professional careers. But just like any other learning experience, the task of engaging outsiders in the work of a thesis requires preparation and supervision. As we enter the time when students shape how they will spend their last important months in graduate school, it is important that we provide not only encouragement but mentoring.

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