

Examining Theses Workshop Plan 3:

Study and discussion of three successful examiners' reports, for inexperienced and mixed groups of examiners

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Activity 1 - Introduction

Time: Approximately 15-20 minutes

Ask participants to reflect briefly on the reports they have received from examiners of their own dissertations.

- Did they know what to expect?
- How did they react?
- Were the reports helpful?

Activity 2 – Analysis of examiners’ reports

Overview

Time: Approximately two hours, including time to study reports

During this activity three examiners' reports on a literature thesis (submitted by Mabel Smyth at Utopia University) will be studied. Participants will be asked to consider:

- the recommendation most consistent with the examiner’s report in each case
- what they think is revealed about the examiner’s criteria for judging a PhD
- whether these reports will assist the candidate in any way
- whether the examiners agree with each other on important points
- what advice they would give the candidate in preparing a response to the reports

It is hoped that participants will be able to develop strategies for writing reports that assist the candidate as well as the university that needs to know whether to award the degree with or without revision.

Preparation

Define your specific goals for this session. Are there issues that are currently causing concern at your institution? These materials can be used with examiners at all levels of experience but are recommended for inexperienced examiners or mixed groups. What specific information do you need to make sure participants receive?

Print and photocopy Handouts 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4. These are: Part 1 of the University's examination form on which the examiner recommends the outcome for the candidate, and the three examiners' reports that go to the candidate.

Print and photocopy Handout 2.5, which is a prompt for discussion of criteria if you wish to use it.

Prepare Slide 2.1.

Collect any University documents you decide to use and photocopy as necessary.

Book any resource people you may decide to use.

Procedure

1) Distribute Handout 2.1.

Explain that Utopia University asks examiners to choose one of these 5 recommendations. This form goes to the University's Higher Degree Committee along with copies of Part 2 of the examination report. Part 1 does not go to the candidate, but she will receive Part 2 after the Committee has decided on the outcome of her examination.

This could be an opportune time to make sure participants know what your university's forms look like, what advice is sent to examiners, and how the research degrees committee operates. It is probably wise not to assume that even experienced supervisors have copies of this material. They should have it and show it to students.

2) Distribute Handout 2.2, Handout 2.3 and Handout 2.4.

Explain that Utopia University once allowed examiners to choose not to put their names on Part 2 of the form, preserving their anonymity if they wished. However, the option of anonymity is no longer offered.

You may choose to ensure that participants know the policy on anonymity at your university.

3) Set the task.

Participants should read the three reports carefully, making notes or highlighting anything that strikes them as particularly interesting, unusual, helpful or unhelpful in the reports. Ask participants especially to note:

- what recommendation they would choose
- whether the examiners agree with each other on important points
- whether these reports will assist the candidate in any way
- what they think is revealed about the examiners' criteria for judging a PhD (these questions are available as slide 2.1).
- what advice they would give the candidate

Participants will need quite a bit of reading time and should be encouraged to make detailed notes, especially about which chapters examiners praised or criticised and about their implicit or explicit criteria. Allow half an hour before you begin discussion. If it is a large group, you may choose to have small groups discuss the five points before convening the full group.

4) Lead a discussion of the five points.

The discussion will almost certainly become quite far ranging (see detailed advice for facilitators).

Acknowledgment: This case study was provided by Dr Peggy Nightingale from supervisors and successful PhD candidates. The comments have been edited to de-identify the examiner, supervisor and candidate.

Handout 2.1: Examiner's report

Utopia University
Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Part 1
Examiner's Report to the University

Part 1 of the examiner's report advises the University's Higher Degree Committee of your recommendation regarding the outcome of this candidacy. Part 2, which will be given to the student, offers advice to the student.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Examiner:

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Please circle the recommendation you wish to make regarding this thesis.

Recommendation 1:

The thesis be passed with no requirement for correction or amendments and the candidate be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The thesis makes a substantial and original contribution to the field and is worthy of publication.

Recommendation 2:

The thesis be passed without further examination provided that the candidate has made minor textual corrections as recommended by the examiner/s to the satisfaction of Head of School.

Recommendation 3:

The thesis be passed without further examination provided that the candidate has rewritten specific sections of the thesis as recommended by the examiner/s, this rewriting not changing the substantive conclusions of the thesis, to the satisfaction of the Head of School.

Recommendation 4:

The thesis be resubmitted for examination after rewriting specified sections of the thesis as recommended by the examiner/s.

Recommendation 5:

The thesis be failed and the candidate NOT be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and NOT be permitted to resubmit the thesis for consideration for a PhD in the revised form.

Signature of Examiner: Date:

Handout 2.2: Report by John Doe

Utopia University Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy Part 2 Examiner's Report to the Candidate

The examiner is invited to make detailed comments and suggestions on the thesis to be conveyed to the candidate. Supplementary sheets may be attached.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Examiner: John Doe

Examiner's appointment: Professor, Gnosis University

To survey the complete work of an author, particularly one so often subjected to misinterpretation as A, is a substantial feat. Ms Smyth's enthusiasm for the task and her control of the material never seem to falter. Though long, the dissertation offers a consistent and convincing interpretation of A's work. In particular, it establishes the continuity between the fiction and the non-fiction, frequently showing how an article has provided useful background or stage-setting for a novel.

The best chapters seem to me 2, 4 (second half only), 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11. They are the ones that offer the closest study of the text, contain the fewest and shortest summaries of plot, and are most successful in holding in check the candidate's pandemic leisureliness.

What I miss most in the dissertation is close textual analysis to establish the assertions being made. Too often a rewarding insight is suggested, but allowed to slip away without adequate, or sometimes any, demonstration. Even the discussion of A's style on pp93ff is rather generalized, and offers examples that belie the accuracy of asserting that A's later sentence structures exhibit 'complexity'. The exposition of ideas is usually good; but the exposition of stylistic questions insecure and derivative. (See, for instance, p183, where B's stylistic comment is quoted but not tested.)

As a history of A's ideas the dissertation is admirably comprehensive. As a critical history it is best in the chapters I have praised earlier. Chapter 2, for instance, is perceptive in its account of A's somewhat slanted view of X, Y and Z. On the other hand, Ms Smyth seems at times beguiled by A's confident style into inattention or uncritical acceptance of what A is actually saying. Four examples from chapter 1, each slightly different, will make the point. On pp18-19 Ms Smyth, as if making a new point, refers to the weariness of parts of A's non-fiction. But in a quotation from A on p16 there is an admission and explanation of this very quality and Ms Smyth has summarized it succinctly. In quotations from A's work made on pp9 and 19, A contradicts herself about the value to a society of heroes, but the contradiction goes unremarked by Ms Smyth. On pp32 and 34 quotations on the subject of A's attitude to Country T's degree of civilization are contradictory, but again the discrepancy goes unremarked. On p35 A's notion that parish-pump politics are somehow unique to Country T is an indication of her own unfamiliarity with the practice of politics and should tell one something about A's fastidious distaste for involvement in practical matters, but Ms Smyth makes no comment.

Even after Chapter 2 sets the dissertation off on a much more assured path, inattention can occasionally be detected. On p92, for instance, part of A's review of C's Book is quoted. The quotation ends with a pithy sentence, 'The reader's sympathies are never touched', which was almost exactly echoed by C in regard to A some two years later. Or, to take a different kind of example, it seems perverse to try to correct A's view of history by reference to such an opinionated and tendentious historical writer as R (see p145).

These matters, in themselves small, point to a larger fault: weakness in arguing a thesis. Ms Smyth is almost always adequate in description and synopsis - it is only in the first half of chapter 4 that I detect any obfuscation of narrative outline - and sometimes brilliant. But in the construction of an argument she is diffuse and unrigorous. The general case made by the dissertation is more than satisfactorily established by the sheer weight of analysis over the whole of A's oeuvre, but it is all a bit like Christian's progress to the Eternal City - there are many snares and distractions along the way.

Ms Smyth is, in fact, an expansive rather than a concise writer. The dissertation would be improved by substantial cutting - to less than half its length - and even at that length could still accommodate the close textual evidence I have adumbrated. Ms Smyth's comment about A's handling of the Government House dinner party (p187) might aptly be applied to her own dissertation. The leisurely, graceful style - a delight to read - is reminiscent of a more expansive age than our own. It is the unhurried style of the Victorian quarterly.

Handout 2.3: Report by Jane Smith

Utopia University Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy Part 2 Examiner's Report to the Candidate

The examiner is invited to make detailed comments and suggestions on the thesis to be conveyed to the candidate. Supplementary sheets may be attached.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Examiner: Jane Smith

Examiner's appointment: Professor, World-class University

The thesis is in general a comprehensive, careful, balanced and well-arranged study of A. A major benefit that derives from the bringing-together of A's non-fiction and fiction is that one becomes aware of just how sustained and central to her work has been A's concern with the nature and effects of colonialism. This aspect could well have been better highlighted in the title of the thesis. If the candidate considers publishing the thesis as a whole, I would suggest that it be "tightened" by way of concentrating on this pervasive theme of colonialism. If publication of individual chapters is considered, I would suggest that the most valuable/ original/ stimulating are Chapters 4, 8, 10, and 12.

Specific points and parts of the thesis which I particularly liked include:

- 1) the interpretation of Book E in terms of Religion Y;
- 2) the drawing of parallels between Book G and Book Z;
- 3) the comment on the absence of any official record of Character J's presence on the island in Book H;
- 4) the connection between Character J's sexuality and her (lack of) sense of self;
- 5) the elucidation of A's growing disenchantment with the idea of "knowing the truth of history"

Granted that one of the two major aims of the research was 'to discover the ways in which the nonfiction has inspired and shaped A's novels and stories,' (piii) it seemed a pity that the relation between non-fiction and fiction was examined only as a one-way relationship, the "influences" seen as moving only from non-fiction to fiction. It could have been fascinating and instructive to examine how "influences" also move in the opposite direction, and how A's fictive imagination shapes and colours the way she receives and shapes the "facts" which the non-fiction presents. (This kind of examination is briefly undertaken in, for example, X's essay on Book K in a recent issue of Journal Q.) If Book H is seen as shaped by Article C inasmuch as the former follows the latter in sequence of composition, might not Book K be even more interestingly, if less obviously, "shaped" by Book F? To examine the possibility that influence also moves in the fiction-to-non-fiction direction might also have complicated the question of how and to what extent the non-fiction "inspires and shapes" the fiction. For instance, is it so much that Book H is "inspired and shaped" by Article C as that both are parallel products of the same experience and imagination?

Of course, Book H (like Book I to a lesser extent) provides an "acid test" on this question of the influence of the non-fiction on the fiction, since Article C appears to be virtually a blue-print for the novel. However, the commentary on Book H confirmed a feeling I got from the thesis as a whole - that a little too much had been expected from the idea of the non-fiction as "influence" on the fiction. What is actually said by way of specific comparisons between Book H and Article C does not seem to justify the insistence, at various points in the chapter, on the importance of an examination of Article C to an appreciation of the novel. The candidate says that A's non-fiction reveals that the roots of her fiction lie in reality (p352). However, we do not need Article C to know this about Book H. Besides, the "reality" in question includes, no doubt, A's interpretation of events. Again, in what sense do the roots of any serious fiction not lie in "reality"? The specific connections made between Article C and Book H remain more or less at the level of a simple indication of parallels, or of fairly obvious ways in which fictive technique normally differs from journalistic technique (e.g. the greater use made by A the novelist of description of landscape to create mood and symbolically embody meaning).

Incidentally, the reservations about Book H expressed at the end of the chapter on that novel seem at odds with the main

body of the commentary. The commentary, which seemed to be "justifying" the novel and appreciating it with comparative warmth, did not prepare me to expect the charge of "a hollow achievement" (p374) at the end.

While the thesis is informed by a sound and comprehensive awareness of the critical controversies generated by A's work, and while it takes a generally reasonable and sensitive approach towards them, there was a tendency to treat some of them evasively or cursorily. For example, the candidate gives a clear, useful summary of W's general criticism of A, but she does not really "take on" the issue. She merely insures that she does not step on any toes by saying that she has found "W's views on A extremely useful, etc" (p11). Besides, the statement which introduces the topic of W's view of A is not an adequate excuse for or defence of A: "choosing to base his fiction on fact and to make essentially uncomplicated metaphors out of reality, A exposes herself to another criticism." (p10)

In the early chapters, the candidate perceptively indicates how A's work shows her awareness of the importance of language in the colonial dilemma. However, the candidate shies away from examining A's implicit attitude/opinions on this question, as may be contained, for example, in Character B's outburst in Book J. Can we assume that A's view is quite the same as that of S quoted in Appendix 3?

On p63 the candidate raises an interesting question, and a very important one, I think, relative to A's "remarkable shift in viewpoint" vis-à-vis Country I, and says that the shift can "be seen either as an uncharacteristic lapse in memory or as further evidence of the duality of experience, the two (or more) truths possible in any explanation of reality." When one puts beside the latter suggestion the candidate's perception of A's growing doubt as to "whether the study of history can possibly reveal truth" (p388), one wonders whether these perceptions might not have been illuminatingly applied to those books in which A seems to be sure as to what truth history reveals. After all, this is a thesis which is very much concerned with presenting A as truth-teller, a writer who sees it as her business "to set the record straight".

I recommend....

Handout 2.3: Report by Robert Catt

Utopia University
Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Part 2
Examiner's Report to the Candidate

The examiner is invited to make detailed comments and suggestions on the thesis to be conveyed to the candidate. Supplementary sheets may be attached.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Examiner: Robert Catt

Examiner's appointment: Professor, University of the Commonwealth

If the thesis is to be revised for publication, particularly if it is to be made into a book, I think the following kinds of revision would greatly improve it.

- 1) Mrs Smyth would have done better to have focused more sharply on the relationships between the fiction and the non-fiction, rather than diffusing her attention over the work-by-work account which gives her thesis its great bulk, and covers much (by now) rather familiar ground.
- 2) The separation into two distinct sections seems to me a mistake, and has blurred the picture of A's development, particularly the growth of compassion and of political concern between Book E and Book G, and the consequent darkening of the latest novels. I suggest one complex critical 'story' sectionalised if necessary by period, and concentrating on the subject of the relationship of fiction and non-fiction.
- 3) Moreover, although there are fascinating hints scattered in the thesis, of how a distrust of the imagination's tendency to fantasy might explain a deep need to relate fiction to the "real world"; these are never brought together into a discussion of why non-fiction should play so crucial a role in the development of A's novelistic imagination, of (conversely) of how her non-fiction draws on the novelist's imagination. A's concern with 'history' should be a major theme.
- 4) I wish A had been put more often into the context of her contemporaries or affinities. One particularly misses the context of other regional writing for the first period; of the peculiar outburst of fictions of role in Region B in the sixties; and of critical attention to the comparative elements in the latest work, which might have helped the distinction between the thematic gloom and the novelistic elan, for which Mrs Smyth has been reaching.
- 5) Though the 'colonial' themes are well to the fore, as they should be, I thought that Mrs Smyth neglected the more "existential" - for lack of a better shorthand - A of the "abyss", which is at least as important from Book D onwards, and which regional critics have tended to miss.
- 6) Most important of all, she neglects A's subtleties of form, most particularly with Books A, D, G (limiting an otherwise excellent chapter), and above all Book F. She is not alone in this, but it is a great pity in a thesis that has so much intrinsically to do with relations between differing kinds and tendencies of imagination in the same author.

I hope the following brief comments on individual chapters may prove useful.

Chapter One: More attention to the tone and style of the book and the contrast with other regional writers?

Chapter Two: How does the idea of Book F begin to form also in Book L (although it is Book E that is being written). What is the process of Book L, its development? What are the imaginative differences between the two books on Country I, and what the political?

Chapter Three: Interesting chapter marred by insufficient attention to A's development, so it came to seem miscellaneous. One became aware, as with the previous chapter, of what was being lost by structurally dividing non-fiction from fiction, instead of tracing the whole development in one complex critical 'story'.

Chapter Four: Good chapter. Something on the "sub-test" growth of feeling for the slave and indigene? More on the

novelist's imagination used historically?

Chapter Five: A's first use of the stories/novel. Formal advantages? The development of the narrator is neglected.

Chapter Six: What about the techniques of A's comedy?

Chapter Seven: Why two books? Why Prologue and Epilogue? Relation between 'history' and 'myth' (i.e. vision of an underlying abyss beneath the surface of "reality").

Chapter Eight: Interesting chapter. Needs to point up the universalising mythical emphasis: (the change between Book D and Book F), and pay slightly more subtle attention to the end, which is not infused with Religion Y. (A tension at the end of Book L?)

Chapter Nine: Ruined by the absence of attention to the whole form of the book, the three different kinds of imagination in the three 'books' 'Myth' and 'History' now? How criticised by the final section of the novel?

Chapter Ten: Amongst the best, yet again doesn't consider the form (cf. Book A) or process. How does one read the title story differently because one has read the others? How does one measure the difference between the first journal entry and the final one in imaginative terms?

Chapter Eleven: Interesting chapter. But is A's novel, dark as it may be, either wholly gloomy (its art?) or lacking in imaginative compassion?

Chapter Twelve: Might Author C help one plot the essential space between A and Character S?

I recommend.....

Handout 2.5: Thesis Examination Criteria

Introducing the study

- Clear definition of the purpose
- Scope appropriate to level of degree
- Familiarity with relevant literature
- Ability to critically examine the literature

Explaining the methods

- Clear description of what was done
- Adequate justification of method (considers alternatives and explains choices)
- Demonstration of 'technical' competence

Presenting the data

- Relevance to stated purpose
- Clear summary of data
- Accuracy of data presentation (figures and tables)
- Verifiability of data

Discussing the results

- Effective analysis of the subject material
- Critical examination of the results
- Logical argument in support of case
- Systematic and constructive discussion
- Suggestion of appropriate further work

Demonstrating originality, contribution to field

- Novel ideas
- New approach or analysis
- Valuable data
- New methods
- New synthesis

Presenting the work

- Fluency of writing
- Coherence of content (nothing extraneous, but everything that is necessary)
- Correct citations of references
- Correct presentation - spelling, grammar
- Adequate illustrative material
- Useful overviews to prepare reader for what follows
- Useful summaries to remind reader of what has been presented

Slide 2.1

Please note:

- what recommendation you would choose
- whether the examiners agree with each other on important points
- whether these reports will assist the candidate in any way
- what you think is revealed about the examiners' criteria for judging a PhD
- what advice you would give the candidate as a supervisor

Activity 3

Overview

Time: Approximately 45 minutes

This activity requires the facilitator to summarise published findings about what examiners actually say in their reports (Kiley and Mullins, 2004; Bourke et al, 2007; Holbrook et al, 2008; Kiley, 2009) and to lead a brief discussion on these findings.

Preparation

Study the detailed advice for facilitators and prepare any notes you may wish to use as you deliver an informal briefing on what examiners commonly say in their reports.

Prepare Slides 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 if you wish to use them.

There is overlap between this activity and the discussion of the examiners' reports in Activity 2. If you are following the plan for Activity 2, you will want to use this concluding briefing to make general points about examiners' reports in many disciplines and to summarise the significant points that came up during Activity 2.

If you decide to use additional experienced resource people for Activity 2, they could be helpful during this discussion as well.

Procedure

You will give an informal 'lecture' to sum up and conclude this session. Your personal style will determine how you handle this part of the workshop. Most groups respond well to an invitation to 'interrupt' and talk over specific points.

You may also wish to include information about how your own institution, faculty, or department manages the examination process and any data about attrition, completion times and success rates that are available.

Detailed advice for facilitators

Perhaps the most important influence on examination practices is contemporary discussion about the nature and purpose of doctoral education. There is an increasing emphasis on developing research and employability skills, on the impact and significance of research, and on cross-disciplinary approaches to solving real world problems. This leads to a questioning of dominant approaches to thesis examination – namely that the thesis is the only assessable product of doctoral work, and that it is assessed by standards of rigour and originality within a particular disciplinary framework. In a standard disciplinary approach the problem to be examined often comes from a gap in the scholarly research literature – therefore a thorough analysis of this literature is required. On the other hand, a practically-oriented thesis may originate in a practical everyday work problem that needs to be addressed. In such cases the literature review takes on a different complexion – it analyses the nature and source of the problem in practical terms, citing a wide range of scholarly work that may have a bearing upon the problem. Such problem oriented, cross-disciplinary theses present particular issues for examiners – not the least of which is that the examiners are unlikely to be familiar with all the literature being cited. We know that examiners tend to use their own internal criteria

for examining theses and do not pay much attention to institutional guidelines (Bourke et al, 2007). These criteria are presumably absorbed by examiners as part of their global scholarly engagement. However there are two enduring ideas that seem to be fundamental to doctoral work:

- That it demonstrates capacity for substantial independent research or creative activity
- That it makes an original and distinct contribution to knowledge

How examiners make judgments on these fundamental criteria is subject to ongoing debate. Remarkably, examiners are consistent when it comes to recognising the strengths and weaknesses of theses and in making recommendations (Bourke et al, 2007). The PowerPoint slides below aim to engage participants in general discussion about what they expect from a doctoral thesis (Slide 1), the categories of comments made (Slide 2) and the evaluative comments made (Slide 3).

References

Bourke, S., Holbrook, A. and Lovat, T. 2007. Examiners and examination outcomes. In C. Denholm and T. Evans (Eds.) *Supervising Doctorates Downunder*. Melbourne: ACER Press.

Kiley, M. 2009. Rethinking the Australian doctoral examination process. *Australian Universities Review*, 51(2), 32-41.

Kiley, M. and Mullins, G. 2004. Examining the examiners: How inexperienced examiners approach the assessment of research theses. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41(2), 121-135.

Slide 3.1

Questions on the examination of doctorates (Kiley, 2009)

- What is the purpose of the doctorate?
- What is the object of assessment?
- Who should assess the final product and what form should that assessment take?
- Do we need to have the same model for all disciplines and universities within the one country?
- Can the assessment be a more meaningful and useful learning experience for the candidate, supervisor, examiner and institution?

Slide 3.2 (Bourke et al, 2007)

Categories of examiner comments (frequency in %)

- analysis and reporting of findings 95%
- approach - method, design and execution 81%
- literature review 89%
- significance and contribution of the thesis 82%
- scope of the thesis 73%
- editorial issues 57%
- substantive issues of communication 79%
- topic related issues 28%
- existing or potential publications 54%

Slide 3.3 (Bourke et al, 2007)

Evaluative comments on thesis

- formative instruction (making up 21% of reports)
- positive summative assessment (19%)
- prescriptions for fixing problems (11%)
- other negative comments (4%)