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Maximizing the PhD Seminar Experience for Doctoral Students

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A PhD doctoral seminar is one of the most rewarding courses that a faculty member can teach. At the same time, it can also be one of the most challenging and beneficial courses for the students enrolled, if the class is approached in the correct manner. This article is written with dual perspectives and is aimed at not only offering course structuring suggestions for faculty members, but also for students' regarding their approach to the seminar and how they can maximize its potential benefits.



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Seminar Course Structure

Doctoral seminars are unique in the sense that they are not about conveying managerial or practical knowledge, but rather are provided as a sort of apprenticeship for the students where the faculty attempts to train them to conduct academic research. There are three key skills that all good researchers exhibit: the ability to think clearly and develop theory; the ability to utilize different research methodologies to investigate areas of interest; and the ability to effectively communicate his/her ideas. Doctoral seminars should be undertaken with the goal of starting the students on the path to becoming good academic researchers and should focus the activities so that these skills can be developed.

Additionally, the seminars should be structured so that the students are able to gain a basic understanding of the core concepts about the theory and research in their area of interest, be able to recognize current ideas and trends in the literature, gain an understanding of some of the key issues facing academic researchers in their domain area, and the ability to bridge theory and practice. These skills, exhibited by all good researchers, will help students survive their programs and prepare them for lives as academic researchers. Embed-

ded in these skills is the ability to write well, so having the students constantly practice their writing skills should also be built into the design of the seminar. Since we are training our doctoral students to become good academic researchers, as faculty we should approach each doctoral seminar as an opportunity for us to help our students develop skills in each of these three areas.

There are a number of different areas that can help build all these skills and at the same time help the students develop and improve their writing skills. First, having the students read on a weekly basis from 8-10 research papers, tied together around a core topic, will provide them with a good breadth of knowledge covering their domain of interest. The bulk of these papers should come in the form of book chapters or papers from top-tier research-oriented journals. These papers will exhibit either good or poor theoretical development and can serve as examples to the students of purely theoretical work. Methodological papers that utilize different research methodologies to investigate the topic of interest should also be included. Additionally, having each student bring in two extension articles every week enables the students to practice their research skills on a regular basis while investigating an area of interest to them that is related to the week's topic. These articles are chosen by the student as an extension of that week's readings. Generally, they should be more recent and should update the week's readings, either in the form of additional theoretical development or a methodological change (e.g., study replication). This provides the doctoral students with an opportunity to focus on what interests them about the week's topic, while forcing them to do a little research every week and keeping them abreast of the changes in the field.

Regarding the content of the readings, at least one week should be devoted to the

discussion of good theory and methodology. This is especially important during the first doctoral seminar. A number of excellent papers that discuss attributes of good theoretical work have appeared in the *Academy of Management Review* in 1989 (Whetten, 1989; Bacharach, 1989) and *Administrative Science Quarterly* in 1995 (Sutton and Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995; DiMaggio, 1995). These readings provide a great discussion and debate over what constitutes a good theory, and while there is no agreed-upon correct approach, they do get the students thinking about the necessary issues and can serve as a basis for discussion across many research domains. In addition to these readings, there should also be papers with similar discussions from the topical domain of the seminar and papers that discuss methodological issues and topics from that domain.

Additionally, having the students summarize the key areas of each reading in a page or two will force them to consolidate their thinking and, with practice, improve their ability to effectively communicate their ideas in a concise manner and further develop their writing skills. Semester-long research papers and final exams also help in developing these skills. Carl Zeithaml, the first professor I had in my doctoral studies, kept saying three words to us that form the core of academic research and also provide an additional area for the doctoral students to hone their skills: integrate, evaluate, and extend. Along with each week's readings, the students should prepare three 'statements.' The integration statement should integrate all the major themes from the week's readings as well as highlight the similarities and differences. It should not be another summary of the articles, but rather should be a fusion of the content of the readings for the week. The evaluation statement should provide a critical evaluation / interpretation of the week's readings. It should cover the strengths, weaknesses, and shortcomings of the readings and should convey ideas pertaining to the state of the literature on each topic. Again, this should not be another summary. Finally, the extension statement should be a natural extension of the evaluative statement and should describe potential avenues for future research. It should not be a summary of the author's suggestions for future research, but rather

should be based on the student's observations of what is missing from the current state of the research and combine it with his/ her own interests to make those suggestions. All these article summaries and statements should be pieced together by the student on a weekly basis and should be turned in to the professor as part of their overall final grade.

Turning to communication skills, the best way for the students to develop the ability to clearly and concisely communicate their ideas is through active participation. Participation should be strongly encouraged by making it a strong component of the student's final grade. Students should be told from the beginning that they could say almost anything they want (within reason) as long as they justify their statements based on the readings for the week. The faculty member should encourage healthy interaction among the class members, and students should feel free to voice differing opinions and engage in proper debate. However, personal attacks should be strongly discouraged. Toward the end of the semester, each student should be given the opportunity to lead a seminar session and decide its structure.

While these suggestions indicate a significant workload, there are steps that the students can take to improve their time management skills and better handle the workload of a doctoral seminar.

The Student Experience

When students first read a typical seminar syllabus, they are often immediately struck by fear and uncertainty. The sheer volume of work involved intimidates most students, and they are not sure how and whether they can handle the workload. The very beginning of the first seminar will be difficult, but over the course of that seminar and others that follow, the students can develop skills that make the workload much more manageable. This section will hopefully provide some general comments in that regard that will relate to just about any research-oriented doctoral seminar.

The first area a student should focus on is learning how to read. At the beginning of the semester, the students constantly complain that it takes two or more hours to read each article for the seminar. If a student has eight articles per seminar session, there simply is not enough time in the week for them to read every paper if it takes them over two hours per paper. When I tell the students that their time will be cut to 30 or 45 minutes maximum (and eventually as little as 15-20 minutes) per article, I am looked at with disbelief. The only way to achieve this reading efficiency is with practice, but also learning how to read correctly. Most students tend to get bogged down trying to read every last

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word and understand every last detail of every single article. The weekly discussions should bring out the salient areas in each article and, over time, the students should learn to focus on those key

areas in their reading. Additionally, when they read for the week, they should use a combination of reading for detail in the important areas and skimming over the less important ones. As the students' body of knowledge increases, they will begin to recognize more of the literature in each article and will only need to skim over those areas. By the end of the semester, much to their astonishment, most students should be able to see a significant improvement in their reading speed.

The second area a student needs to focus on is effective time management. When faced with a large number of readings for multiple seminars, students should not try to get it all done in a single day. Rather, do some work each day for each seminar—if there are 10 papers for a seminar, read two per day for five days. Then focus on spending the last two days creating the integrative, evaluative, and extension statements. Additionally, students should be strongly encouraged to summarize the articles as they are being read (i.e., read in front of the computer and jot down notes along the way) instead of having to go back and spend an additional hour doing it later. Even if these summaries are not

a part of the class, students should do them. They will help the student identify key areas in each article, and if done correctly, serve as an excellent preparation for comprehensive exams. My notebooks as a student were so complete that I did not need to go back to the original articles during my preparation for my comprehensive examinations.

The third area of focus is theory-building abilities. Even if it is not a required part of the class, each student should create the integration, evaluation, and extension statements for every topic in each of their seminars. This will be good practice for the student, as much of the academic research does those three things. It integrates the existing literature and critically analyzes it. Then it extends the literature and creates a new model or theory. While at times it may only engage in theory development, the research paper will often also investigate the model. A good way for the student to guide the integration statement is to attempt to develop a model that summarizes the relationships within and across the readings. Then fill in the model with the constructs and their papers. Models are not only good ways to organize one's thoughts, but they also tend to develop theory-building skills as one does more of it. In my case, the cornerstone of my comprehensive examination came from the integration, evaluation, and extension statements I had done for my seminars. Comprehensive examinations generally ask questions that are based in numerous literature streams, expecting students to effectively integrate work from those areas. By using the integration statements as the beginning of preparation for the exams, common themes within each stream have already been identified, and it becomes easier to link them to other streams in the same seminar or other seminar—it simply becomes a process of integrating the integration statements.

Fourth, if a seminar is not structured along the lines discussed in this paper, doctoral students can still take a number of steps to improve their skills and better prepare for life as a researcher. As early as possible in their first semester of study, students should ask professors to provide them with a reading list composed of im-

portant streams of literature and suggested articles in each stream. If there is no list already prepared, the students should attempt to develop a reading list on their own by talking with faculty and checking with colleagues at other schools / universities. That reading list should then be utilized as outlined above in this paper: article summaries for each article; gathering extension articles; and integration, evaluation, and extension statements for each stream. Over time, this reading list can be used by the student to develop a strong theoretical background, build research skills, and do some advanced preparation for the comprehensive exams. If this is undertaken in addition to other seminars, at least two articles per week should be read and summarized. Every month, a different stream will be complete and within 12 or 18 months, the students should be able to complete the list in addition to any existing coursework.

Finally, when approaching your research papers, go at them with the idea that you will turn it into a conference paper and eventually a published article. Don't pick a topic that will only serve as the paper for a seminar without any subsequent plans for it. Approach each seminar as a way to build up your research portfolio. Investigate topics that are of interest to you and work with the faculty member(s) to develop and execute your ideas. Your early seminars are great ways to garner a couple of journal hits before you come out on the market.

Summary

Overall, it is the responsibility of the faculty to provide structure and direction to the doctoral students. Through carefully prepared seminars, the faculty can utilize the time to mentor the students toward becoming a good academic researcher. Over the course of the semester, a seminar can be structured so that the faculty encourages the students to develop their ability to think clearly and build theory, be familiar with a number of research methodologies, and effectively communicate their ideas. At the same time, the students must realize that the seminars are not structured as a form of punishment, but rather

are carefully designed by faculty members so that certain research skills are honed over the course of the semester. It is incumbent on the doctoral students to put all their effort into completing the requirements of the seminar and use the time to improve their reading and time management skills, and build theory. These skills will only develop with time and repetition so it is imperative that, above all else, the workload of the seminar not be intimidating or frustrating . . . it does get a little easier to manage with time.

By taking some of the steps outlined here, students can make more productive use of their time and be able to manage it more effectively. A fringe benefit is that they can also complete some advance work on preparing for comprehensive exams and put some journal articles in the publication pipeline early on during their studies.

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