Preparing doctoral candidates for the viva: issues for students and supervisors

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ABSTRACT

The PhD viva has been described as mysterious (Burnham, 1994; Morley et al, 2002), unpredictable (Rugg and Petre, 2004) and potentially fearful for students (Delamont et al, 2004), with its form and duration a function of the predilections of individual examiners as well as a function of differences across disciplines. Despite its myriad manifestations the PhD viva voce (live voice), as oral examination of the doctoral thesis, constitutes the final 'test' of the PhD endeavour. In the UK this is a private event, though in some countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands, for example, the viva is conducted in a public arena (Delamont et al, 2004). Although there is no standard or prescribed format, students across all disciplines can expect to defend their thesis with this involving questioning, clarification and discussion of key elements. This critical commentary discusses a number of issues that inform the preparation of students focusing on the role of the internal and external examiner, the viva voce process, guidance for students and some practical suggestions for supervisors and students, particularly the value of full role-play in building students' confidence. The extent to which the doctoral viva, in its current 'secret' form, can be seen as a fully accountable and independently rigorous process is taken up in the conclusion that highlights the phenomenon of 'cosy' reciprocal examining arrangements, the spectre of litigation when things go wrong and the need to consider a fundamental review of both the purpose and conduct of the viva.

Key words: doctoral study; oral examination; thesis defence; viva

Introduction

The submission of the written doctoral thesis, usually after the preparation of several drafts, is a huge milestone in the process of achieving a PhD and is often experienced by students as an emotional and practical endpoint in their studies (Herman, 2010). It is, however, only one endpoint in the process with the other final stage being the viva that has the purpose of examining the student at their best (Potter, 2006). Given the enormity of the task of completing the written thesis, some might ask why students have to be put through the ritual of an oral examination that is often stressful and difficult to prepare for. Potter (2006) identifies three critical functions of the viva. The first is to check that the thesis is really the candidate's own work with questions and discussion designed to test authenticity. The second function is aimed at testing the ability of the student to defend their work with being 'articulate under stress' (Morley et al, 2003: 65) seen as an important credential of being a professional researcher. The third function relates to opportunities for students to clarify aspects of process and clear up any misunderstandings. Potter (2006) argues that this third function contributes to a fair assessment of the thesis that, if only marked as a written piece of work, might be subject to ambiguity or genuine differences in opinion. However, the balance between the assessment of the text and performance at the viva is ill defined and generally unclear (Morley et al, 2003: 66) such that in some institutions, it is possible to submit an adequate thesis but fail the PhD based on an unsatisfactory viva. Similarly, candidates may be able to give a robust oral defence of an unsatisfactory thesis and be given the award. Mullins and Kiley (2002: 384) make the further point that current practice does not always make clear whether it is the thesis (as a complete and comprehensive document) or the student (as an apprentice researcher) that is being examined at the viva, with some differences discernible across disciplines. With such uncertainty, Tinkler and Jackson (2002) argue that getting students ready for the viva is like preparing 'in the dark'.

The elements of transparent rigour and consistency are not addressed by Potter (2006) whose ideas centre on managing the process as it currently stands, rather than questioning its validity as a tool for assessing academic quality given that the process is both inconsistent and cloaked in secrecy. The three functions of the viva identified by Potter (2006) point to the importance of careful preparation on the part of students in recognition of the fact that submission of the written thesis alone does not mean that they can assume they are 'home and dry'. So, without a standard format to follow and variability in duration, development of effective strategies aimed at a positive outcome requires judicious attention. Drawing on doctoral supervision experience in the social and behavioural sciences, this commentary discusses a number of strategies that can usefully contribute to making the viva a more comfortable experience. A number of factors are relevant, with initial discussion focusing on the role and selection of examiners.

Role and selection of the internal and external examiner

Clarity for students about the respective roles of the examiners is essential in guiding preparation for the viva and care over their selection is an initial and critical aspect of the process (Kiley, 2009). Their selection involves obvious professional and academic considerations but, as Kiley (2009) argues, the less obvious but potentially more critical personality issues are more difficult to determine. Developing the concept of 'duty of care', Kiley (2009: 889) suggests that supervisors have a responsibility when selecting examiners to protect their doctoral students from the 'bad and the mad', being sure as far as is possible, to identify those 'experts' who will give the student a fair hearing whilst maintaining high standards of integrity. For example, having an examiner who enjoys belittling others is the last thing a student needs. Protecting candidates from harsh or unfair treatment may involve supervisors entering into 'friendly' or 'cosy' (and sometimes reciprocal) arrangements with potential external and internal examiners to both ease the process and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. The selection of examiners via existing collegiate networks does raise questions about the integrity of vivas as a form of independent academic process.

Potter (2006) discusses the tendency for some people to think that only a 'big name' external examiner would be appropriate but argues that 'big names' are not necessarily good examiners and may not always have realistic expectations of what is achievable in a PhD. Taylor and Beasley (2005), drawing on the ideas of Mullins and Kiley (2002), make the valuable point that examiners who have minimal or no prior experience of the process and the appropriate standards to be applied (and by implication are not 'big names' in the field), may be too tough in their efforts to be rigorous. This, Partington et al (1993) argue, can lead to bad practice on the part of an examiner who may behave as inquisitor, firing off questions and even interrupting answers, creating an atmosphere of confrontation and hostility. Whilst it is reasonable to assume that most theses will have questionable elements and that examiners should test both a student's mastery of the field and authenticity of the work presented, an overly critical approach can undermine the concept of fairness. As a concluding point on the issue of examiner selection, the 'horses for courses' approach advocated by Taylor and Beasley (2005: 185) suggests that the appropriateness of the examiners is influenced as much by the thesis and the candidate, as it is by other criteria. Choosing the 'right' examiners will strongly influence both process and outcome and merits closer attention in the literature. That said, discussion now turns to consider their respective roles.

Current arrangements in the UK for formal assessment of the doctorate involve the selection of both an external and internal examiner, both independent of the student. This was not always the case as noted by David (2010) who describes an earlier process entailing examination by an external expert together with the candidate's supervisor in a role similar to that of an internal examiner. The external examiner will be chosen for their expertise in the area, will be from outside the

'home' institution of the student and should have no conflict of interest in relation to the thesis under scrutiny. Their job is to lead the viva voce examination and to judge whether the work is of the correct standard in relation to standards across other institutions and it is they, rather than the internal examiner, who will be 'the arbiter of whether a student's submission earns the research degree for which it is entered' (Joyner, 2003: 123). Their power position in the process is, thus, one of pre-eminence. The internal examiner will be drawn from the candidate's institution though not necessarily from the same faculty as that of the candidate. Their nomination may draw on either or both methodological or subject expertise and they should not have had any involvement with the study. Their role is to come to a view whether the work meets the standard that would normally be expected of a student in that institution submitting for that degree. Also, in the absence of an independent chair, the internal examiner would be expected to facilitate the administrative and practical arrangements for the viva.

Although both examiners contribute in similar ways to the assessment of the thesis, there are subtle differences in the influence of each on the process and, in my experience, students are not always made aware of these subtleties that can impact on both the conduct of the viva and its outcome. This points to the requirement on the part of supervisors to make candidates fully informed about the structural elements of the viva that includes the power dynamics vis a vis the internal and external examiners.

The viva process

Students understandably want to be clear about what they can expect to undergo (and, therefore, prepare for) in the viva. In my experience, questions about the likely form and duration of the viva can come quite early on in the PhD endeavour. Given some of the viva 'horror stories' circulating within the academic community (Rugg and Petre, 2004), these queries, though not helpful in terms of maintaining focus, are perhaps not surprising with some students experiencing the prospect of the viva as a dark cloud over their studies. Usually the viva will last from one to three hours with its key component the questioning of the candidate by the examiners. In recent years there has developed in some institutions the practice of setting up a panel comprising the internal examiner, the external examiner and an independent chair to oversee the proceedings (Wellington, 2010). The role of the chair is to make introductions, settle the candidate and to generally ensure fairness of conduct throughout the process. Although not an active participant in the process, one of the candidate's supervisors, with the agreement of the candidate, can be present as a silent witness and is most often seated behind the candidate and is encouraged to take notes. However, each academic institution will have its own set of guidelines about the viva examination process, and the protocols regarding the attendance of one or more supervisors can vary. It, therefore, is wise to consult the guidelines before embarking on plans to set up a viva, thus taking care not to mislead the candidate. In my experience the supportive presence of a supervisor has both psychological and practical elements and can help moderate the mood of what some students will perceive as a 'gladiatorial' contest. This arrangement, as the dominant form in the UK, differs from practice elsewhere in Europe where supervisors are expected to take full part in the oral examination of candidates (Taylor and Beasley, 2005).

The viva is an opportunity for a range of exploratory activities; it is an opportunity for examiners to test the knowledge of the student and verify the authenticity of the thesis. The viva is also an opportunity for examiners to make a conclusive assessment of the student's work and is particularly so when the thesis is deemed to be borderline. In these circumstances the viva can be conceptualised as a rigorous intellectual exchange designed to offer the student an opportunity to expand on ideas and clarify areas of concern and, by its essence, is inquisitorial in nature (Trafford, 2003). The viva is thus framed by the initial assessment of the thesis by both examiners who will have submitted their independent and

uncorroborated reports to the university in advance of the viva examination. Views about the quality of the thesis are subsequently shared between examiners, and this discussion takes place prior to the viva, either on the day before or on the day of the viva.

Whilst the relative merits of the thesis will determine the detail, tone and duration of the viva, central to the process is the chance for candidates to 'tell the story' of their research and a general question that enables the candidate to start the 'telling' is often the way viva examinations begin. Wellington (2010) argues that giving students this opportunity to demonstrate enthusiasm and passion for their topic at the start of the viva helps build their confidence and settle their nerves, this as acknowledgement of the inherently stressful nature of the process (see also Rugg and Petre, 2004).

The way that the viva develops thereafter, however, is not bound by any 'rules of engagement' and as both Johnston (1997) and Taylor and Beasley (2005: 193) note, examiners without any formal training or induction in how to conduct the oral examination can have free reign over the process that Morley et al (2002) argue has the potential for abuse and irregularity. Whilst the evidence of abuse is predominantly anecdotal (Burnham, 1994), some research has identified a number of negative behaviours on the part of examiners. Tinkler and Jackson (2000) point to aggression, sarcasm and hostility, whilst Morley et al (2003) characterise some abuse in this context taking the form of belittling tactics that may humiliate the student together with discriminatory behaviour on the grounds of sex and race as well as other stereotyping. One example cited by Leonard (2001) to illustrate this point is the ridiculing of feminist scholarship by unsympathetic or ideologically opposed examiners that highlights the often unspoken but critical 'subterranean agendas of values and ideologies in doctoral assessment' (Morley et al, 2002: 268). Powell and McCauley (2002) suggest that the potential for abuse in the oral examination process is reduced where this is conducted in a public forum with open scrutiny of proceedings. In the UK, recognition of variable practices that might include harsh or unfair treatment of the candidate, have resulted in the recent introduction in some institutions of an independent and impartial chair to guide and manage the deliberations (as noted above). Anecdotally, within my own institution this practice has been generally welcomed and is seen as contributing to 'fair play'.

Tips for students

As doctoral viva examinations have been shown to be so variable in their form and conduct (Morley et al, 2002), it is difficult to offer students detailed and comprehensive guidance about how best to prepare. Also, of course, students are highly individual with each having their preferred ways of approaching the preparation task. However, the shape and structure of the thesis provides useful clues about likely areas of questioning, with Wellington (2010) characterising its key elements as a series of threads. His critique is helpful in highlighting the doctoral endeavour as a collection of threads or connections– practical and personal, theoretical, methodological, ethical and analytical. The issue of originality is also relevant and the extent to which a thesis contributes new knowledge may be the subject of debate between examiners and within the examination itself (Mullins and Kiley, 2002).

As there are usually at least six to eight weeks between the submission of the written thesis and the day of the viva (and often, in my experience, it may be much longer) the first practical tip to the student is to go back and read the thesis with the aim of what Potter (2006: 257) terms as 'consciously getting back up to speed' with its contents. He suggests that the creation of a 'road map' of the thesis can be useful as it ensures that the student knows what they have written. Detailed familiarisation with the thesis may seem a very obvious starting point but I can recall two occasions when colleagues, in the role of PhD examiners, reported that it was clear that in the case of both students, they had not read or were not

thoroughly familiar with the thesis content. Re-familiarisation with the context, research questions, literature, key findings and the conclusion should, therefore, be a primary aim of the 'read-through', as without this, candidates are unlikely to be able to offer an adequate defence of their work. Hartley and Jory (2000) develop this point arguing that their research findings suggest that 'knowing your thesis inside out' is a vital component of effective preparation.

A second 'targeted' read of the thesis should focus on areas of potential debate particularly where these relate to the literature or method. Students who can discuss with clarity and confidence why they used the methods they did, why alternatives were rejected and what practical and ethical challenges they encountered, will impress examiners. Where, with the benefit of hindsight, a student identifies strengths and weaknesses that may not have been evident amidst the fraught final writing up stages, making a note of these and being prepared to acknowledge this in the viva, contributes to an awareness of areas for improvement. A sound understanding of 'positioning' that is multi-dimensional is also important, particularly in relation to the theoretical framework(s) chosen and how this has informed the research questions. In my own PhD undertaken many years ago, I challenged a prominent social theorist about her understanding of the cause of women's structural position in the contemporary labour market. Findings from my research enabled me to do this and I was very confident that I could defend the claims made, even though my supervisor remained nervous to the end about my position. As I knew she would, once the initial introductory/general questions were over, the external examiner challenged me to account for what she saw as 'risky but brave' (exact words) interpretations of my data. I was ready and because of careful preparation was able to enjoy the opportunity of discussing my ideas that had clearly engaged and stimulated the examiners.

One of the criteria for the award of a doctoral degree is the contribution the thesis makes to knowledge that involves some element of originality, whether this be theoretical or methodological, or both. Although there is some debate about the usefulness of 'encouraging candidates to publish as they go' (Taylor and Beasley, 2005: 130), particularly in respect of part-time doctoral students (Watts, 2010), this practice does confirm contribution to knowledge that Thomson and Walker (2010: 295) frame as being often multi-faceted and overlapping. Thus, where a candidate has some publications, particularly in peer-reviewed journals, it is difficult for the examiners not to pass the candidate. Taylor and Beasley (2005) note that in some countries such as those in Scandinavia, for example, there is a requirement that all or part of the materials presented for doctoral examination have previously been published. Nevertheless, as Rugg and Petre (2004) point out, when work involves new discovery there remains uncertainty and no absolute right answer, so being clear about issues such as generalisability of findings, limitations of the study and areas for further research will demonstrate a reflexive approach that is held in high regard by examiners.

Awareness by the candidate of other work being undertaken in the field that may have some bearing on the thesis, is highlighted by Phillips and Pugh (2000) as being important in contributing to the candidate's credibility as a member of the academic community. If the work relates to a current controversy or debate, examiners are likely to ask questions to address the issue and this can be experienced by the student as a 'grilling'. Potter (2006: 255) recounts how some students, having been 'grilled', emerged expecting the worst, only to be warmly congratulated at the end, passing with very minor corrections.

The value of the 'trial-run'

As the term 'viva voce' (live voice) suggests, the oral interrogation of the doctoral thesis is very much a live process and many doctoral candidates will have had some experience of oral examination as part of either or both earlier undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (Taylor and Beasley, 2005; Potter, 2006). The viva

process is informed by the nature of the physical setting and the structural dynamics as much as it is by the people involved and the level of the assessment task. The extent to which a 'mock' viva can positively contribute towards the preparation of students for the 'real thing' has begun to be discussed in the literature. Delamont et al (2004) and Hartley and Fox (2004) argue for the significant benefits to students of such preparatory activity, and my practice with students supports this approach. Hartley and Fox's (2004) research found that although students were frequently asked different questions in the mock and the real viva, the mock viva was considered useful by students as it allowed them to experience 'typical' viva arrangements and practice debating their work. However, as Potter (2006) points out, it requires a lot of effort to set up a 'mock' viva and, if it is to be beneficial, it must be taken seriously and enacted in a sufficiently searching way.

It may not always be possible, but arranging for a 'mock' viva in the setting in which the 'real' one will take place is helpful to students to take account of the affective domain that in this case refers to the emotional dimension of candidates' feelings and anticipation (Wellington, 2010). For one of my students, my co-supervisor and I enacted a full role-play to replicate what we saw as the likely formalities on the day. We discussed the thesis and highlighted areas for discussion and divided up the questioning between us as is usual with examiners. Trafford (2003) terms this the 'prelude' phase of the viva that frames the academic relationship between examiners. We arranged the room and ourselves appropriately before the student entered the room. We shook hands with her, introduced ourselves and our roles (as though we had not met her before), and began the questioning which continued for nearly two hours. At no point did we relent from the role-play scenario so that we could be confident that the student had a good sense of what the 'real' viva might be like. The attempt to try and simulate 'real on the day conditions' also extended to the way we dressed with us, as role-play examiners, dressed fairly formally, as was the student. Potter (2006) comments that smart but comfortable clothes help students convey a sense of being competent and well-prepared candidates.

This 'trial-run' was appreciated by the student who found it very challenging but instrumental in highlighting areas where she needed to focus more strongly and as Murray (1997: 10) puts it, 'be ready to engage the brain'. So although the 'trial-run' cannot fully prepare or protect the candidate from what Wellington (2010b: 138) terms as 'unpredictable moments', it can help to build the student's confidence about the dynamics and challenges of the process. This full role-play extends the concept of the 'mock' viva to develop a deeper awareness on the part of the student about the lived experience of the viva. Delamont et al (2004) make the important point that, in the UK context, this 'trial-run' may be especially useful for students whose first language is not English.

Discussion and conclusion

Although in recent times the practice has started to develop of examiners informing students at the start of the viva of the outcome of their thesis submission, this is still relatively rare and most students can expect to have to engage with examiners' questions in defence of their work as part of the assessment process. The importance of examiners gathering sufficient relevant oral evidence to enable them to judge the worth and authenticity of the thesis is central to this process and this should not be underestimated. Because the huge and emotionally laden endeavour of completing the written thesis to a satisfactory standard has been the focus of both student and supervisor over a long period, post submission, students may move into a 'post PhD world' that Phillips and Pugh (2000: 83) characterise as euphoria, with a consequent need to be re-motivated to prepare for the viva as the final hurdle. This short-term goal is in contrast to the long-term and often grinding nature of the pre-submission years and can be difficult to adjust to.

Drawing out some key concerns about the process and experience of the oral doctoral examination, this commentary has critically discussed a number of variable elements of the viva that Tinkler and Jackson (2000) characterise as lacking in transparency. Also of potential concern, given the confidential and closed viva process, is that there is no moderation of doctoral results, with no peer review or external examination function as is the case for taught undergraduate and postgraduate awards. That there can be no appeal of the outcome by a student on the grounds of academic judgement, but only on the basis of process, suggests that the doctoral candidate, as 'customer' in a developing market culture for education (Morley et al, 2003), may invoke their consumer rights to press for clearer criteria of outcomes and for visibility and transparency of process to ensure fairness and consistency. The extent to which fear of appeals and litigation associated with the 'customer' status of the student has resulted in an increase in 'cosy' arrangements between supervisor(s) and a colleague in another institution to act as external examiner, guaranteed not to 'rock the boat' (as discussed above), calls into question whether the viva, in the absence of rigour, has become a token formality with a consequent devaluing of the doctoral degree.

This suggests the need for a radical review of doctoral education assessment across disciplinary boundaries to consider systematic and universally agreed criteria and scrutiny procedures to quality assure the award. For example, measures such as the convening of a public panel for the viva on the continental model are worthy of consideration, with this open forum removing the secrecy element from the process. With an increase in work-based, professional and 'taught' doctorates (Bourner et al, 2001), a further aim of such a review would be to develop standardised procedures across disciplines and institutions to 'benchmark' standards in both the written and oral assessment components. Also, the establishment of codes of practice concerning examiner selection that, for example, might move towards the appointment of anonymous reviewers and the mandatory nomination of an independent chair for the viva, might increase confidence in the integrity of the doctoral assessment process. Whilst supervisors may perceive such policies as a threat to their academic autonomy and thus might resist their implementation, they may help to positively transform the current disparities through which inequalities and inconsistencies are maintained.

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