



Debriefing: An Essential Final Step in Doctoral Education

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The value of debriefing has never been lost on the business or the military community, both elements quite expert in engaging in the art of inquiry regarding all details relevant to a completed mission. Whether it is a business venture or a military strategic initiative, nothing better serves those vested in the process than a focused, in-depth conversation about goals and objectives, timetables, decision-making practices, communication efforts, and the protocols that figure necessarily into engagement. Strategists learn invaluable lessons through the sheer acts of reflection and conversation, and their insights better inform the process for the next go-round, utilize resources and avoid waste, and ensure a more productive, efficient process upon which they can continue to improve.

Unfortunately, graduate education does not formally engage in such a review of its dissertation or theses processes; hence, the opportunity for an exchange of insights and ideas is frequently lost as busy dissertation advisors and committee members move on to meet the demands of new advisees. Similarly, recent graduates, harried as they are, escape to the tasks of finding jobs, carving journal articles out of their dissertations, and rediscovering their spouses and significant others. Understandably enervated by their respective ordeals, faculty members and graduates alike often do not discuss what happened or what did not happen during their time together and therefore miss out on a rare opportunity to engage in productive intercourse.

Not long ago, a doctoral graduate came into my office terribly upset by a series of unpleasant experiences that had been brewing and had finally erupted in an icy standoff with her committee members, just weeks prior to her dissertation defense. It seemed that she and her committee were at odds regarding a content issue, and the bridge back to sustaining a good working relationship appeared to have been burned on both sides. Clearly, an impasse seemed imminent, but when the realization dawned on her that there was more to lose than gain by holding to her objections, she reconsidered and graduated. Nevertheless, what brought her to my office was a lingering sense that the communication process had utterly failed, and long before the differing opinions on content had arisen. Disconcerted by what had transpired, she had arrived

at my doorstep, after the fact, to sort out the events that led up to the schism.

Another soon-to-be doctoral graduate dropped off the final copy of his dissertation to the graduate college and came by my office to visit. A conversation with him soon revealed that he enjoyed a positive dissertation experience, engaged productively with his committee, and generally experienced a rewarding journey to the Ph.D. Admittedly, he felt “a little down” after exerting the substantial investment in time and energy that the doctorate exacts, and he seemed concerned about filling the void that confronted him. Although the vacation his spouse suggested seemed welcome, he felt conflicted by thoughts that he should be publishing instead of boating in South Haven.

In both instances, it might appear that these students would have benefited by speaking with a psychologist or a counselor, and perhaps they would. In all reality, however, a debriefing with their committee members would serve them better. The ability to objectively communicate observations and perceptions is an invaluable tool through which faculty and students enlighten each other by focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of their interactions and the processes that bound them together throughout the advising experience.

Dissertation advisors and committee members need to hear about the value of their sustained commitment to students and the attainment of their degrees. Wouldn't the second student's committee be gratified to know that their diligent oversight of the complicated dissertation process made a difference in the life of their advisee? As well, had they been aware of that student's emotional let down after the completion of his doctoral degree, a common enough phenomenon frequently noted by psychologists, perhaps they could have forestalled some of those negative effects by normalizing the possibility that students sometimes do indeed experience a temporary sense of “lost-ness” after a great accomplishment.

Conversely, overfilled faculty e-mail accounts and voice mailboxes, broken or missed appointments, and protracted turnaround times for chapters, spelled apathy to the first student. She felt absolutely dependent on maintaining her committee's good will for

the successful completion of the degree, but did not express her mounting discontent in a forthright manner. Faculty members also need to hear this.

Faculty also can play a critical role in helping students to recognize their (the students') resistance at each step of the editing process, as well as the penchant for refusing to take constructive criticism with grace. Such circumstances frustrated the good will of the first student's committee, and she should have been made aware of her role in cultivating that frustration—if not during those interactions, then surely after.

Expectations about what will occur in the dissertation process—or any process for that matter—often lead to an imbalance because unvoiced expectations are frequently dashed. It is far better to articulate those expectations up front in the process and to engage in what I call the rules of engagement. Then everyone understands what will happen and what will not happen. After the process is completed, it is always advisable to engage in a debriefing during which committee members and their advisee reflect back on the process and collaboratively engage in a critical review where advisors and advisees benefit through continuous process improvement.

The following steps are for students and dissertation committee members, as well as professional facilitators in the academic setting:

- *Schedule a debriefing.* Prior to the student's graduation, ask for a meeting during which the student and the dissertation advisor and committee members come together to critically review the entire dissertation process and their joint and individual roles in that process. Reserve a quiet room for this meeting and provide some light refreshments. Make certain that the meeting will not be interrupted by other duties or obligations. Such approaches ensure more of a celebratory tone and indeed serve to bring closure to a long and demanding process. As well, the meeting itself reinforces best practices and affirms the value of the collaborative process. Any member of the committee or even the student may conduct the meeting; however, a professional facilitator or an administrator may offer a skilled, objective approach.
- *Prepare for the meeting.* To prepare for the meeting, consider all factors that worked to make the engagement rewarding, successful, and productive, and then write them down. By the same token,

consider those elements that may have protracted or confused the process and note them. These could include:

- Quality and level of communication among and between committee members and the student.
- Expectations of the committee regarding editorial/conceptual revision of chapters.
- Turnaround time to receive and send chapters.
- Frequency, productivity, and outcome of meetings.
- Availability/accessibility of the committee to the student.
- Level and quality of mentoring support.
- Level and quality of interaction guiding research methodology and statistical computation.
- The committee's level of interest and commitment to the completion of the project.
- The degree to which the student was prepared for the dissertation defense.
- The degree to which the student complied with the committee's expectations and directives.
- The level of support and interaction of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), if research involved human subjects.
- The degree to which the graduate college or school facilitated the student's trajectory through the degree process.

Questions along these lines, for example, help secure a more complete appreciation for the intricacies of a highly complicated process that can easily fall prey to misunderstanding on the parts of both advisors and advisees.

- *Communicate positive and negative variables as well as outcomes.* Everyone present at the meeting should take careful notes, discussing the strengths and the shortcomings of the process. Begin with the positive elements and make clear responsive statements that indicate an appreciation for what worked well and then tell why. Include a results section that shows the outcome of these positive features upon the dissertation. Committee members also should acknowledge each other's contributions in this process; after all, it is likely that they will encounter each other on yet another dissertation committee in the future and should therefore help to establish or reaffirm solid working relationships to benefit

future students. Students should acknowledge the contributions of individual committee members, who also should acknowledge the student's positive involvement. In addition, factors that did not lend positively to the process should also be discussed along with the outcomes generated by these negative elements. Again, include a corresponding results section that indicates the negative impact upon the dissertation process. Strategies to ameliorate the negative variables help to provide new plans of action for the future. For example, a student who experienced delays because she ignored the committee's directions for submitting a Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) protocol, obligatory for any researcher working with human beings, needs to understand that she is accountable. In addition, a student who is clearly advised about the manner of submitting revised chapters to the committee and who then does not comply with those directives, is responsible for the resulting outcome.

- *Remain calm and quiet.* It is far more difficult to listen to a list of shortcomings, rather than a litany of hosannas. Remain calm and objective, and try to avoid personalizing negative statements you may hear. Rising above the situation to examine process and actions, rather than the individuals who are the doers of those processes and actions, actually serves to depersonalize the debriefing and keep everyone focused on process improvement, rather than improvement of particular individuals—always a negative in itself. That part will unfold as individuals self-reflect.
- *Mirror back responses.* It is important to affirm that participants in the debriefing actually listen to each other and respond to each other. One way to do this is by mirroring back responses. An advisor could say, for example, “Do I understand correctly that when I missed our scheduled meeting you felt

that I didn't care about you or your dissertation?” or a student could say to a committee member, “When you asked me to revise a section of my dissertation and found that I hadn't, you felt that I had just wasted your valuable time and didn't care about improving the quality of my work.” Such initiatives affirm that good communication is taking place and that people are really interested in seeking resolution to issues that complicate the process. The opportunity to clarify these issues, offer an explanation, or simply acknowledge the fact and then move forward positively reinforces the process. Also, expressing gratitude to each other for seemingly insignificant kindnesses reinforces the spiritual nature of individuals bound to each other through commitment. A committee member could admit, “I didn't realize that my weekly phone calls and e-mails meant so much to you. I will keep that in mind as I work with other students.”

Advisors and advisees alike may be surprised by what they can learn and by what they can teach. Benefits extend beyond the individuals and coalesce as one of many evolving best practices in graduate education.

Note: Part of this article appeared in June 2006 on the Web site for the Graduate Center for Research and Retention at WMU in the section titled, “Note From the Director.”



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