

The Tao of Thesis

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They say that the degree is only the beginning of one's academic career. Indeed, to borrow from Churchill, the degree is not the end; it is not even the beginning of the end. But it is the end of the beginning. If this is the case – the degree being the end of the beginning – what then is the thesis?



A student once approached a wise professor and asked, "How can I find a thesis topic – the question that I will research?" The professor replied, "It is very simple. Assemble all the knowledge in the world, and then find what is missing. But, look first within your embodied experience, for if it is not there, you will have a very long search ahead of you."



On searching through dusty tomes, amidst bound and worn theses, stacked in a long forgotten section of the university library, a thesis student found a note, written on now yellowed and brittle paper, in a hand cramped by hours of note-taking and transcribing: "If you do not know the thesis you want to create, you are destined to write your professor's thesis."

Know Yourself

Why are you doing this? Why subject yourself to the marathon (or half-marathon, in the case of a master's) that is the thesis degree? For whom (besides yourself and perhaps your mother) are you doing this work? To sustain yourself through the sometimes lonely years of work, periods of self-doubt and insecurity, and the occasional bouts of frustration and irrelevancy, you must first find the passion in your research — if even you are not interested in your topic, neither will be anyone else. Ideally, you will discover a question that is so compelling that it permeates your consciousness, and informs your entire experience of the world. You will view the world and your entire existence through research-coloured glasses. The thesis process becomes less an effort to find answers, and more a vehicle through which you can live your question. From Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*:

...I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be



given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.¹

Know, as well, your working style: the ways in which you assimilate knowledge and synthesize knowledge. Know your preferred methodologies and knowledge paradigms, and know why you have chosen them (and lacking understanding of other methodologies and paradigms may not be the most useful reason). Know your writing style, whether it tends more toward the formal and formulaic, or emerges from the narrative and creative. Know what styles, forms and voices appeal to you in the quest for knowledge and how that knowledge is presented; in other words, what sort of thesis speaks to you. The best way to accomplish this is to spend a day in the library reading theses, finding one or two that you love, and one or two that feel toxic to you². A reflection on your reactions to each type will guide you to *your* thesis style.

Know Your Mentor (Supervisor)

All of the above considerations not only apply equally to your supervisor, but are crucial to developing a relationship in which you both complement each other. Take a course from each of your potential supervisor candidates. Do a Graduate Assistantship or Research Assistantship with her/him. Understand their personal motivations in being a professor, and the metaphors they use to construct their identity in this role: Are they a teacher? A dominant master? Researcher? Sherpa? Holistic life guide? Perhaps more important, understand how they intend to construct *you* in your role as their supervisee. Are you a necessary evil or a necessary good?

Understanding the dynamics of how your relationship will be constructed over several years means having very frank conversations about your respective styles of managing time and projects, the process of conducting research, and the relative perceived validity of your preferred approaches to constructing knowledge; in other words, what are the knowledge paradigms that primarily ground and contextualize your worldview, and theirs? Your supervisor's nominal objective is to get you to complete the degree. Often, however, the supervisor may exert subtle influences that tend towards "creating you in their own image." This is especially true in a relationship in which the student/candidate is expected to defer to her "superior." In many ways, the advanced degree can be considered a "rite of passage" into the priesthood of the academy. A supervisor may want to re-enact their own initiation experience on you, for good or for ill.

¹Rilke, R.M. (2000). *Letters to a young poet*. (Burnham, J. M., trans.). Novato, CA: New World Library.

² With acknowledgement and thanks to Prof. Nancy Jackson of the department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at OISE, University of Toronto, for this inspirational and influential exercise.

In a practical sense, your conversation will include mutual expectations relative to your work schedule, and tracking and managing your project. How often will you meet? Under what circumstances? Who will initiate the meeting? Will your supervisor convene thesis group meetings for all of their supervisees, or is that left to the individuals? Does your supervisor even comprehend the concept of thesis group, or do they intend for you to become the solitary distance runner? Understand how your supervisor will read your work, and how (and how quickly) s/he will offer comments, critiques and suggestions. There is no one right or best way to approach these matters that will apply to everyone. Each person's engagement with their project and their process is individuated; the key is to ensure compatibility among these considerations between you and your supervisor.

When – not if – you disagree with each other, first consider whether you have not yet clearly articulated your ideas in a way that conveys your contextual assumptions. This mismatch of context and ground between thesis researcher and supervisor is a leading cause of disagreement and missed understanding. During the early stages of your process, as your ideas are beginning to emerge and evolve from the primordial swamps of knowledge and experience, the contextual ground that enables meaning- and sense-making often remains tacit and implicit. Once you have made both your ground, and that of your supervisor, explicit, re-engage the conversation to enable a new sense or expression of your ideas to emerge. Listen to yourself with your supervisor's ears. If an irreconcilable mismatch remains, particularly on fundamental issues, you will likely have great difficulty achieving a meeting of the minds; reconsider your path, and those who walk with you, carefully.

A supervisor will play two paradoxical roles: devil's advocate and your advocate. If your supervisor is not playing each of these roles at various times through your process, you are missing an important aspect of crucial guidance. The devil's advocate role goes beyond critiquing your work and offering suggestions for improvement. At critical points in your process, it is their responsibility to temper and anneal the knowledge you are creating in the fire of academic inquiry. Your unique construction of empirical reality – or at least the small part of it that you are incorporating into your thesis – must be challenged against that which is already known and practiced. Is what you are bringing forth truly new? Useful? Innovative? Clarifying? Consolidating? Does it unify, if unity and coherence are required? Does it explode long held, but no longer appropriate, assumptions about the nature of the world? In what ways are your proposed contributions to knowledge not obvious, once the academic obfuscation of thesis-speak is stripped away? In this role, your supervisor is not intending to stop you; s/he is intending to test your commitment to, and understanding of, your own work.

Equally, at appropriate times, s/he must be your advocate in front of the rest of your committee members, with the administration, and perhaps even with respect to opportunities that will further your aspirations. S/he will recommend readings and resources, some of which may be useful, and others that may be red herrings. Inevitably, some of these must be sliced and served up as an appetizer for the feast of

knowledge that comprises the heart of your thesis. (Your supervisor's red herrings are often more palatable when served with onions and a wine marinade.)

Above all, when it comes to the content and subject matter of your thesis, remember this: to a greater or lesser extent, you are seeking and creating new knowledge, a sense of the world that did not exist before you created it. Although at this critical time in your career, you may not be the subject matter expert in the field (although you may well be that, depending on life circumstances), and you may not be an expert in the particular research methodologies (ditto, especially if you have theorized and created a composite methodology). Nevertheless, you are, or will become, by definition, the content expert on your topic. For this undertaking to be successful, your supervisor must therefore be secure in their own knowledge, expertise, and capabilities, and in themselves.

Know Your Committee

Ideally, each member of your thesis committee will fill a unique, and as-mutually-exclusive-as-possible, role. The intent is for each member to provide something that you need, that the others cannot, even though collectively, they will be able to offer many overlapping skills, experiences and wisdom. Consider: Which member(s) can provide content expertise across the broad topic area? Who among the committee is particularly skilled in the methodology and method you will be using? Who will provide credibility to your enterprise, especially if you will employ non-traditional (relative to the field or discipline) methods and approaches? If you are drawing from cultures, traditions, or standpoints different from those in which you have been acculturated, which committee member will "keep you honest" and provide the requisite critical eye? Who might be able to provide necessary connections for your current and future endeavours and aspirations?

Create a potential committee member candidates list, being explicit about what qualities each one brings to your quest. Vet the list with your supervisor, as the most important criterion for the committee is compatibility among the members. Prior successful committee experience together is a strong indication for your success. No matter how attractive a potential member might be, if your supervisor is uncomfortable with that person, their inclusion on your committee will add a significant level of complication that you will have to manage on top of your project. Interview the candidates on your short list to ensure their compatibility, now that you have come to know yourself. Equally important is to discover how they will individually and personally benefit from participating with you and the other members on your quest. Through this process, your intention is to know your candidates sufficiently well that accepting your invitation to join your committee becomes perfectly logical, perfectly natural, and perfectly appealing.

Break bread with your committee at your first meeting, which is often the proposal review meeting. There are few things that create a human connection better than sharing even a simple meal. After all, this pursuit is all about understanding ourselves and our place in, and relationship to, the world that we seek to explore.