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Vive le viva: An alliterative list of lessons to learn

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Over the years I have played many roles in PhD vivas. Obviously my first appearance was as the candidate (which, incidentally, I perversely enjoyed). Since then I have been external examiner, internal examiner, supervisor sitting in on a viva, and an independent chair. In short, I have experienced vivas from all sides and all viewpoints. Here are a few tips and reminders based on my own experiences that you should perhaps be aware of. Obviously, vivas are by their very nature subjective and idiosyncratic. However, there are many underlying common factors.

Preparation is paramount – Before your viva try and make sure you either have a mock viva or at the very least an in-depth session with your supervisor(s) to go through the thesis chapter by chapter. I have given mock vivas to some of my students and most report that their mock viva was nothing like the real one in terms of questions asked or the actual experience. Given that each examiner brings their own expertise and academic biases with them, that is to be expected. It is really hard to predict which issues the examiners are going to focus on but knowing some of the thesis' strengths and weaknesses (at least from a supervisory point of view) before the viva day will provide some reassurances and possible lines of defence.

Constructively criticize (yourself) – Examiners will have read every word of your thesis. Make sure you re-read your thesis and try to put yourself in their shoes. As you are re-reading it, be self-critical. If you think something you have written is ambiguous or is unsupported, your examiner will too. I know its cliché, but to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

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Tricks of the trade – Examiners will often read the abstract first to get a clear sense of the overall shape of the thesis. They may also read the last chapter before all others as this chapter often provides the integrated link between all the chapters. Try to make sure these are written as well as you can. The last thing you want is for the examiners to make any rash judgements based on primacy (or recency) effects of reading your thesis.

Pre-viva evaluation – Before you have even got to the viva, the examiners will have already provided a provisional report to your academic institution. If the thesis is poor and likely to fail, it is highly unlikely a viva will go ahead. Therefore, see it as a positive sign that you are being given a viva in the first place.

Read the regulations – Make sure you are fully aware of your own academic institution's regulations on PhD examination. Not only should you know things from your side as a candidate but also get a copy of what guidelines will be sent to your examiners. If you know the criteria that your examiners are being asked to evaluate your thesis you will be in a better position to defend your position and highlight your case for being awarded your doctorate.

Time for “torture” – Vivas are normally around two hours long but I have been in a few shorter ones (not many mind), and many longer ones. You are entitled to have a break any time you want and most examiners try to adhere to the wishes of the candidate. The decision outcome is not dictated by the length of the viva (although very long ones may be indicative of some serious issues).

Nervousness is normal – Examiners will know that you are feeling nervous and that it is a potentially scary situation for you. Although you will have heard the odd horror story of examiners being highly irritated, scathing or completely bored, on the whole they will try to be fair and pleasant to you. In my experience they are not trying to catch you out, they want to hear what you have to say. They want you to do well.

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Presiding over the process – More and more universities are now requiring independent chairs to oversee the viva process. These are usually experienced academics outside the discipline under examination. The chair's main job is to make sure that the viva runs smoothly and to make sure the candidate is being treated fairly and appropriately by the examination team.

“Enjoy” the experience – Obviously the viva is an examination but it is also a free flowing discussion in which you have the chance to talk about the impact you think your work will make in your field. You may never get another chance to talk at length with a captive audience for two to three hours. (Perhaps that is why I loved my own viva so much?!). Just try to “enjoy” the experience.

Validating your viewpoint – Remember what a viva is really for. It's a chance for you to validate and authenticate your work, clarify the findings, and develop ideas of where your research might be going in the future based on what is in the thesis. It's not an arena for examiners to make you feel bad or score intellectual brownie points.

Push your publications – If you have managed to get some of your thesis published (including papers 'in press'), use the viva as an opportunity to promote these. It is very hard for examiners to fail a thesis if a fair amount of it has already undergone extensive peer review and been published. It also demonstrates the originality of your work and that your thesis already fulfils one of the major criteria (i.e., that work from the thesis is good enough to publish in peer-reviewed journals).

Inquisitive questioning – Examiners' questions will always vary as they are all individuals with their own academic hobby horses. I have known examination teams to ask a completely different set of questions to those in the mock viva. The examining team will have also decided beforehand who is going to ask which

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questions although there will obviously be many opportunities for supplementary questions by the examiners.

“Defend to the death” – Remember that you are in the viva to defend your thesis. When examiners ask constructively critical questions, defend your position and put across your viewpoint (hopefully) based on your interpretation of the empirical literature.

Rating the research (not examining the English) – Examiners are there to evaluate your written research not how well you verbally use spoken English. Obviously speaking articulately will help but you should never be failed because you spoke in a nervous fashion.

Learning the lessons – The viva should be a learning process for both sides. You will certainly never forget it and is likely to be one of the defining moments in your life. You will have thought about nothing else for weeks and you will probably be thinking about it for weeks after (thinking “why didn’t I remember ‘such and such’ when I was asked?”).

Nervous nail biting – After the viva is over, you will be asked to leave the room while the examiners come to a decision. This is often an agonising wait for the candidate and not unlike waiting to hear the outcome of a major medical test. Make sure you have someone to talk to in the intervening period (e.g., supervisor, friend, partner, etc.). Someone you can just offload on until you are called back in.

Charting the changes – If changes need to be made to your thesis, the examiners have to be explicit in what they want doing. Whether changes are “major” or “minor”, examiners have to provide a detailed summary of what is required. You will also be given a specific time period in which changes must be

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made. Try to do these as quickly as is humanly possible. The longer that revisions are left, the harder it is to get back 'into the swing' of it.

Network for knowledge – After the viva, get advice and wisdom from your external examiner. It's not often you will have the ear of one of the top experts in your field at such an early stage of your academic career. Get them to give you advice on ideas for dissemination and publishing. If they really liked your PhD, ask them if they will be referees (e.g., for future jobs, grant applications, etc.). Although you won't be thinking it at the time, a viva is an excellent networking opportunity. Make the most of it!