



Effective Doctoral Education¹

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As doctoral programs proliferate, more and more graduate-school professors are called upon to serve as seminar facilitators, research mentors, and dissertation guidance committee members. The typical professor has very little experience or training to call upon as background and skill for these tasks—unless one assumes that frequent flyer miles can be traded in for a pilot’s license. Little has been written, and there have been few forums for the development of professional agreement on what is needed and how it should be done. Doctoral supervision and guidance are still largely matters of the blind-leading-the-blind at worst, and quick-learning on-the-job at best. Thus, a person who has been doing it for a while—even for thirty-seven years is somewhat shy about offering suggestions. But here we go:

Part 1: For What It May Be Worth . . .

--wherein I assert propositions based upon limited experience--

The Mind-set

For the first time in their formal education, doctoral students are in a learning situation from which grades and other competitive phenomena are less important than the joy of learning. Don’t spoil it for them.

Many learners will not know how to handle this new situation without bringing all their childish learning habits along with them. Try very hard not to encourage childishness.

Encourage cooperative behavior rather than competitive behavior. Put people together in learning teams. Help them discover how much better their comprehension and higher functions of mental processes can be stimulated in a highly interactive social environment than in the isolation of “becoming outstanding.”

Discover the value of thinking creatively yourself. The doctoral leadership experience is one in which it is permissible to say, “That’s a really important question and I wish I understood it better. . . . What do you think?” For some professors this is the intellectual equivalent of discovering you forgot to dress before coming into the classroom; but lighten up! Becoming a “peer learner” in some matters, at least, is one of the most important parts of the doctoral experience. You are working side-by-side with people who are joining you as doctors of the church. This is a poor time to pull rank. And it’s a downright dumb time to pretend you know everything.

These concerns are matters of mind-set in the doctoral professor.

The Relationships

Remember that doctoral students are, by definition and by determination of the admissions office, *survivors* of many years of educational process. In so many cases the skills of survival are not the same

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as the skills of creative learning. Some of these skills of survival have simply become bad habits. Many doctoral students need to be encouraged to extend themselves beyond their accustomed ways of approaching the learning task. Competitive behavior and privatization are two of the habits that often require therapy.

The cure lies in warm but professional relationships. The starting place is in respecting the dignity and worth of all learners in the doctoral community. Harshness, coercion, threats, and manipulations are not worthy of the calling. The whole community of scholars, and most especially those working intimately in the doctoral experiences should pursue higher ideals in their relationships, following carefully the style and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These concerns illustrate the urgent need for highly relational doctoral education.

The Strategies

Don't be compulsive about "keeping ahead" of your doctoral students. Many will be flattered by the very idea of helping you catch up or keep up with the newer literature.

Thus . . .

Don't give doctoral students too many bibliographies. Avoid building dependencies of any sort. Your task is to help young scholars learn to stand on their own two feet.

Thus . . .

Insist that at least 4 or 5 citations in every major seminar paper be based upon literature that is too new or too diverse in origin to have appeared in an assigned or professorially contributed bibliography. It is so very important to help students in Christian institutions discover and use larger and more diverse libraries. It is appalling that so many MDiv graduates are virtually illiterate in science, social science, political science, history, and world affairs. We have an obligation to assure that the doctors of the church are broadly in touch with the world of ideas common among the people of their time.

As a result, aha! . . .

You can be helped by your co-learners. Build your bibliographies and awareness of diverse literature from and with their work. Learn with them the essence of scholarly pursuit as a sharing of a common base of grounded theory and an interdependent pursuit of further insight and accountable wisdom.

Insist on good writing. Writing is extremely important in the learning process. It provides exercise in reasoning and in the relating of otherwise disconnected ideas. But it must communicate. The never-mind-the-spelling-or-the-grammar style of teaching writing in the 1950's and 1960's gave a whole generation the habit of smearing thoughts on paper that no one else can interpret. The Apostle Paul's commentary on speaking in tongues gives us a clue: there must be someone present who can make sense of it all. Why shouldn't it be the writer? I circle every spelling error, grammar error, style-book non-conformity, and awkward sentence that I notice. Doctoral students resent it at first, but most ultimately thank me—usually saying that no one has ever before taken that much interest in their writing.

Encourage students to write every substantive paper for an actual audience. Doctoral students should not waste their writing. Especially since most of my PhD students have been in 5 to 15 years of ministry and are currently on leave or furlough, I insist that every major paper be addressed to an audience of real

people—as a manuscript for a bulletin or journal, or at very least an email broadside for a group of interested colleagues. Thus I adopt the posture of the onlooker and commentator who is dedicated to seeing that a substantial, valid, and understandable communication is formed. In that role, I mark each paper with vigor. Developing good writing skills is one of the most important gifts we can give a doctoral student.

Balance your input to a seminar. For each assertive proposition you throw to them, you owe the students at least two good questions. The most common fault in doctoral education is that it is often nothing more than a continuation of the sort of kiddie-learning that is extended so predictably into graduate schools. More of the same, only smaller groups. What a waste! Keep the students interacting with you and with each other; don't let them escape into their mindless note-taking and their persistent honing of the skills of appearing to be awake while mentally absent.

Remember the key questions and use them often:

Why do you say that?

But what else is involved?

Where would that suggestion lead if we accepted what you are saying uncritically?

Minimize the major threats to learning. Commonplace assumptions about teaching and learning, drawn from ordinary formal education, can work against effective learning, especially within a doctoral community.

HERDING—the assumption that efficiency of scale is a necessary value causes people to be collectivized and treated uniformly.

TELLING—the transcendent emphasis on verbal information and the assumption that people are learning what they hear results in much fruitless noise-making.

TESTING—the tendency to *teach to the test* and to test what is easiest and least argumentative to measure results in an exaggerated emphasis on low levels of mental processing.

From Bloom's taxonomy of uses of the mind we can see the learning task in a more holistic way. We can also see why it is so hard to test in the upper levels of mental process.

6. EVALUATING (using information to make judgments—identified in Scripture as *wisdom*)
5. SYNTHESIZING (putting ideas together to form new patterns)
4. ANALYZING (pulling ideas apart into components)
3. APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE (explaining, using, dealing with function)
2. COMPREHENSION OF INFORMATION (capability to reword or explain)
1. RECALLING INFORMATION (to find and draw out from storage in rudimentary statement or recognition)

Based on Benjamin S. Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain* (McKay, 1956).

Recommendations for adult-level doctoral learning:

1. Move toward instructional tasks that involve higher levels of mental process.

2. Create a trust environment that will accommodate “judgment-call” measurement, so that the higher levels are more apt to be seen as important.
3. Assess products of whole learning experiences rather than assessing components out of context.
4. Give priority to the development of insights and judgments rather than simple recall and simplistic analysis.

These concerns are based on the proposition that providing effective learning experiences requires more than wishful thinking.

Part 2: Never Again . . .

--wherein I confess sundry gaffes--

As is true of so many schoolteachers and formal educators within higher education, I came into teaching as a by-product of a passionate love for the content of my discipline. Fairly soon I discovered that without a similar or greater concern for my students and their needs my competencies as a teacher were not going to develop beyond a minimal threshold. Turning the corner toward this new prime motivator is reported by many and always with the satisfaction and fulfillment that simply being a sharing bookworm will never bring. Here the teacher finds an even greater fulfillment: striving to help, to encourage, to stimulate, to “motivate,” and to provide those things that would assist my students.

But there was another corner to turn. After many years of being driven by this desire to be helpful it began to dawn on me that Jesus had a larger view of his mission than this. He played out all of these motives and behaviors, but he did so from a posture alongside, rather than from above his learners. He walked with them. He shared himself with them. He was absolutely approachable. He did not use social distance and the isolating effect of status as a shield. Consider the testimony of the early verse or hymn recorded by Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. Or watch him walk alongside on the road to Emmaus. I found in my relationships with my doctoral students the ultimately satisfying experience of being a walker-together-in-the-way. But I had to learn many things in the process, most surely the following:

To Affirm Priorities

- Listening to students.
- Accommodating uniqueness.
- Assuring the worth of learning.

To Avoid Excesses

- Avoiding methodological hobby-horses.
- Engaging in medium-as-message distractions.
- Inappropriately classifying learners.
- Prying invasively into sensitive matters.
- Individualizing at the expense of supportive interactions.
- To oppress learners by insisting on my rightness.

Part 3: For Heaven's Sake . . .

--wherein I conclude with encouragement and solicitude--

Don't assume that you must appear smarter than your doctoral students. What is far more important is that you be a careful listener, a good note-taker, and a quick learner. Most doctoral students are far more concerned about your interest in *their* interests than their interests in *your* interests. Learn to make the best of it.

Let your doctoral students into your life. Take them with you from time to time. To a professional assignment, then to a social event, then to a conference, and then for a long lunch. Don't overdo it. These events are more the spice of the banquet—the seminars are the main course. (Unless of course your main course is served in windowless barns for more than 20 people at a time. In that case, you will need more spice.)

In your experiences, how do you fulfill the following:

Listening to students?

Accommodating uniqueness?

Which methodological hobby-horses are most tempting to you? . . . most dangerous?

What sensitive personal matters are most easily “stumbled into?”

What are you doing to reduce competitiveness?

In what ways do you hope that your work with doctoral students will affect your institution as a whole?

Do you truly seek effective learning? How do you know it when you see it?

Learning is a social activity.

Learning is developmentally fulfilling.

Learning leads toward transformation.

Learning occurs best in supportive environments.

Learning is retained best when acted upon and exercised.

For doctoral students, especially, learning is most rewarding when new data and experiences are immediately processed in combination with previous learnings. The result is *insight*.

Ode to the Obvious: Teaching is intended to result in learning. Teaching, or any of the other things that happen because the educational program exists, must stand the test of appropriate outcomes. It is not enough that the educators *try*. The path to [where-was-it?] is paved with good intentions. Children can often be convinced that they are learning well from bad teaching. Sometimes college students will be similarly broad-minded. But doctoral students almost always know better. They want results. Indeed, the sorts of students we most want to encourage are those who know where they are going and have a discriminating judgment about whether or not a given learning activity is moving them toward the goal.