FIGURING IT OUT: A CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW TO COMPLETE YOUR PH.D.

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We use dialogic theory to frame our conversation about how we are completing our Ph.D.s, in an attempt to help other students finish their degrees. Dialogic theory allows us to document how we think through the Ph.D. process, critically evaluate our experiences in graduate school, and transcend solely individualistic or structurally oriented advice about how to complete a Ph.D. Further, our conversational format exemplifies the open-ended focus of dialogic theory, demonstrating that there is no single "best" way to complete the Ph.D. Indeed, students may continue our conversation in order to figure out how to complete their Ph.D.s, in their own particular circumstances. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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FIGURING IT OUT: A CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW TO COMPLETE YOUR PH.D.

We use dialogic theory to frame our conversation about how we are completing our Ph.D.s, in an attempt to help other students finish their degrees. Dialogic theory allows us to document how we think through the Ph.D. process, critically evaluate our experiences in graduate school, and transcend solely individualistic or structurally oriented advice about how to complete a Ph.D. Further, our conversational format exemplifies the open-ended focus of dialogic theory, demonstrating that there is no single "best" way to complete the Ph.D. Indeed, students may continue our conversation in order to figure out how to complete their Ph.D.s, in their own particular circumstances.

We aim to help other graduate students successfully finish their Ph.D.s by drawing on dialogic theory and using a discussion oriented method. Although coursework and seminars are important, and all students must acquire basic analytical, writing, and technical skills, our experiences suggest that success also depends heavily on informal interactions with faculty and peers to learn how to publish, teach well, complete dissertations, and, in short, become professionals. This reflexive process, generally captured under the aegis of "completing a Ph.D.,” requires students to continually reevaluate their progress in relation to their existing social circumstances. As such, we find it odd that many of the books and articles that intend to help students complete their degrees are little more than lists of advice on how to conduct good research, navigate the dynamics of dissertation committees, or find perfect jobs, regardless of the social context. Although we have personally found much work on these topics useful (e.g., Becker 1998; Marx 1997; Peters 1997; Steinberg 1981; Stinchcombe 1966), the culture of graduate education implies that helping students teach themselves how to be successful—according to their own standards and situations—might be a more valuable approach.

We use dialogic theory to frame our discussion about how to complete a Ph.D. in a timely and efficacious manner, for three reasons. First, we hope that the conversational format will allow students to add their own voices to our discussion, in order to better think through the dynamics of their situations (Bochner and Ellis 1996; Warren and Fassett 2002). Dialogic theory posits that thinking is an interactive process that depends on talking with others while situated in specific contexts (Shotter and Billig 1998). That is, conversing with others can help individuals gain new perspectives on their particular social situations, an advantage that simple lists of advice may be unable to provide. Further, Mead (1934) suggests that thinking is a process that takes place through conversations with others, although those "others" need not be present. An individual may take the imagined perspective of another to better discuss or think through various aspects of an issue. Rather than illuminate "the perfect" tactic for finishing, we aim to prompt others to think about how they might learn from others and teach themselves to finish their Ph.D.s, given their own particular circumstances and aspirations.
Second, we hope that fostering conversations about navigating the Ph.D. process will provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their own and others' experiences to more readily become professionals. Personal transformation, from the role of student to the role of professional, is a central element of graduate education (Becket et al. 1961; Granfield 1992). Dialogic theory takes the perspective that conversations—both with one's self and with others—allow individuals to critically examine their own experiences, compare them with others, and consider alternate courses of action based on these new insights (de Peuter 1998; Gagnon 1992; Warren and Fassett 2002). We hope that students will expand our discussion to their own contexts, with an eye toward understanding how to feel, think, and act more like professionals. No single book of advice can cover all aspects of professional development, because graduate students, even within the same discipline, often have diverse career aspirations. Thus, our approach encourages students to seek professional development by exploring the social resources in their departments, professional societies, or other formal and informal networks.

Finally, dialogic theory allows us to counter individualistic or structurally oriented advice about completing a dissertation. Individualistic perspectives ostensibly assume that successful completion depends solely on the students' personal abilities, initiative, or seemingly predestined chances of success (Plutzer 1991), while giving students the onus for navigating committees or conducting original research (Bolker 1998; Peters 1997; Sternberg 1981; Tanner 2002). Conversely, structural perspectives emphasize the funding insecurities, mentor idiosyncrasies, or limited resources that may impede students' progress (Egan 1989; Kleinman 1983). But a dialogic approach takes an intermediary position and focuses on the role of culture as a "tool-kit" that individuals acquire through interaction with others, which may facilitate the acquisition of new perspectives and the navigation of structural demands (Bell 1998; Hannerz 1969; Swidler 1986). Because students have a wide variety of skills, and because departments provide diverse human, economic, and intellectual resources, students must develop social and cultural resources through interaction that allow them to complete their Ph.D.s across diverse circumstances.

Discussing How To Complete A Ph.D.

PMK: Perhaps we should provide some background on why we decided to write this article. Roughly a year ago, we heard some grumbling among our fellow graduate students about a lack of academic and professional mentoring in our department. Perhaps because our perceptions were somewhat different from theirs, we organized a speaker series on professional development and invited various graduate students and faculty members to present on such topics as getting published, finding mentors, searching for jobs, and completing dissertations.

LAP: That is exactly where we ran into trouble. When we invited faculty and advanced graduate students to talk about finishing a dissertation, several faculty accepted although none of the students were willing to talk about their experiences. Some said they didn't feel...
like good role models and others didn't feel that they were successful, although many of their peers, including us, actively disagreed!

PMK: That brings us to the crux of the issue. As we considered the possibility of presenting the information ourselves, we reflected on our own experiences and found that we were also reticent about presenting our strategies as though they were "the best" way. Through our discussions, we found that we each had markedly different work styles and approaches to graduate school; we discovered diverse ways to successfully complete our Ph.D.s.

LAP: We summarize our many conversations in the following sections. Because we focus on helping students teach themselves how to complete their Ph.D.s, our discussion revolves around five central areas that we found important, including learning how to be a self-starter, learning how to learn, learning how to juggle multiple tasks, learning how to be a professional, and learning how to let go.

Learning How To Be A Self-Starter
PMK: I seldom achieve a desired outcome without a little initiative. Of course, being a self-starter never guarantees that projects will go well. Because setbacks invariably occur—such as not receiving funding or having a falling out with a faculty member—I try to work around the problems and recover as quickly as possible. I also set deadlines for myself. By informing my committee of my goals or submitting dissertation chapters for presentation at conferences, I can better focus my attention and finish projects by specific dates. Further, by keeping these deadlines a little optimistic (but not too optimistic), I force myself to finish the next draft, chapter, or set of analyses sooner rather than later.

LAP: It is important not only to set, but also to keep deadlines! Flexibility in time use can be one of the best aspects of graduate school, but also one of the worst. Without focus, this flexibility can lead to procrastination, poor work habits, and eventually the failure to finish in a timely manner, or at all. Not only do I set deadlines, I also make contracts with my advisor, dissertation committee members, and a graduate student support group. These sources of social support keep me on track, as I am accountable to others for completing my goals.

I also try to work on my dissertation a little every day, regardless of whatever else I am doing. This helps me keep my ideas fresh in my mind, and may include small tasks like reading a journal article or reviewing an interview transcript. Then, when I have a lot of time or motivation, I can get even more work done. I am most productive when working consistently on my various writing projects, rather than setting tasks aside for extended periods of time.

PMK: Although some scholarship suggests the benefit of researching at every available moment (Boice 1992), and working on my dissertation every day sounds like a good idea, I never get anything done when trying to do a little work on several projects simultaneously. Instead, I often work on one project for several days to the exclusion of all others, and once it
is completed, I'll turn my full attention to the next task. I seem to work best when I have large
chunks of time reserved for work on a paper or chapter.

Learning How To Learn
LAP: One of the most important aspects of being a graduate student is learning how to
receive feedback from your mentors. I find it valuable to have something specific to talk about
when I meet with my advisors, as it is seldom productive to stop in at an already overworked
professor's office, only to sit there and muddle through whatever I have been thinking about.
Even in the early stages of my graduate career, I wrote out my questions prior to visiting a
professor so as not to waste his or her time. As an advanced student, I benefit most by
writing out my ideas, because this gives my committee members something to read and
evaluate.

After receiving their suggestions, I try to show my appreciation to professors by incorporating
their advice into my work. A faculty member once told me that nothing is more frustrating than
correcting a student's dissertation and then seeing the same mistake on subsequent drafts,
which may dissuade faculty from helping out a second time.

PMK: Although I see what you're saying about having something prepared when you go to
see a professor, I often find it valuable to stop in and chat with faculty about somewhat diffuse
ideas that have been bouncing around in my head. Although these conversations may
wander a bit, they help me work through my ideas and give me insight into certain theoretical,
methodological, or substantive problems. I have found many faculty who are willing to help
me clarify my ideas, depending on their particular mentoring style and time commitments.

I also find that efficiency is a central component in learning better, more quickly, and with less
effort. Efficiency can take many forms, like learning how to skim effectively, or writing instead
of reading. Indeed, I've found that reading often slows me down by distracting me from my
own ideas and what I already know. Conversely, writing helps me figure out what I already
know and what I still have to learn. Thus, when I'm not making progress, instead of turning to
the literature for inspiration, I'll often push myself to write.

LAP: I certainly agree with you about the importance of writing. As we have often discussed,
the only way our dissertations will ever get done is if we sit down and write them. Most books
on writing suggest that you schedule time to write every day, regardless of your level of
enthusiasm (Becker 1986; Bolker 1998; Wolcott 2001). At the same time, I've wasted untold
hours in front of the computer waiting for the words to come. Turning to the literature often
gives me direction when staring at the screen fails.

Learning How To Juggle Multiple Tasks
PMK: One of my mentors told me that learning to juggle innumerable responsibilities was the
most important skill that she learned as a graduate student, something that remains important
as a junior faculty member. Because I hope to go to a research university after I complete my
Ph.D., I try to have several manuscripts in various stages of preparation at all times. Having several manuscripts in progress, in addition to my coursework or dissertation, ensures that if one project stalls, then I can still progress on another.

LAP: On the other hand, it is also important to stay focused. My advisor once told me to ask myself before undertaking anything, "Is this going to help me finish my Ph.D.?" At first, it was simple to answer that question: I had to take certain classes and complete my comprehensive exams to fulfill departmental requirements. But once I entered that murky stage where coursework and comprehensive exams are completed, it became more challenging to keep my time and energy focused on completing my dissertation. Thus, I find it useful to periodically stop and ask myself "Is this going to help me finish my dissertation?"

I also find that organization is important. I save considerable time because my files are meticulous, my books are shelved neatly, and I can find everything in my office. Otherwise I'd waste hours searching for articles that I've already read but can't find. I'd have to search the literature again, find another copy, and then reread the article. If necessary, I would suggest setting aside a weekend to get organized.

PMK: Admittedly, that sounds like a good idea. Unfortunately, I seem to work best when my desk is in a state of perpetual disarray with papers, books, and computer printouts strewn about. However, I do use routine to keep my time organized. I work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day and spend no more than a half-hour dealing with e-mail. The rest of the time, I write, run statistics, conduct interviews, or meet with others about work. Without that routine, I spend too much time chatting with friends or surfing the Internet.

Learning How To Be A Professional

LAP: I think that as graduate students, we sometimes forget that we must become professionals in the larger academic world. For example, networking with graduate students and faculty members at other schools is important. At conferences, I attend sessions that relate to my specialty areas and introduce myself to speakers whose work I find interesting. I sometimes e-mail faculty at other universities if I find their research intriguing. Most are receptive to this, especially because they get to discuss their own work! Beyond forging new professional friendships, networking also provides access to resources such as reading lists, published papers, or copies of books. Further, you will be viewed as a professional, and you may come to mind when acquaintances are hiring for a job or looking for a collaborator.

PMK: I also think it is important for students to think about what they want to do when they finish graduate school. From the day I applied, I knew I wanted to work at a research university. With that in mind, I realized that my time would best be spent publishing papers. But other students have other aspirations, including teaching at liberal arts colleges, working for various government agencies, or going into the private sector. Each career path requires networking with different people, teaching more or less often, and acquiring different sets of
skills. Without some understanding of what kind of professional you aspire to be, it can be difficult to publish, teach, or network accordingly.

LAP: Although I agree with you, it is also important to remember that you and I both entered graduate school knowing what type of jobs we would like, and further, our goals have not changed over time. Many of our fellow graduate students entered school with an eye toward a specific career, then took a seminar, taught a class, or worked with a professor, only to change their minds and do something other than what they initially expected. Thus, regardless of what different people initially want to do, it can be important to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise.

Learning How To Let Go
PMK: I think of graduate school as an imperfect but transitory situation. I'm not saying this to gripe, because I've had fabulous mentors, funding every semester, and exceptional peers to work with. But often in graduate school we work a tremendous number of hours on teaching and research, and receive relatively little pay or power in compensation. Overall, graduate school may or may not be a very supportive environment depending on your interests, relationships with the faculty, and department's culture and material resources.

On the same note, I often tell myself and others to "get over it" when problems arise. My department will not be perfect before I leave, and those who get caught up with perfecting it, via unionizing, student meetings, or endless complaints, may never finish. I feel strongly that as academics we have a responsibility to improve the world where possible. But perhaps it's more effective to do that after our Ph.D.s are completed, rather than while we're accumulating debt, working too hard, and have little power.

LAP: We've had numerous conversations about why and when to get involved in various activities. Both of us have served on departmental committees or volunteered for organizations around the university, experiences that gave us insight into the lives of faculty and the functioning of the university that the classroom could not provide. But participation in too many activities can take enormous amounts of time and distract you from completing your Ph.D.

PMK: Sometimes it's also important to let go of the dissertation. It is easy to become attached to particular topics, methods, theoretical approaches, or writing a perfect manuscript, instead of seeing this as a single project in a much larger career. Further, becoming a Ph.D. implies becoming a professional. But there is more to life than being a professional: family members get sick, we meet people and get married, or other unexpected changes occur. At such points, it may be necessary to set the Ph.D. aside and deal with the contingencies that arise in the normal course of one's life.

Conclusion
We have often heard students who seem to intuitively find success tell others to "just figure it out." As sociologists, however, we realize that "figuring it out" can be a difficult process that entails understanding the many structural, informal, or unstated dimensions of graduate education. There is no single "best" way to complete the Ph.D.-individuals must finish within their specific departmental and life circumstances (Stinchcombe 1966). As such, no list of advice can possibly provide students who have diverse skills, interests, and aspirations with the means for success-or even guarantee with certainty that any single student will figure it out (Deegan and Hill 1991). Indeed, authoritative texts that offer easy success often gloss over the plurality of skills and aspirations that shape graduate students' experiences, within departments that have variable intellectual, social, and economic resources (Gardiner 1992; Oliva 2002). We believe that figuring it out is a skill that can be acquired: ideally our discussion will prompt others to think more critically and actively about how they can better teach themselves and others how to successfully complete their Ph.D.s within their given situations (Becker 1998).

We hope that readers will be able to build on our discussion in their own situations. The dialogic perspective emphasizes the idea that conversing with others may help students think through the process of completing the Ph.D., learn how to become a professional, and navigate both the personal responsibilities and structural demands found in graduate school (Bell 1998; Gagnon 1992; de Peuter 1998; Shotter and Billig 1998). Indeed, some work shows that social integration with more knowledgeable peers is a key predictor of academic success (Boice 2000). Further, our conversational method provides topics and invites comments from other students who are seeking a point of departure for better understanding their graduate careers.

We have discussed our approaches to graduate school by focusing on five major areas including learning how to be a self-starter, learning how to learn, learning how to juggle multiple tasks, learning how to be a professional, and learning how to let go. These categories are not exhaustive and our discussion within each category does not cover all relevant issues. We also recognize that graduate students enter graduate school with different expectations and sources of social support. However, we hope that this discussion is only the beginning, and that other students can expand on our conversation to better teach themselves and others how to complete their Ph.D.s successfully, both inside and outside of the classroom.

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