



Reflections on the Doctoral Program Experience: *An Interview with Ted Ward*¹

by Laurie Bailey, PhD

Q: In your seminars, you tend to expose people to a variety of viewpoints. Talk to me about “why?”

TW: One of the most inhibiting things that a person can encounter in doctoral studies is that one has to approach a new category of thought and understanding from a given window. I am convinced that almost any category of thought, whether you have encountered it yet or not, has many windows. There are many ways into it. In response to a question yesterday I said, “The key difference between a research degree and a ministry degree is that the person in a research degree carries the responsibility for opening up new territory conceptually for the benefit of one’s field. To open up new territory, one has to do more than read viewpoints on that topic. One must read in such a way that one sees that there are yet other options—perhaps undiscovered options—about how to approach a given thematic area or topic that goes far beyond what we already know and understand. It is again the metaphor of a window into a space. There is more than one window; even though one may be appealing and dominant.

Take, for example, Kohlberg in reference to Moral Development. It was a tremendously important window. And many people treated it as the *only* window. That became a trap because ultimately the limitation of the space of that window—the shape and size of it—was limiting because the theme or topic, the room, was bigger than that window. One needs to be in the business of not only using other windows, but discovering *other* windows, *other* ways of approaching the topic. Therefore, one of the key issues in a research doctorate is to be sure that one does not associate one type of approach to a given conceptual area. That issue really gets to the heart of what is a research orientation.

Some might have a sixth grade view of research—where you go to the library and look up the answers. To me, that is a very pedestrian use of the word. Research is the capacity to systematically deal with things not yet well understood. The trap is to presume that there is but one way into the topic or theme.

Q: Besides assigning a variety of viewpoints for reading, how else do you encourage one to examine a breadth of perspectives on a topic?

TW: I don’t really assign all that specific a set of readings. I don’t organize an efficient approach to reading very well. Instead, what I do is encourage a kind of openness that comes in part from lack of structure so that people have to say, “I wonder what I ought to look at?” They have to make some of that decision themselves. It may be better for good doctoral students not to be directed to specific readings if you are able to build learning community. If the learning

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community is functioning properly, sending people out into the research field to glean means that when they get together for lunch each will have bunches of grain from different parts of the field. If you send them into the well tilled fields, they don't have any reason to talk; they have all touched the same bases. So the randomness of the reading feeds into the need to talk with others who have done other kinds of disparate reading.

I believe students should be encouraged to play out their special concerns in the way they define their working topic. I have tried not to over-specify working projects so that the individual differences can be played out in the arena. It is a little bit like inviting people to a baseball game with no bases marked in the diamond. The players simply have to figure out what to do. If you want to sit on the sidelines and watch, that is your business. If you want to get out there and play, you may find that there are several games going on at the same time. I want people to play their individual games, but to do it in a collective arena.

It is a matter, in some respects, of educational economics. When I got to Trinity, there were four or five specializations to choose from. Most students couldn't identify easily with one specialization and they had their own ideas of what a track should be. I said to the department, "We have a problem. We have four or five specializations, but it looks like we need at least eleven." My point was that you either radically increase the number of specializations or knock them out altogether. What you really ought to do is create one wide channel for everyone to explore from the standpoint of one's own themes and interests. Inevitably, some things will overlap with what others are doing. In this way, seminars can be the common factors in the program.

In every seminar the assignments have a specific focus in relation to the channel, but the student is able to specialize that focus in light of his or her concerns. Little by little, people do build one thing on top of another.

Q: You use metaphors frequently, and you use several different models in your seminars. Are these practices simply a reflection of your personality; or are they an intentional commitment?

TW: I'm intentionally committed; but I think that it may be easier for me because I am rather graphic. I was a musician, and I think musicians and artists see things differently. List memorization, for example, is an abomination. I've never been good at it. I tend to talk in terms of musical structures. There are carefully laid introductory statements. There are theme statements that are laid in—developed in a significant way but not in detail—and then another theme, and then another theme. Once I've got my themes down, I go back and develop them and then I usually put some kind of capitulative coda on the end and bring the whole thing to some kind of appropriate conclusion.

My wife constantly bugs me about writing. She says, "You just start out writing and you don't know where you are going." I *do* know where I am going. I have an idea about where I am going. Even as it is in musical composition, quite often after you get into your theme (which you have outlined in your first simple form) you don't develop it before you go to the next theme. After a time, you go back and develop those themes. Then you come to some sort of conclusion that goes back and reminds what those themes were and makes some statement about them.

I've always believed that the teaching act provides exemplars of what's involved in being a teacher. It is not only a matter of being able to speak; but it is a matter of being memorable. You use metaphors that people can hang onto and grasp. And once you get into the metaphor, people often come to the conclusion *with* you, not *after* you. That's really what a good metaphor does: it allows you to think ahead and say, "I see where you are going."

One of the unfortunate habits of expository preachers is to brilliantly show people how *they* get from "A" to "B" to "C" so people say, "Isn't that brilliant. I never saw that before"! Two weeks later it's forgotten—except they will remember the brilliance; and they will go back every time that person speaks. I want to teach in such a way where I begin, "Let's talk about 'A'. Now, let's add a little bit of 'B'. Where does that take you? Isn't that interesting? Let's call that 'C'." In other words, I am calling "C" out of them.

Q: You are building discovery, even into your discussions.

TW: Absolutely. Because if ideas flow logically and reasonably, people ought to see the next step unfold before they hear it enunciated. If you hear it enunciated, that is a brilliant performance. If you discover it, well . . . You can illustrate this musically. A good pattern, for example, from Mozart or Beethoven always has a predictability to it. You hear a melody and can almost tell what the next note ought to be. Now sometimes, especially Mozart, will surprise you because he takes you in a slightly different direction than you anticipated. It still tastes like peppermint, but it's the best peppermint I've ever tasted! It's your creativity and Mozart's creativity coming together. But a mundane composer just plods along note after note. Good melodic writing, or even good harmonic writing, allows the listener to feel fulfilled because there is just enough similarity ("That's what I would have done") but then the little nuance: the person who does the predictable, but in a slightly, unpredictable way.

Now that, to me, is what good teaching is all about: giving students a sense of where they have understanding; where they do see. Then how do they put together what they understand with something else that they see, or almost see and understand. And then they connect the ideas and it makes a shape! I believe people can be taught to do that.

I rarely point a finger at someone and say, "What are you thinking?" I don't want to put people on the spot prematurely. For the person who is not ready, it creates a negative experience.

Q: Let me ask you about dialogue. It seems that for many people dialogue is being put in groups and coerced into listening to other people. Where and how does the dialogue fit into your philosophy.

TW: I go down two lines of thought when I think about academic dialogue—one of which is psycholinguistic—*you don't understand something until you shape it into words*. One of the important purposes of interactive discussion is to obligate people to shape ideas into words so that the psycholinguist grasp of that idea becomes cognitively available. It's one reason why I am convinced that the person who sits back and listens is ultimately going to learn less. Similarly, note takers worry me a little bit. They reach in and selectively grab and write down phrases. What I really want is the frequent opportunity for people to say, "Here's what that means to

me.” We do that necessarily in small groups. There isn’t sufficient opportunity to shape words in a total group discussion.

The other line of thought with reference to dialogue is the *learning value associated with seeing difference between one person’s idea and another person’s idea*. “I’ve always looked at it this way and you’re saying . . . Now, let’s look at that”. It’s a kind of a collectivization of thought where we bring together multiple vantage points toward a more whole or a larger grasp of an issue. That’s perspective building.

There is a term used in writing that is very provocative: responsive listening. In my judgment, the most important thing in fostering effective dialogue is to help people learn how to do responsive listening; to hear what the other is saying and not just to use what another says to make your own point. “Here’s your statement, now I get to make mine. And you get to make another one if you want to.” The goal is to hear well enough so that I know what I’m going to say next will link to what others are saying. Many times in discussions, especially where discussions are performances, people are organizing their statement while the last person is making his or her point. They didn’t hear. They weren’t listening.

Q: Is there anything else that you are doing intentionally that I have missed?

TW: Advocacy. I want people to know that I am taking a position of advocacy for the student; and I make sure the student’s side is carefully examined before I arrive at any sort of judgment. Ultimately, the teacher has to be able to be an advocate, especially at the doctoral level. We can’t afford an adversarial position. We are committed to the student’s progress and development.