

WHAT I LEARNED (AND RELEARNED) IN DISSERTATION LAND

INTRODUCTION

The need for Mutual Understanding has never been so evident to us as it has been during the months, days, and, hours of pounding away at a doctoral dissertation. Those who have experienced it have described the process of completing a dissertation as a grueling, demanding, steep slope to climb. The months, or perhaps years, it takes to climb to "summit doctorate" are in fact grueling and demanding. Over the eight months or so of early doctoral work, including planning and preparing the all-important proposal, we learned that tireless persistence is the most important quality needed. Over the nearly-a-year from the proposal defense to the dissertation defense, we learned that once you've invested time and effort designing exactly what you're going to do and exactly how you're going to do it, completing the planned work can be much less taxing than planning the work out of dust in the first place. And again, we learned that dogged persistence is the most important quality to maintain.

One of the most profound things learned is that, while the dissertation process is a solitary adventure (and it is an adventure), it is not accomplished alone. This paper is a compilation of some of the rest of the lessons learned: the poignant, humorous, and surprising lessons alike. Our belief is that they will be useful for those contemplating entering a doctoral program, those about to embark on the dissertation, those in the midst of completing a dissertation, and the family members and friends of the seemingly alien creature--the doctoral candidate who is working (or has worked) to climb a steep and sometimes dangerous slope.

To the doctoral candidate: if this work makes your climb a bit more bearable and perhaps a little sweeter, it will have been worthwhile.

To the Ph.D.s who have already lived their doctoral-earning experiences: if this collection enables you to look back upon the positive aspects of your experience (even if some experiences were bitter), it will have been worthwhile.

To the family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors of the doctoral candidate: if the material contained in these pages enhances your understanding and support of the doctoral candidate's crazed, obsessed, and other (seemingly extreme) behaviors, it certainly will have been worthwhile.

And, if in some sense those living on the dissertation world (yes, you're on a separate planet for a time), and those living on the Earth can attain a small degree of tolerance and understanding for each's respective "worlds," that will be icing on the doctoral cake.

WHAT I LEARNED (AND RELEARNED) IN DISSERTATION LAND

I have learned that if you have absolutely no idea what you're doing, or how you should do it, or where you're going, or if what you're thinking is feasible, you should plow forth anyway. Clarity emerges from the act of plowing.

I learned (the hard way) that if you don't jump into the dissertation proposal immediately after completing course work, the nebulous dissertation "cloud" will follow you everywhere until you seriously start (and complete) the dissertation.

During the proposal development days, I learned what it feels like to wander through a thick, foggy forest trying to find some unknown location with a flashlight that sometimes works and sometimes doesn't; an off kilter compass; a map that has pieces missing, some incorrect road names, and some roads and landmarks missing altogether; and a target location which appears to shift from time to time.

I re-learned that the depth and extent of your abilities should not depend on *others'* faith in you or lack of faith in you. Given the extent of the investment of your heart and mind and energy and time you will need for the dissertation, the fundamental belief in your abilities must stem from within (independent of others).

I have learned that ABD *really* stands for "All But Degree." The tenacity, energy, and focus it takes to complete the dissertation is unmatched by that required for any course work in undergraduate or graduate studies. Course work is one thing. Doing the dissertation is quite another matter entirely.

If I was unaware of it before, I certainly learned (from others) that it would have been a really good idea to begin to sketch out and work toward the dissertation proposal while taking the doctoral course work. Apparently, this can save considerable amounts of time and energy later on.

I have learned that most doctoral students have to create their own support systems; a surprising lack of formal institutional support exists for students once they enter the phase of planning and writing the dissertation.

Purely by accident, I learned the "easy way" (others have learned the hard way) that it is worthwhile to find out about all the technical details, paperwork, administrative requirements, format requirements, and so forth **before proceeding with the dissertation.**

I learned that the best time to go to the library is final exam week. You have the library all to yourself and all the books that you want are there on the shelves.

I learned that Visine is very effective at soothing red, irritated eyes, but that its effectiveness dwindles at 1:42 a.m. after fifteen hours on the computer.

I learned that three week furloughs can be a great gift because they can allow a dissertationist to get a lot of pages written!

I learned that you should check the price of innocent looking dividers when in Kinkos. Once you've torn into and written on the special kind meant for laser printers you have to pay the \$29.75 (plus tax) for them.

I learned that no matter how intensely you are working, it is very soothing to have a kitty cat (a) sitting there watching you work or (b) on lap sleeping.

I have learned that no matter what your intensity level is, it is cute and funny when your kitten sticks his head into the ink jet printer to try to get the paper that's printing. It, however, is a little less cute and funny when he bites the papers you're printing, thereby placing little teeth holes in the edges of all the pages.

I re-learned that energy begets energy. The more you work, the more you are able to work because the continuous flow and momentum sustains you.

I re-learned that one must totally for-go any desire for instant results or feedback or any expectations of any sorts of rewards or anything at all. One just plows forth with the work because that is what needs to be done. Full stop.

Very early on I learned that the dissertation is not the place for cute prose or witty phrases, and I learned that, unless you are directly quoting something, you should be very parsimonious about placing quotation marks in your writing. No matter how rough the draft, there is such a thing as having way too many quotation marks in your dissertation proposal.

I learned that it takes several persistent runs at the proposal to get it right, and that realizing that the whole process is iterative in nature greatly reduces frustration levels.

I learned that wherever you go, people greet you with, "who are you?" When this occurs in your own home or office, you know you're immersed in your doctoral work.

I learned that there are long patches of time during which you are probably not fit for human contact. When you have been transformed into the alien species Dissertaneous, you have trouble understanding even basic, simple things that people are talking about.

I learned that, when you are writing a dissertation, you are rendered incomprehensible when attempting to converse. Frequently, when speaking, you trail off mid-sentence as you begin to think about something having to do with that section on ...

I learned to love WordPerfect (which is what we used in "those days!"). What it does with documents and tables is nothing short of pure magic.

I learned that those skills of knowing how to avoid falling into a negative downward spin when something goes wrong tend to *really* come in handy in the dissertation process.

Then I learned that if you really look at it and think hard enough about it, feedback from people who seem only to want to rake you over the coals can provide some useful insights.

I learned that having a 434 page book on **The Pencil** on the shelf in front of you in your office is a great source of inspiration and motivation. The rationale is that if someone can write 434 pages on the history and design of the pencil, I can write 200 or 300 pages on just about any topic.

I learned that having a high tolerance for uncertainty is certainly helpful in the dissertation process.

I learned that munching on carrot sticks helps you to think.

I have learned **not** to give too thorough of an answer when asked, "so what is this paper you're working on" or, "what's a regression?"

Quite accidentally and unintentionally, I learned how to glaze people's eyes over within 3.2 seconds.

I have learned not to use the word regression too much in conversations. People think you're doing a study about psychology and relapsing to childhood practices.

I have learned that if you have memorized a supply of short, stock answers to questions about what you are working on, you should switch mental channels before replying to your committee members or anyone associated with the university.

I'm still learning to more appropriately and accurately gauge what level of detail people want to hear.

I have learned that if you write and write and write and write and write, you end up with a 96 page chapter. Later, I learned that you can break that chapter into two separate chapters.

I have learned that working on the dissertation is so much more fun when your folders, file boxes, and other office supplies are purple and other assorted colors (but mostly purple) rather than drab tan or off white.

I learned that I probably should have made up a bunch of letters of apology (for being abrupt, not returning phone calls, etc.), signed them, and had them available to hand out to people whenever I offend them. This step would inject some humor into some situations which might otherwise lead to misunderstandings.

I also learned that, in order to avoid having to hand out an apology form letter in the first place, you should figure out how to tone down the raw intensity level before interacting with other life forms at the office and other places.

I learned that, while CD ROM and the Internet are great, there is nothing like a real library with real books.

I have re-learned that reference librarians are some of the greatest people on Earth.

I have learned that talking through your ideas, even if they are unformulated, convoluted, disjointed, or hazy, can really help clarify your thinking.

I have gratefully learned that people who are willing to listen while you sound out your ideas and think out loud really do you a great service. And I learned that there are many more of these people around than you might think.

I learned that many people sincerely share in your rejoicing over simple little things, such as designing a new kind of chart, even if they have no idea what you're talking about. They will even display your chart on the refrigerator.

I learned that you should not eat a huge plate of spaghetti and then expect to go back to the computer to work.

I have learned that it is invaluable to tape record your meetings with your advisor. Sometimes your mind is racing during the meeting, and when you play the tape back you don't even remember taking part in some portions of the conversation or certain details about how revisions should be made.

I learned that if your batteries are low on your little tape recorder, your meeting with your advisor sounds like Minnie and Mickey Mouse after seven cups of coffee.

I learned that during the planning, research, analysis, writing, and revision stages of your dissertation, you walk around with either one singular thought in your mind, or 57 thoughts and ideas all at once.

I think I have learned a little bit about what insanity is like.

I have learned that you should not phone your committee Chairman to hold a discussion when your intensity level is at 9.86.

I have learned that your Chairman generally is forgiving and understanding if you phone him when your intensity level is at 9.86 or above.

I have learned that when you're going it alone, you're not really going it alone.

I have re-learned that you should save WordPerfect files early and often.

I learned that in the olden days, people kept their only copy of their dissertation in the freezer - the last place to burn if there's a fire. Today, people keep copies of diskettes at their neighbors' houses.

I learned that the next best time to go to the library is the first week of the semester. The library pretty much empties out after 5 p.m., and you *almost* have the whole library and Xerox copy room to yourself.

Again concerning the library, I learned that if you pack a back pack with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, granola bars, crackers, a bag of carrots, and a sprite, you can easily stick it out at the library to do your literature search/research for nine or ten hours! The whole idea is to approach

it like going on a picnic, except in this case you also take along a list of journal articles and books to get, paper, pens, pencils, paper clips, and a stapler (to staple together articles you copy, in case you were wondering).

I have learned that, no matter what it is you're calling about, when you phone committee members after you have given them chapters to review, they will start the conversation by saying, "I haven't read it yet." Try this at home (but not too often) and see!

I learned that when you tell your advisor that you will have something to him by a certain date, you will work like a maniac to get it to him by then.

I have learned that with a certain amount of common sense, decency, and thoughtfulness, you don't need to worry so much about what **The Protocol** is.

I have learned that if your mother was an office manager/secretary for her paid job, she beats out spell check and Grammatik 32 percent of the time.

Eeeeeek! They're everywhere! I have learned that if you grab a post-it to scribble down an idea every time there's something you want to remember, you quickly end up with little post-it notes all over your work surface.

I learned that family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues can be partners in the dissertation process-sometimes by saying or doing certain (supporting) things, and sometimes by refraining from saying or doing certain (other) things.

I learned that no matter how small it seems, even minor events can be disruptive to your train of thought. There is no such thing as just going out to lunch or just running a few errands. Leaving the shopping, bill paying, laundry, and even lunch till later helps to preserve your momentum and thought train.

Speaking of laundry, I have learned that owning one extra laundry basket enables you to live out of two laundry baskets rather than one. And I've learned that purchasing just a few extra clothing items allows you to do laundry every two weeks rather than every week.

I learned that if you're pre-occupied with dissertation business while doing laundry, you just might get it all washed and dried, only to realize that you have no recollection whatsoever of putting detergent into the washing machine. Then you get to do your laundry all over again!

I have re-learned that when you leave your clothes in the dryer for several days they get all wrinkled. What a revelation. (I think that's about all I have learned about laundry. I still have no idea what an iron is.)

I have learned that an HP 560C ink jet printer takes 2 hours and 41 minutes to print a 383 page document.

I learned that you should put all valuable jewelry items, i.e., rings, away for the year or so that you're working on the dissertation; otherwise, you might absentmindedly take the items off and dump them into the trash can.

Unfortunately, I learned that if you forget to pay your Home Owners Association fee, the HOA has ZERO tolerance of the fact that you were off in your own world doing a dissertation and will sock you with big penalties anyway.

While we're on absentmindedness, I learned that it sure does save you a lot of money when cashiers call you back to the register (as you're dashing off) to give you the change you have coming from that ten or twenty dollar bill.

In the proposal-writing stage I learned that, even if your dissertation is job-related, it is better to pay the \$85 to copy it than to go to the office at 11 p.m. and try to make copies. For one thing, it's creepy to be in a 3,500 person building all alone. For another thing, even if you visually check it, you will invariably copy the dissertation with the prepunched three-ring binder holes on the right side of the paper instead of the left side of the paper. This fact was verified by an informal survey (sample size = 2).

A post script on post-its: I learned that cats like to chew on your little post-it notes that you put into articles and books to mark certain pages.

I learned that your thinking can become somewhat warped after 2 a.m.

I have learned that your thinking affects your writing.

I learned that if you do not put big notes on the spines of all your library books saying when they're due, you'll be paying big library fines!

Recently I learned that some library people can be very forgiving and will sometimes wipe out your debt to society and your criminal overdue book record without your even asking. (It is unknown for sure whether appearing at the library looking haggard, with sunken eyes, and without having eaten anything all day increased the probability that this will happen.)

After just two or three lessons I learned that it's cheaper to carry around lots of quarters for the parking meters at the university rather than pay a parking ticket.

I learned that while you're waiting out in the hall while your committee deliberates the merits of your dissertation proposal, you could use the time to take a little refreshing walk out doors. While you're out there, you can go and feed the parking meter.

I learned that the committee can call you back into the conference room with a decision on your dissertation in five minutes or less.

I have learned that, when you're sent out into the corridor to wait, there's absolutely no chance that anyone would stray more than ten feet from the conference room, while inside, the committee deliberates the merits of the proposal or the final dissertation.

I have learned what it is like to stand before Solomon with the "dissertation parent" pulling you one way and the "job/office parent" pulling you the other--each claiming that you belong to it alone.

I have learned what it must be like to have two full time jobs. I am learning--still--the art of *balance*.

I learned that building a giant octopus out of snow on your front lawn is not only a nice little diversion, it helps relieve extreme levels of intensity and tension.

I learned that if you attempt to work on your taxes while in the midst of revising chapters, you are likely to: (a) lose too much precious time, and (b) find your 1099s and other tax documentation mixed in with your dissertation material.

I have learned that people start to find it annoying if you constantly ask, "what empirical data support your contention?" when they claim that something is true.

I have learned that just saying NO to invitations really pays off in the long run.

I have also learned that, while you should not waste time and energy explaining yourself, just saying the word NO is probably too abrupt. You can soften it by saying, "I appreciate the thought, but I need to meet this time frame."

While driving on the beltway I learned that if you are consumed with thoughts on some aspect of your dissertation, you will probably miss your exit.

I learned that down the home stretch when you're nearing the dissertation defense date, you should not rest too easy. You may have one more fire to walk through.

I learned that, even though it's called a "defense," you do not need to be defensive!

In the proposal defense and the dissertation defense I learned that it is "just business" when your committee throws hard balls at you. It's kind of like friendly fire. They do it to toughen you up, test your thinking, and enable you to experience the rite of passage that all fore-doctors before you experienced (and successfully lived through).

I learned that you can catch or dodge all those hard balls if you are well prepared, approach the dissertation knowing that *you* are the expert, and utilize a "listen to learn" approach to your committee members' questions and challenges.

Most of all, I learned that, warped though it sounds, you should firmly fix it in your mind that you will have *fun* in the defense--yes, I said fun.

I learned that you can joyously look forward to your dissertation defense as an opportunity to have a captive audience *to actually talk about the work you've been steeping yourself in for lo these many months!*

I learned that if you become so relaxed and comfortable debating issues in your dissertation defense that you sort of forget where you are or why you're really there, and end up asking a committee member tough questions, *it won't work! They* (the committee members) *will not* forget why **you're** there and why **they're** there!

I have learned that many of the horrors you hear about doing a dissertation are not necessarily true. Much of what happens depends on your own efforts and foresight. And I learned that when and if "horrors" do occur, you can work your way through them with calm poise and clear thinking.

I learned that you learn a lot from people who have completed their dissertations before you. You can learn where some land mines are and what some of the important little details are.

I re-learned that it is glorious to learn.

I am still learning that the world is full of Amazing Grace.

(last updated: 17 January 2004)