

Terry's tale: issues of procedure.

Scene One:

Perhaps I should start by saying that although we have had our differences, my relations with my supervisor have generally been good. That's what makes the present situation so awful.

Dr Barratt supervised the dissertation I wrote for my MA, and he helped me to work up my PhD project proposal. When, after several disappointments I got the studentship, he genuinely seemed to be as pleased as I was. Any misgivings I had at that stage were relatively minor, mainly a question of differing viewpoints - he is not always completely in sympathy with the feminist viewpoint I am taking in the thesis and wanted to focus more narrowly on historical matters. But I took this to be an inevitable fact of life as a PhD student in a trail-breaking field of study. Also, I sometimes thought that he did not always give me sufficient feedback and constructive criticism about my work - a notable example was when he returned an early draft chapter to me with the written comment "The style of recording references in footnotes is now perfect", with no remark about the content of the chapter at all! But I just put that down to personal style.

The first two years passed without incident or trauma. On the debit side my health was not always good. Also, I found that my time for research was limited because I was having to take on a lot of teaching work, both inside and outside the University, in order to support myself and my three children. But this was more than outweighed by what was happening on the credit side. Dr Barratt was very pleased with the early chapters - or, at least, he seemed to be. One draft chapter was published internally as part of a series of research monographs. I attended international conferences in the UK and I generally began to feel as if I was really taking off as a proper academic.

However, in June this year, at the end of my third year, I handed in the first draft of chapter six to my supervisor. This is a key chapter (it seeks to analyse Byzantine governmental structures in terms of feminist political typologies). I thought that it was pretty good, for a first draft. But Dr Barratt was uncharacteristically scathing about it; and, equally uncharacteristically, he was unprepared to discuss what the problems were with it or what needed to be done to improve it in a subsequent draft. The meeting became rather difficult. Some unkind things were said on both sides. He even refused to give me an extra ten minutes of his time at the end of our scheduled one hour's supervisory meeting, claiming that he had another student to see. I left in tears.

That all happened about four weeks ago. It's caused me to re-interpret all my past dealings with Dr Barratt - I simply don't know where I stand, or if the work I have done is any good. I've haven't put pen to paper since then; and, worse still, he hasn't had the courtesy to get in touch with me about what happened.

As far as I can see, the only chance I've got to finish this whole miserable undertaking is if I change supervisor.

1. What advice would you give Terry at this stage ?

2. In particular, in what circumstances should a student be allowed to change supervisor ? Who should be responsible for initiating the procedure ? What form should the procedure take ?

Scene Two:

In the event I decided to approach Professor Priestly: which was a bit nerve-racking, to say the least, given her standing in the field. She read the thesis thus far, including the offending chapter, and pronounced it "a typical first draft" - by which she seemed to mean that it was interesting and contained much potential but was unorganised. She said that she foresaw no problems in converting it into what she called "an acceptable piece of academic writing". (I should add that Dr Barratt and the History Department have been very amicable about the handover, to the point where I have forgiven him for what he said at our last supervisory meeting. As far as I can tell, there is no long-term bad feeling between any of the parties concerned.)

From then on we didn't look back. I immediately found new energy and enthusiasm for my thesis, and completed the drafts of the remaining chapters over the summer, plus some revisions to the earlier chapters. At that stage the thesis started to become somewhat longer than I had anticipated; but the strategy I followed was to put everything down on paper, on the grounds that it is easier to take it out at the last minute than to put it in! During the past year we have continued to discuss drafts as I amended them; and by early summer - well before the end of the "writing-up year" - we had a version of the thesis which Melina Priestly agreed was very acceptable for submission and, in her opinion, of a very high standard of scholarship. In line with her final suggestions, I did some minor, last-minute "fine-tuning", and submitted the thesis four weeks ago, in mid-August.

I must say that I felt elated when I handed those three fat volumes in at the Graduate Office. I was very pleased with my efforts and proud that I had managed to bring the work to a satisfactory conclusion - even though it had been something of a bumpy ride on the way!

Melina and I have also agreed on the appointment of the examiners. The external was suggested by Dr Barratt when he was my supervisor; and even though her background is more historical than theoretical or feminist, and although she is not known to Melina, we've decided to stick with her. The internal is, apparently, a new appointee to the University, but Melina reckons that this should not be a problem.

1. What comments do you have at this stage?

2. To what extent should a student be involved in the selection and appointment of his/her examiners ?

Scene Three:

It's now four weeks since the viva, and I still can't get over how awful the experience has been. It started going wrong from a very early stage. The internal examiner appeared unsure about procedures, which didn't exactly inspire confidence. She arranged a date for the viva without checking with either Melina or myself as to whether it was convenient to us. Then she changed the date not once but twice, again without letting us know of the alteration until the last minute. This behaviour antagonised Melina; and, coupled with another matter between them to do with departmental business, there was clearly some hostility between them by the time of the viva.

Things then went from bad to worse. The external examiner telephoned me four days before the viva. The good news was that she mentioned a lectureship vacancy in the history department of her university. The bad news was that she mentioned in passing that there was "a problem" about the length of the thesis. This was a new one on me, so I checked with Melina, who assured me that, although my thesis was undoubtedly long (160,000 words or thereabouts), there were many examples of successful theses which were at least the same length. She also said that there was a "departmental culture" of paying little attention to the University's rubric of a 100,000 word maximum if the content was good enough; and she repeated that, in her view, there could be no doubt that mine was.

The viva was an unrelenting ordeal which lasted four hours. At the outset Professor Priestly gave the external examiner the information about departmental flexibility over word length limits; it was clear that this should have been conveyed to her at an earlier stage; and it was equally clear that she was highly displeased that it hadn't been. It was announced that the examiners had decided to refer the thesis; and that this decision was based not only upon the length of the thesis but also upon matters of style and quality. They said that it lacked organisational focus, clear argument and self-confidence. They thought it was descriptive rather than analytical, over-defensive and even, at one point, paranoid. I found these criticisms hurtful and difficult to respond to, as they ran counter to the reception my work had received previously from both my supervisors.

Melina said afterwards that my defence of the thesis was the best viva performance she had ever seen; and she also told the examiners that in her view the thesis was among the top ten per cent of theses she had examined in some twenty-five years' experience. But all this was to no avail. She also said that we would appeal against the decision, but that was little consolation. I left the room feeling bewildered at this Kafkaesque experience and, above all, angry and frustrated that the content and argument of my thesis had not been examined.

Things haven't got any better since then. Although Melina has fought hard on my behalf, the university administration has ruled that the examiners' decision must be upheld as "procedures were followed". Moreover, in spite of the incompetence and bias of the examiners, it turns out that I don't have any right of appeal because the work has been referred. So I'm in a worse position than if it had been failed outright.

There is, it seems no question of my thesis being read by anyone else from either within the university or from another university to make an impartial judgement about the standard of my work.

All I am left with is a written report from the examiners which I find confusing, confused and contradictory and a nasty taste in the mouth. My faith in the academic system has been severely shaken. I feel demotivated and helpless.

What comments and advice would you offer the candidate at this stage?

Team task

On the acetate provided list your answers to the following questions:

1. What, if anything, should be made known to the candidate in advance about the likely conduct and coverage of the viva?

2. What support should be provided for a candidate who is being required to revise and resubmit a thesis ?
