

QED NEWS

The Observation Tower

by

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In *The Last Lecture*, Randy Pausch, the young Carnegie Mellon professor who succumbed to pancreatic cancer, writes about the responsibility of faculty to cultivate a sense of accountability in their students and “help students learn to judge themselves.” He wonders, “Did [students] recognize their true abilities? Did they have a sense of their own flaws? Were they realistic about how others viewed them?” The educational process provides students with the tools or instruments through which they develop as scholars in the field, especially on the Ph.D. level. Through this model, students commit to the process, employ the tools, engage in their respective disciplines, and metamorphose into the role of academic. They cannot (should not) advance without cultivating a sense of independence and a scholarly sense of Self through which they transition psychologically and professionally. After all, the careers into which they will track necessarily demand a sense of sovereignty, and students will have to measure up at some point along the way. “In the end,” Pausch writes, “educators best serve students by helping them be more self-reflective.”

Self-assessment is key. But how can doctoral students learn to immerse themselves in the studied measurement and evaluation of their own work - their research and the written product, the dissertation? Too often, they are reliant upon their advisers who sometimes find that they must monitor each phase, even at the end of the process, when a series of editorial commentaries should point the way to the final product and lend toward a modicum of independence in the process. The skills that students acquire in one dissertation chapter should transfer, logically, to the demands of other chapters. In addition, they should have attended dissertation defenses and read dissertations, both inside and outside of their field of expertise, in preparation for their own dissertation writing. In the absence of this preliminary work, it is understandable that many students enter into the process shrouded by uncertainty. In short, they have not done their homework and may be at a loss to discern the interconnectedness of the research/chapters to the entire dissertation proper, as well as to their personal evolution.

The advising model should evolve from the protégé-master paradigm, a relationship in which the student is dependent upon the master craftsman/advisor, to the role of journeyman. Initially, the master craftsman (adviser) exerts control and directs the process, but gradually, as the student evolves, relinquishes control and encourages more decision-making behaviors in the advisee, thus fostering independence and self-sufficiency. Students are *customers* who come to the advisor and committee for the tools through which they can become successful. Let me be clear: students do not *purchase* a degree: they purchase the educational opportunity to *earn* an advanced degree, through the expertise, wisdom, guidance, mentorship of their advisors. The point for advisers is not to carry them *ad infinitum*, without transitioning them into an independent role as budding scholar. This means that students must learn to oversee their own research and writing process, while still availing themselves of the adviser's expertise. Indeed, it is a balancing act.

Pausch likens the role of professor to that of a personal trainer who gives "access to the equipment (books, labs, our expertise) and after that it is our job to be demanding." The role of the professor, he writes, is to "teach students how to see their minds growing in the same way they can see their muscles grow when they look in a mirror."

Students without an internal barometer through which they gauge progress toward the acquisition of skills, especially in the writing/researching stage of the dissertation, will struggle as the mounting demands of the dissertation consume their time and attention, and so will their adviser and committee members struggle to reinforce the principles of accountability, self reflection and assessment in their advisees. Some students may fail to implement precisely the committee's editorial commentary or be alert to rhetorical concerns of the monograph, but more importantly, may fail to adhere to a consistently defined conceptual framework that keeps them focused and on track in developing the study. Others may fail to exercise precision in the research design and implementation stage. For others, the philosophical purpose of the monograph escapes them. When this occurs, committee members may no longer be *providing* the tools, but may be, in essence, *wielding* authorial tools to construct the dissertation according to an unshared vision. The fine line between the student's work and the adviser's and committee members' contribution may at times be blurred, especially for the student who fails to see his or her work as a reflection of process improvement and self growth.

Concluding Thoughts

If you are a dissertation adviser, consider the ways in which you will measure your advisee's performance. Have you clearly delineated quality indicators for the dissertation and shared them with your committee members, with your advisee, with your department? Have you and the committee articulated an ethical hard limit among yourselves and with your advisee so that your involvement in the process has established parameters that guide your interactions? Is there a clearly defined boundary between you and the student? Are you *guiding, mentoring, facilitating*

your advisee's progress or are you merely *enabling*? As Pausch suggests, will you "...tell them honestly when they have it in them to work harder?"

If you are a doctoral student, ask how your adviser and committee members will assess your work. Ask how *you* will assess your own work. Are you all in accord with those performance expectations or is your model typified by the notion that the committee will repair the problems and just let you move forward? In other words, will you choose to dwell in the protégé/master model throughout the entire process or have you made the decision to advance to *journeyman*, and eventually, *craftsman* level? At the end of the day, you will have to stand on your own, and your adviser and committee will not be there to intercede on your behalf: it is better to cultivate scholarly independence while you are still in the process.

The Last Lecture is steeped in the language of quality: self-reflection, measurement, evaluation, accountability, and continuous evolution toward self-realization, a life-long process. As with all processes, it is not just the finish line that connotes success. It is also what happens along the way, inside the process, that constitutes the scholarly experience and that cultivates the quality academic and the quality human being.

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