

File 20100625.0802: Notes from meeting with Dr Martin this morning:

Dr Martin called me on Skype at 0742 local time. This call was just to check in, nothing really important, I just wanted to update my supervisor on my progress and what I have been thinking about. Not getting enough sleep as usual. As it should be.

I had a meeting with the programme manager of Radiant Mercury as described in my weekly report. I am going to take the `dau.mil` training on the defence acquisition life cycle because I just could not communicate with the programme manager without that shared vocabulary. He seemed to speak only in acronyms. I need the information in order to understand how the cost of CT&E and ST&E gets paid in this CDS programme, so I have to learn the language.

Regarding *Times Higher Education* articles on PhD student progress and supervision. I read five or six articles on the topic, and in the articles and comments there was a lot of discussion of the time pressure commonly felt by PhD students in the UK to be adequately explore the topic in three years, starting from scratch. Students, after all, have no experience of their own to build on, so it takes longer for them to integrate the entire body of work in a field, that a more experienced researcher would take less time to apprehend before getting to the point where they can make substantive contributions. [Editorial comment: that is just an excuse. Get back to work and finish it.]

I wanted to find out what characteristics are common to students who finish.

I have been chasing down a lot of interesting rabbit holes this week and last, such as the idea of moral hazard, fire protection in nineteenth century factories, and how researchers like Everett Crosby formalised in 1905 the ways that people learn and communicate information about the level of risk in asymmetric information environments. The famous paper from 1970 about the market for lemons also formalised how people in such a situation move information around: they use the tricks of screening and signalling. In much the same way as accreditors (I assert) exchange information about risk even when they do not want to communicate (turf wars) or when they are prohibited from communicating (security clearance and classification rules).

Dr Martin said that in a viva, you don't want the examiners to be able to point to a great big hole. I said I thought one style of viva was characterised by the examiners diligently exploring to find the limits of the student's knowledge, and that the viva wasn't over until they could force the student to say finally, 'I don't know.'

I read those articles in THE to try to discover what the mistakes are that are made by doctoral students so I can avoid making them myself. If I am doing anything that is annoying to my supervisor, please tell me and I will try to stop it. Dr Martin said I'm not doing anything annoying, but there is this task list at the end of my reports that has a few items on it that have been there a long time, and it gives him concern about the schedule and how I am going to finish it all. I agreed, and this was mentioned last week and the week before, but the reason why I haven't knocked any old items off the list is because I have been working on the ACM workshop paper.

Deadline extensions: conferences often extend their deadlines at the last minute. I don't want to depend on it, but in this particular case it would be welcome. I will get the paper done and submitted in time.

I am aware of the fact that soon I will have to drive a stake in the ground and say, 'I am writing a dissertation about this.' Not quite there yet, and Dr Martin said he does not have a clear idea of what the unifying theme of my thesis is: the elevator pitch. He said he thinks I have it in my head, though. I promised to write it down. I have been struggling to express it clearly in this ACM workshop paper. I will have it soon.

There are two schools of thought on what the PhD is. One says that it is to become the world's foremost expert on one particular topic. The other says that it is a process of showing that you are a competent researcher and can select, chase down, and finish a research project, to a defined standard of quality, in a particular amount of time. It shows that you know how to work as a researcher.

Andy Cooper once gave me advice that the key to a PhD is to narrow your topic sufficiently that you can chase down every last detail, leave no loose threads.

Dr Martin advised that the purpose of confirmation is to point to having completed the substantive contribution and now all you have to do is write up.

iii substantive contribution iii

Next Monday, if someone could open a voice-only channel from room 478 for the seminar with Prof. Smith, it would be appreciated so I could listen in. Reading Group time on Monday has not been announced yet, either before or after 1400 Oxford time.

Call ended 0800.

References