

File 20101217.1600: Notes from meeting with Dr Ashbourn at Coffee Republic, down George Street at New Inn Hall Street. Dr Ashbourn bought me a hot chocolate and gave me a Christmas card.

Dr Ashbourn read my report, briefly. She told me not to throw away the numerical simulation or the abstract accreditor clearance model; those are my postdoc work. She told me again she wants me to apply for a postdoc fellowship in Oxford.

Dr Ivan Fléchais told me that to avoid losing him as an internal examiner, do not give him any draft chapters to review. Dr Ashbourn explained why that is true. It sounded to me like the assessors were advising me, without saying so, that Dr Fléchais would be the internal examiner and Professors Angela Sasse, UCL would be the external examiner.

She told me a few things that she made me promise not to write down. If she ever saw those things in a report, she would hunt me down.

Dr Ashbourn coached me how to pronounce the name of Professor Marta Kwiatkowska (Director of Graduate Studies, DGS): *Kveeyatkowska*. She made me practice it until I got it right.

We talked about autism and she asked if I had ever been diagnosed clinically. She said I didn't seem all that far along the spectrum. I said I had never been diagnosed clinically, but several people had told me they think I have Asperger's, and that one of them is a clinician. I told of how being at Oxford has trained me to speak in front of groups, how I have given eighteen talks to audiences of Lockheed engineers, something I would never have thought I could do before. She seemed unimpressed by the number, something no surprising for a teacher who undoubtedly has given thousands of lectures. Eighteen, big deal. She was polite about it, though. I told her how Andrea calls me Mr Spock. I said I am very literal in what I say and how I interpret what other people say and do, not what I think they mean. I told her the story of our courtship for fourteen years, and how and why Andrea did not speak to me for three years. I think Dr Ashbourn liked that story. I told how I am very literal, and how I learnt to mimic human interactions from reading fiction and etiquette books. She asked if I felt comfortable with human interaction, saying that I appeared to be so. I told her I simulate it effectively. She repeated the question a couple of times, and I stuck to the same answer. I said, deadpan, that I have learnt to simulate it adequately.

She asked how I communicate with Dr Martin. I said our meetings are strained. I said I thought Dr Martin and I understand each other. She asked if I thought he was autistic too. I said maybe a little. She met him recently. I have face-to-face meetings with my supervisor because I read that you are supposed to have face-to-face meetings with your supervisor. She was surprised to hear that we do it by video, not one the phone. She suggested not being so nervous during meetings; if I don't have any results to report, just say so. If I am nervous visibly then it makes the other person nervous too. She coached me on how to appear non-nervous. Just chat, she said. I told how I did that once, on a week when Reading Group didn't meet because too many people were out of town, and it felt really good. I think Dr Ashbourn was pleased by that.

I asked Dr Ashbourn's permission to switch into full Asperger's mode and ask a list of 13 specific questions that I couldn't ask Dr Martin because it would be impolite. She said fine, go. So I did. She told me which ones were stupid, which ones to rephrase and ask Dr Martin, and she answered some of them for me. The questions were:

- When I address everyone in the comlab formally, am I shooting myself in the foot?

Dr Ashbourn replied that she finds it charming in an old-fashioned way that I do this. She said it is definitely not a problem. She related some stories about the way new undergrads addressed her in emails, replying to her introductory email in which she addressed the undergrads correctly by addressing her completely informally in response, which was off-putting. If a person tells me to call them a particular name (e.g., Ivan), then follow their instructions. Otherwise, if Dr Martin seems to tolerate my calling him Dr Martin, then continue to do so. But if asked to address someone more informally, then do what they asked you to do.

Formality extends to the secretaries in the department also, of course.

- Did I get myself into this situation by disregarding your advice?

Don't ask this question, said Dr Ashbourn. If Dr Martin feels bad about this situation—and he should, she said—then use it, but don't give him an opening like that.

Dr Ashbourn emphasised that Dr Martin owns some of the responsibility for this situation by not being a good enough supervisor. She asked me some specific questions about the draft confirmation

report: did I show it to him? Did he read it? No, we discussed it and I wrote it the way he said, but he didn't insist on reading it and I didn't send it to him. He said to write the report about my preliminary results and attach my papers, which was completely different from what the assessors were expecting (and really, what the department procedures say). Many supervisors at Oxford are too hands-off, said Dr Ashbourn. They are notoriously not good at it.

- Did I get myself into this situation by not meeting with you often enough?

Instead of giving him an opening like this, Dr Ashbourn suggested to say, 'it would be very helpful if we could meet every week or so.' Don't force it into every seven days; that is unnecessarily rigid, but do chat at least once a week. Don't be nervous when meeting; that puts the other person on guard; if you do not have any results to report, just say so. Keep it calm and friendly and the result will be better. Keep supervisor meetings nice and relaxed.

- Did I get myself into this situation by disregarding the advice I received at transfer of status?

Irrelevant. Don't say 'got yourself into this situation'. They had as much to do with it as you did. I suggested that I could find out what that advice had been by looking at my old reports and in my laboratory notebook, which I have not done yet. Dr Ashbourn agreed this was a better source of information. Look at the constructive way forward.

- Did I just fail confirmation? What does that mean?

No, you did not. You have a second chance. Well, you didn't pass, so maybe the opposite of that is fail, but you have another chance to do it, and you were given *specific instructions* how to satisfy them next time. Send those chapters you say you have already written to Dr Martin to get his comments. This shouldn't even count as a first confirmation of status, since what you gave the assessors was so far off what they expected to receive that they couldn't even begin to evaluate it. So the next time you go in, it will be like a first time, and you will pass with flying colours because you know exactly what they want to see. There is no mystery any more. You know who your assessors will be ahead of time, and they told you exactly what to show them. So do that, and the way forward is clear.

- Do I have a chance of still graduating with a DPhil?

You will graduate, said Dr Ashbourn. And then you will do a postdoc in Oxford.

- This second chance at confirmation: is it real or is it a fiction in the rules?

It is absolutely real. (At this point, Dr Ashbourn told me a few things about how the university runs that she forbade me from writing down. She said if she ever saw them in a report, she would hunt me down.)

- How often does this happen? Has any graduate ever overcome it successfully and finished?

All the time, said Dr Ashbourn. They want you to finish. They put time pressure on you for certain reasons related to the unwritten information in the previous paragraph, but if you continue to make progress they will not kick you out. What did they say to scare you? (I answered, 'here's an MPhil by research, no go away.' They scared me, okay?) Dr Ashbourn said not to worry about the MPhil threat. That is used for people who stop working, stop showing up, stop communicating.

- What is the real completion rate in the department?

- If I do what they advised, successfully, can I graduate?

- Did you see this coming? Did you see a way that I could have avoided it? Did I ignore some advice that would have prevented this occurring?

Dr Ashbourn said she could see that I am trying to figure out if I did something wrong, and correct it. But don't give Dr Martin that opening to wiggle out of his responsibility, she said. Just follow the assessors' instructions. The way forward is clear. Don't try to figure out what happened right now, just move forward and get a successful confirmation of status before the end of Trinity term. Don't compare your progress to the other grad students; everyone's progress is different. Just focus on getting yours done, and you will finish. Don't assume it's something you did wrong, and try to fix it. Just take the way forward that has been given to you.

- Do you believe I can finish this?
- Are you willing to advocate for me?

Just take the realistic possibility and go forward, said Dr Ashbourn. Don't give Dr Martin a chance to wiggle out. Just be matter-of-fact, state that you are going to follow the assessors' plan that they were kind enough to plot out for you, and do it.

If Dr Martin feels bad about this, use it. Dr Ashbourn concurred (don't say it out loud, though). Send those chapters you've written to Dr Martin as soon as possible.

Regarding weekly activity reports and written *agendæ*, ask Dr Martin if there is too much detail in them—once. If he says 'um, well, yes' then there is too much detail. Otherwise, continue as before. Ask whether written agenda is useful to him; if he says no, then quit sending them. But keep making them for yourself, as they are a good way not to forget anything in meetings. Dr Ashbourn wouldn't have started using them herself, but there is no reason for me to stop now.

Dr Ashbourn's birthday is 15th March. Brian Greene lecture is 14th March. I had better be back in Oxford then. I will.

## References