

A doctoral disputation during my final viva

Not long before I retired, I had a request from a prestigious university to be the external examiner for a thesis that was in my specialist area and on which I had published a number of books and peer reviewed articles.

I thought it would be the ideal viva to coincide with the end of my academic career. But in the event, it raised an unexpected question: how far can a candidate challenge examiners' judgement?

This process was fraught from the start. It had proved difficult to find a date for the viva before the end of the calendar year. I and the other external examiner were initially expected by the University to hold the viva (in person) on December 23rd. Given we would both need to book flights for the occasion, we declined as it was too close to Christmas.

But eventually a date in January was agreed. We had been informed of no formal arrangements for our arrival. Nor was there any kind of welcome. So, although the other examiner and I had been booked into the same hotel, it seemed it was up to us find each other. Fortunately, I had taken the precaution of looking up my fellow examiner online so that I could recognize her. Once we had connected we found a place to eat together that evening. We got on well and had a very pleasant evening; while the thesis was mentioned we agreed to leave our discussion until the morning at the formal pre-viva examiners' meeting at the University where we would share our separate reports.

The following morning on arrival together at the University we discovered that the room where the viva was to be held was locked and the key could not be found.

Sometime later, once we did eventually get access to the room, we were able to hold our pre viva meeting and found we concurred on the main issues relating to the thesis and divided the questions we thought should be raised with the candidate between us. As I was the subject specialist, I agreed to take the lead.

Eventually a member of the university administration team arrived first and informed us that he rather than an academic would act as chair. A few minutes later the student was led in by her supervisor.

It was clear from the outset that the student was in a highly excitable state. Though my fellow examiner and I attempted to put her at ease before the viva started, as the questioning began there was much waving of hands and nervous laughter from her.

As the viva progressed and we raised questions, the student became more and more excitable and appeared not to appreciate the difference between the defence of her thesis and challenging and pursuing a dispute with the examiners.

For instance, I asked her to explain a number of issues that concerned me about her methodology, methods and what I perceived to be missing elements in the thesis. Rather than offering considered responses to our questions, the student instead began to justify her thesis by asserting that I was mistaken and that, on the contrary, all these issues were irrelevant and did not need addressing; she did this in a manner that was increasingly agitated, eventually verging on the hysterical.

I began to fear that if we let proceedings continue in this way the outcome would inevitably be a failure. The Chair did not intervene. So, I took matters into my own hands, and, to save the situation deteriorating further, called a temporary halt to the formal viva. I have to admit I had never seen this done before by an examiner but felt I had no choice.

While we took 'time out' together I explained to the candidate that asking these questions and expecting to have reasoned responses was standard in a PhD viva. It did not mean we were attacking or undermining her work. Rather it meant we needed explanations for some of her processes and choices, inclusions and exclusions and these issues may need to be addressed in amendments to the thesis along with the insertion of some additional material. I explained that this was routine as very few theses are awarded forthwith without this process.

Fortunately, after this short break, when we reconvened the formal viva, she seemed to have calmed down and was a great deal less argumentative.

The viva continued for another hour at which point we asked her if she had any questions for us. She did not. The student and her supervisor then left the room while the other examiner and I discussed the outcome.

We agreed that we would give her three months to address recommendations and requirements for change specified in our examiners' joint report.

The student was called back in with her supervisor and informed of the outcome. She seemed greatly relieved. We outlined the main requirements for change and told her that these would be specified in detail in our post viva report. We shared a few polite niceties. Then she and the supervisor left the room, and the Chair left too. It was 1.00pm...

Left in an empty room I turned to my fellow examiner and said, "We're not going to be given any lunch are we?" We packed up our papers and went our separate ways.

Epilogue

The amended thesis was sent to me and to the other examiner on time. However, one requirement for change that I had specified be made throughout the thesis had not been addressed. This was not a major or substantive issue and momentarily I was tempted to rubber stamp and approve the amended thesis, so that I would never need to look at the thing again.

However, I knew it was important not just for the quality of the final thesis but also for the student to know that we required all the amendments, without exception, to be addressed properly. These final amendments were completed within a few weeks and the student was duly awarded her PhD.

Reflection

As a seasoned academic at the end of my career, I had a great deal of experience in all the roles required in the examination process; I had sat in on the vivas for all my own students in my role as PhD supervisor, been an examiner on many occasions, and had chaired numerous vivas.

Over the years I had frequently been witness to the anxiety of students who were about to undergo their viva. I had always made myself available to my own students for the period before the viva when we were both aware that the examiners were meeting to 'decide their fate' and had become accomplished at distracting them with anecdotes.

I was always aware as a Chair or examiner that the student was very likely to be nervous. Indeed, it was easy to recall the anxiety built up over several weeks as my own PhD viva approached. So, I had, on occasion, to suggest that they keep their mascots and good luck charms out of sight of the examiners. However, in this case the anxiety and nervous tension displayed by this student was beyond anything I had previously encountered and despite my familiarity with the process I was unprepared for it.

Whether or not my intervention was appropriate I cannot say, but in the end the outcome was a good one for the student who I hope was not bruised by the experience. On reflection, it is unlikely that I would have had the confidence to intervene in this way early in my career which suggests that preparation for all roles in the PhD viva process is essential.

For discussion

What are the lessons here for

1. Candidates?
2. Supervisors?
3. Examiners?
4. Chairs of the examination?
5. Institutions?

