

Examining Theses Workshop plan 2: Study and discussion of three successful examiners' reports, for inexperienced and mixed groups of examiners

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Contents

Introductory activity 1

Activity 2

- Overview

- Preparation

- Procedure

- Detailed advice for facilitators

- Handouts

- Overheads

Activity 3

- Overview

- Preparation

- Procedure

- Detailed advice for facilitators

- Overheads

Introductory activity 1

Time: approximately 15-20 minutes

Ask participants to reflect briefly on the reports they have received from examiners of their own dissertations.

- Did they know what to expect?
- How did they react?
- Were the reports helpful?

Activity 2

Overview

Time: approximately two hours, including time to study reports

Acknowledgment: A supervisor and successful PhD candidate provided me with this case study. The examination of the thesis happened some time ago so I am able to tell you not only how the student reacted at the time but also what happened next. I can't acknowledge them by name or university and I have done everything I can to take identifiers out of the reports, but I have assured them that I am grateful for their candor and so are participants in workshops I have run. Peggy Nightingale

During this activity three examiners' reports on a literature thesis (submitted by Mabel Smyth at Utopia University) will be studied. Participants will be asked to consider

- whether the reports seem consistent with the recommendations of outcomes
- what they think is revealed about the examiners' criteria for judging a PhD
- whether these reports will assist the candidate in any way
- whether the examiners agree with each other on important points

It is hoped that participants will be able to develop strategies for writing reports that assist the candidate as well as the university that needs to know whether to award the degree with or without revision.

Preparation

Study detailed advice for facilitators. It is strongly recommended that you read the detailed advice for facilitators of Activity 1a, Activity 1b, Activity 3, and Activity 4.

Define your specific goals for this session. Are there issues that are currently causing concern at your institution? These materials could be used with examiners at all levels of experience but are recommended for inexperienced examiners or mixed groups. What specific information do you need to make sure participants receive?

Print and photocopy Handouts 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4. These are: Part 1 of the University's examination form on which the examiner recommends the outcome for the candidate, and the three examiners' reports that go to the candidate.

Print and photocopy Handout 2.5, which is a prompt for discussion of criteria if you wish to use it.

Prepare Overhead 2.1.

Collect any University documents you decide to use and photocopy as necessary.

Book any resource people you may decide to use.

Procedure

1) Distribute handout 2.1.

Explain that Utopia University asks examiners to choose one of these 5 recommendations. This form goes to the University's Higher Degree Committee along with copies of Part 2 of the examination report. Part 1 does not go to the candidate, but she will receive Part 2 after the Committee has decided on the outcome of her examination. In the case of Mabel Smyth, all three examiners chose recommendation 1, so the Committee had an easy time in deciding whether she should pass immediately, rewrite or fail. You should tell participants what the outcome was in this case.

This could be an opportune time to make sure participants know what your university's forms look like and what advice is sent to examiners. It is probably wise not to assume that even experienced supervisors have copies of this material. They should have it and show it to students.

2) Distribute handout 2.2, handout 2.3, and handout 2.4.

Explain that Utopia University once allowed examiners to choose not to put their names on Part 2 of the form, preserving their anonymity if they wished. However, the option of anonymity is no longer offered.

You may choose to ensure that participants know the policy on anonymity at your university.

3) Set the task.

Participants should read the three reports carefully, making notes or highlighting anything that strikes them as particularly interesting, unusual, helpful or unhelpful in the reports.

Ask participants especially to note:

- . whether the reports seem consistent with the recommendations of outcomes,
- . whether the examiners agree with each other on important points,
- . whether these reports will assist the candidate in any way, and
- . what they think is revealed about the examiners' criteria for judging a PhD (These questions are available as overhead 2.1.)

Participants will need quite a bit of reading time and should be encouraged to make detailed notes, especially about which chapters examiners praised or criticised and about their implicit or explicit criteria. I recommend at least half an hour before you begin discussion. If it is a large group, you may choose to have small groups discuss the four points before convening the full group.

4) Lead a discussion of the four points. The discussion will almost certainly become quite far ranging (See Detailed advice for facilitators).

Detailed advice for facilitators

There are many, many points that can be made about these reports. You and participants in your sessions will no doubt think of many more than we can highlight here.

First, it is worth noting that for all three examiners to choose recommendation 1 suggests that this is a very good thesis. When I reviewed 58 closed student files (Nightingale, 1984), 36 passed on first submission but many of these were required to make some corrections (as in recommendation 2 at Utopia University). Many students have no idea that so many theses are sent back for at least some revision, and many feel that that is equivalent to failure. They should be prepared for the possibility and reassured that it is very unlikely they will fail if they do whatever they are asked to do.

Do the comments offered to the candidate seem consistent with the recommendation to pass the thesis with no further work? People who read these reports have very different reactions to them so try to see how participants in your session react. You might ask them to try to put themselves in the student's shoes. She has just been told that she has passed, that she does not have to do any more work to get her PhD. Presumably she has been warmly congratulated by her supervisor and Head of School and should be feeling elated. Now she reads these reports. How do participants think she reacted?

In fact, she was absolutely devastated. She read lines like Robert Catt's comment that Chapter Nine (which she had felt good about) was "ruined", or John Doe's comment that she was "insecure and derivative" on stylistic questions, or Jane Smith's comment that she treated critical controversies "cursorily or evasively" and she felt a total failure. It took a great deal of bucking up by her supervisor and many months before she read the reports again and noticed that all were suggesting she had publishable work, even a book. Indeed, she found a publisher - a good one - and rewrote the thesis using most of the advice offered by the examiners, and the book itself got good reviews including one in the Times Literary Supplement.

So, at least from the student's point of view, the examiners' comments seem to suggest that they would want a rewrite rather than accepting the thesis immediately. However, please note that Utopia University's Part 2 "[invites] the examiner to make detailed comments and suggestions on the thesis to be conveyed to the candidate". This is different from asking the examiner to explain her/his recommendation; many universities do the latter. However, many examiners talk about their reports as feedback for the student regardless of what the university documents ask for (Kiley & Mullins, 2001). A mismatch between the feedback report to students and the recommendation ticked on the administrative form is not unusual and can cause problems for decision-making committees as well as confusing students. (This issue is considered more fully in Activity 4.)

Are there any lessons for examiners and/or supervisors here? Discuss this with your participants. At least, I would suggest, supervisors should try to prepare students for the kind of reports that are common in their disciplines. There do seem to be some discipline differences but in my experience, at least, it is very common to see most examiners offering some very strong advice that can be read as pretty negative. Mabel Smyth commented that she was less upset by John Doe's report because he started and ended with praise, while Robert Catt seemed not to like anything at all - perhaps another point that could be stressed in helping examiners write reports that students can cope with and which may help them grow rather than shrivel up.

It is common to see examiners' opinions differ - sometimes quite dramatically with one recommending immediate acceptance of the thesis and another asking for a substantial rewrite. Sue Johnston (1997) describes a case where two examiners recommended immediate acceptance and one a failure. Depending on your goals for this session, you might want to discuss how your university deals with such differences of opinion.

In this particular case, all three examiners singled out Chapters 4 and 10 for praise. Two liked Chapter 11, and a different pair liked Chapter 8. One also mentioned Chapters 2, 6, 7, and 9. But one

disliked Chapter 9.

All three examiners said the thesis was too long. Mabel Smyth told me that when she began revising for publication - a task she could not face for a couple of years - she found herself cringing over the flabbiness of the thesis. By then she agreed that she had not really established a consistent, coherent argument and she acknowledged that she had over-simplified the relation between fiction and non-fiction. She described the process of writing the thesis as just studying one book after another, reading all the criticism and following up background material etc, and then writing a chapter. She said she was well into the work before she even found a metaphor that would represent the author's development and sort of hold the thesis together. The thesis she submitted was, in effect, a series of chapters written separately and revised only a little to try to turn them into a single "story".

This sort of aimlessness is probably much more common in fields like literature than in experimental science, but I have read examiners' reports criticising science students for having no controlling idea, no thesis/ theme holding together the dissertation. And I have myself examined social science theses that did not really address the stated hypothesis; such theses are more like a chronological narrative telling everything the student did but not really reaching conclusions. When I reviewed the comments of 139 examiners of Masters and PhD theses (Nightingale 1984), I concluded that the major fault (even of theses that were accepted) was this failure to take a stance or to reach a conclusion. Probably because of this problem of conceptualization, theses were described as overly long, repetitious and circular. Johnston (1977) also found many criticisms about length and focus in the 51 examiners' reports she studied.

What does all of this tell us about the criteria that were applied by these examiners? First of all, all three apparently accept as a standard that at least some of the thesis should be publishable. All three say specifically or indirectly that this thesis could be published as a book, which I understand to be pretty high praise in literature. On the other hand, all three suggest substantial reorganisation and/or major additional work (to publish not to pass). This suggests that none of them believed that the thesis had to be publishable as it stands in order to be acceptable for a PhD.

Recent studies by Mullins and Kiley (2002) and Buckridge (2001) in which experienced examiners have been interviewed cast some light on this apparent generosity. "Experienced examiners expect the thesis to pass" (Mullins & Kiley, 2002, p7; Buckridge, 2001). They comment that experienced examiners are well aware of the time and effort that has gone into a thesis and they are reluctant to demand more of the same. Experienced examiners are, in most cases, interested in giving feedback to the candidate; rarely do they feel they have to act as gatekeepers keeping someone out of the PhD community. Mullins and Kiley, (2002) say that:

The concept of capacity differentiates the form of assessment undertaken at the postgraduate research level, compared with the undergraduate and/or coursework level. At the postgraduate level the examiner seeks evidence that the student has demonstrated the potential to be an independent researcher, not that she/he is necessarily one already.

You may wish to discuss the purpose of a PhD. For some examiners it is to produce a thesis that documents a contribution to knowledge in the field; for others it allows novice researchers to demonstrate that they are becoming capable of independent work which will contribute in the future. (See also detailed advice to facilitators of Activity 1.)

Frequently, one hears that inexperienced examiners should be avoided because they are too harsh in their judgments. It seems to be true that they have not assimilated this criterion of judging capacity rather than reading a thesis as if they are peer-reviewing an article for a leading journal. If you are leading sessions that include inexperienced supervisor/ examiners, this is a point that should be

emphasised strongly. They will not be subverting academic standards if they pass a thesis which is not perfect or brilliant.

Mabel Smyth commented to me that she appreciated later that her examiners were justified in their criticisms that she was in some ways insecure in her approach to texts as a PhD student, but she pointed out that she was, after all, still a student at that stage. She also commented that as a student, she did not dare "take on" a major critic as one examiner wished she had. She became aware when she rewrote the thesis for publication that she had learned how to handle complex issues of style and gained the confidence to challenge established writers partly as a result of doing the PhD and partly by continuing to work in the field for a couple of years. Students are often told: "It's a plumber's license, not a life work" or "It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize." Examiners should be reminded of this too.

While you are discussing the issue of criteria, you may wish to explore the issue of the difference between a Masters by research thesis and a PhD. Have any of your participants read Masters theses that could have met the standard of a PhD? Does your university documentation give useful information to examiners about differences in expectation between these degrees?

You might want to work with the group to develop a list of criteria for the PhD and then see which would distinguish a PhD from a Masters.

Handout 2.5 might assist discussion of criteria. If you decide to use it, you will want the group to consider whether the listed criteria work for all disciplines. In particular, some humanities people may find trying to make judgments about "methods" and "data" irrelevant; others may find it easy to fit their ways of approaching their subjects into this framework.

If some members of your group have experience in trying to write detailed criteria for assessment, they may find some or all of these points too general or ill-defined to be useful. For example, "Scope appropriate to level of degree" does not help an examiner to distinguish between PhD and research Masters. It is important to treat this handout as a prompt for discussion not a solution to the problem of establishing good criteria.

One last minor point: note that John Doe's report is dated in early October, Jane Smith's in early December, and Robert Catt's in early April in following year. Does your university have any specific strategies for encouraging examiners to get their reports in promptly? You may wish to stress to participants that they should not accept the invitation to examine if they are already over-committed; tardy examination reporting seems to be the bane of the lives of postgraduate office administrators and Deans everywhere, not to mention making students miserable.

One Australian university is encouraging students to choose an optional oral exam in part because setting the date for an oral imposes a specific deadline on examiners. The take-up of this option seems to vary from department to department, probably depending on the attitude of the postgraduate coordinator and/ or head of school. Some students have found an oral a very positive experience; others cannot even bear the thought. On the other hand, it does seem to achieve the desired aim of getting reports in relatively quickly.

If you know that most members of the group are inexperienced supervisors/ examiners, you may wish to invite some experienced people from different disciplines to attend part of the workshop to contribute to the discussion phase of Activity 2.

Handout 2.1: Examiner's report

Utopia University
Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Part 1
Examiner's Report to the University

Part 1 of the examiner's report advises the University's Higher Degree Committee of your recommendation regarding the outcome of this candidacy. Part 2, which will be given to the student, offers advice to the student.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Examiner:

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Please circle the recommendation you wish to make regarding this thesis.

Recommendation 1:

The thesis be passed with no requirement for correction or amendments and the candidate be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The thesis makes a substantial and original contribution to the field and is worthy of publication.

Recommendation 2:

The thesis be passed without further examination provided that the candidate has made minor textual corrections as recommended by the examiner/s to the satisfaction of Head of School.

Recommendation 3:

The thesis be passed without further examination provided that the candidate has rewritten specific sections of the thesis as recommended by the examiner/s, this rewriting not changing the substantive conclusions of the thesis, to the satisfaction of the Head of School.

Recommendation 4:

The thesis be resubmitted for examination after rewriting specified sections of the thesis as recommended by the examiner/s.

Recommendation 5:

The thesis be failed and the candidate NOT be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and NOT be permitted to resubmit the thesis for consideration for a PhD in the revised form.

Signature of Examiner: Date:

Handout 2.2: Report by John Doe

Utopia University Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy Part 2 Examiner's Report to the Candidate

The examiner is invited to make detailed comments and suggestions on the thesis to be conveyed to the candidate. Supplementary sheets may be attached.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Examiner: John Doe

Examiner's appointment: Professor, Gnosis University

To survey the complete work of an author, particularly one so often subjected to misinterpretation as A, is a substantial feat. Ms Smyth's enthusiasm for the task and her control of the material never seem to falter. Though long, the dissertation offers a consistent and convincing interpretation of A's work. In particular, it establishes the continuity between the fiction and the non-fiction, frequently showing how an article has provided useful background or stage-setting for a novel.

The best chapters seem to me 2, 4 (second half only), 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11. They are the ones that offer the closest study of the text, contain the fewest and shortest summaries of plot, and are most successful in holding in check the candidate's pandemic leisureliness.

What I miss most in the dissertation is close textual analysis to establish the assertions being made. Too often a rewarding insight is suggested, but allowed to slip away without adequate, or sometimes any, demonstration. Even the discussion of A's style on pp 93ff is rather generalized, and offers examples that belie the accuracy of asserting that A's later sentence structures exhibit 'complexity'. The exposition of ideas is usually good; the exposition of stylistic questions insecure and derivative. (See, for instance, p183, where B's stylistic comment is quoted but not tested.)

As a history of A's ideas the dissertation is admirably comprehensive. As a critical history it is best in the chapters I have praised earlier. Chapter 2, for instance, is perceptive in its account of A's somewhat slanted view of X, Y and Z. On the other hand, Ms Smyth seems at times beguiled by A's confident style into inattention or uncritical acceptance of what A is actually saying. Four examples from chapter 1, each slightly different, will make the point. On pp 18-19 Ms Smyth, as if making a new point, refers to the weariness of parts of A's non-fiction. But in a quotation from A on p16 there is an admission and explanation of this very quality and Ms Smyth has summarized it succinctly. In quotations from A's work made on pp 9 and 19, A contradicts herself about the value to a society of heroes, but the contradiction goes unremarked by Ms Smyth. On pp 32 and 34 quotations on the subject of A's attitude to Country T's degree of civilization are contradictory, but again the discrepancy goes unremarked. On p35 A's notion that parish-pump politics are somehow unique to Country T is an indication of her own unfamiliarity with the practice of politics and should tell one something about A's fastidious distaste for involvement in practical matters, but Ms Smyth makes no comment.

Even after Chapter 2 sets the dissertation off on a much more assured path, inattention can occasionally be detected. On p92, for instance, part of A's review of C's Book is quoted. The quotation ends with a pithy sentence, 'The reader's sympathies are never touched', which was almost exactly echoed by C in regard to A some two years later. Or, to take a different kind of example, it seems perverse to try to correct A's view of history by reference to such an opinionated and tendentious historical writer as R (see p145).

These matters, in themselves small, point to a larger fault: weakness in arguing a thesis. Ms Smyth is almost always adequate in description and synopsis - it is only in the first half of chapter 4 that I detect any obfuscation of narrative outline - and sometimes brilliant. But in the construction of an argument she is diffuse and unrigorous. The general case made by the dissertation is more than satisfactorily established by the sheer weight of analysis over the whole of A's oeuvre, but it is all a bit like Christian's progress to the Eternal City - there are many snares and distractions along the way.

Ms Smyth is, in fact, an expansive rather than a concise writer. The dissertation would be improved by substantial cutting - to less than half its length - and even at that length could still accommodate the close textual evidence I have adumbrated. Ms Smyth's comment about A's handling of the Government House dinner party (p187) might aptly be applied to her own dissertation. The leisurely, graceful style - a delight to read - is reminiscent of a more expansive age than our own. It is the

Handout 2.3: Report by Jane Smith

Utopia University Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy Part 2 Examiner's Report to the Candidate

The examiner is invited to make detailed comments and suggestions on the thesis to be conveyed to the candidate. Supplementary sheets may be attached.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Examiner: Jane Smith

Examiner's appointment: Professor, World-class University

The thesis is in general a comprehensive, careful, balanced and well-arranged study of A. A major benefit that derives from the bringing-together of A's non-fiction and fiction is that one becomes aware of just how sustained and central to her work has been A's concern with the nature and effects of colonialism. This aspect could well have been better highlighted in the title of the thesis. If the candidate considers publishing the thesis as a whole, I would suggest that it be "tightened" by way of concentrating on this pervasive theme of colonialism. If publication of individual chapters is considered, I would suggest that the most valuable/ original/ stimulating are Chapters 4, 8, 10, and 12.

Specific points and parts of the thesis which I particularly liked include:

- 1) the interpretation of Book E in terms of Religion Y;
- 2) the drawing of parallels between Book G and Book Z;
- 3) the comment on the absence of any official record of Character J's presence on the island in Book H;
- 4) the connection between Character J's sexuality and her (lack of) sense of self;
- 5) the elucidation of A's growing disenchantment with the idea of "knowing the truth of history"

Granted that one of the two major aims of the research was 'to discover the ways in which the non-fiction has inspired and shaped A's novels and stories,' (piii) it seemed a pity that the relation between non-fiction and fiction was examined only as a one-way relationship, the "influences" seen as moving only from non-fiction to fiction. It could have been fascinating and instructive to examine how "influences" also move in the opposite direction, and how A's fictive imagination shapes and colours the way she receives and shapes the "facts" which the non-fiction presents. (This kind of examination is briefly undertaken in, for example, X's essay on Book K in a recent issue of Journal Q.) If Book H is seen as shaped by Article C inasmuch as the former follows the latter in sequence of composition, might not Book K be even more interestingly, if less obviously, "shaped" by Book F? To examine the possibility that influence also moves in the fiction-to-non-fiction direction might also have complicated the question of how and to what extent the non-fiction "inspires and shapes" the fiction. For instance, is it so much that Book H is "inspired and shaped" by Article C as that both are parallel products of the same experience and imagination?

Of course, Book H (like Book I to a lesser extent) provides an "acid test" on this question of the influence of the non-fiction on the fiction, since Article C appears to be virtually a blue-print for the novel. However, the commentary on Book H confirmed a feeling I got from the thesis as a whole - that a little too much had been expected from the idea of the non-fiction as "influence" on the fiction. What is actually said by way of specific comparisons between Book H and Article C does not seem to justify the insistence, at various points in the chapter, on the importance of an examination of Article C to an appreciation of the novel. The candidate says that A's non-fiction reveals that the roots of her fiction lie in reality (p352). However, we do not need Article C to know this about Book

H. Besides, the "reality" in question includes, no doubt, A's interpretation of events. Again, in what sense do the roots of any serious fiction not lie in "reality"? The specific connections made between Article C and Book H remain more or less at the level of a simple indication of parallels, or of fairly obvious ways in which fictive technique normally differs from journalistic technique (e.g. the greater use made by A the novelist of description of landscape to create mood and symbolically embody meaning).

Incidentally, the reservations about Book H expressed at the end of the chapter on that novel seem at odds with the main body of the commentary. The commentary, which seemed to be "justifying" the novel and appreciating it with comparative warmth, did not prepare me to expect the charge of "a hollow achievement" (p374) at the end.

While the thesis is informed by a sound and comprehensive awareness of the critical controversies generated by A's work, and while it takes a generally reasonable and sensitive approach towards them, there was a tendency to treat some of them evasively or cursorily. For example, the candidate gives a clear, useful summary of W's general criticism of A, but she does not really "take on" the issue. She merely insures that she does not step on any toes by saying that she has found "W's views on A extremely useful, etc" (p11). Besides, the statement which introduces the topic of W's view of A is not an adequate excuse for or defence of A: "choosing to base his fiction on fact and to make essentially uncomplicated metaphors out of reality, A exposes herself to another criticism." (p10)

In the early chapters, the candidate perceptively indicates how A's work shows her awareness of the importance of language in the colonial dilemma. However, the candidate shies away from examining A's implicit attitude/opinions on this question, as may be contained, for example, in Character B's outburst in Book J. Can we assume that A's view is quite the same as that of S quoted in Appendix 3?

On p63 the candidate raises an interesting question, and a very important one, I think, relative to A's "remarkable shift in viewpoint" vis-à-vis Country I, and says that the shift can "be seen either as an uncharacteristic lapse in memory or as further evidence of the duality of experience, the two (or more) truths possible in any explanation of reality." When one puts beside the latter suggestion the candidate's perception of A's growing doubt as to "whether the study of history can possibly reveal truth" (p388), one wonders whether these perceptions might not have been illuminatingly applied to those books in which A seems to be sure as to what truth history reveals. After all, this is a thesis which is very much concerned with presenting A as truth-teller, a writer who sees it as her business "to set the record straight".

7 December 1990

Handout 2.3: Report by Robert Catt

Utopia University
Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Part 2
Examiner's Report to the Candidate

The examiner is invited to make detailed comments and suggestions on the thesis to be conveyed to the candidate. Supplementary sheets may be attached.

Name of candidate: Mabel Smyth

Thesis Title: Colonialism: Fact and Fiction

Examiner: Robert Catt

Examiner's appointment: Professor, University of the Commonwealth

If the thesis is to be revised for publication, particularly if it is to be made into a book, I think the following kinds of revision would greatly improve it.

- 1) Mrs Smyth would have done better to have focused more sharply on the relationships between the fiction and the non-fiction, rather than diffusing her attention over the work-by-work account which gives her thesis its great bulk, and covers much (by now) rather familiar ground.
- 2) The separation into two distinct sections seems to me a mistake, and has blurred the picture of A's development, particularly the growth of compassion and of political concern between Book E and Book G, and the consequent darkening of the latest novels. I suggest one complex critical 'story' sectionalised if necessary by period, and concentrating on the subject of the relationship of fiction and non-fiction.
- 3) Moreover, although there are fascinating hints scattered in the thesis, of how a distrust of the imagination's tendency to fantasy might explain a deep need to relate fiction to the "real world"; these are never brought together into a discussion of why non-fiction should play so crucial a role in the development of A's novelistic imagination, of (conversely) of how her non-fiction draws on the novelist's imagination. A's concern with 'history' should be a major theme.
- 4) I wish A had been put more often into the context of her contemporaries or affinities. One particularly misses the context of other regional writing for the first period; of the peculiar outburst of fictions of role in Region B in the sixties; and of critical attention to the comparative elements in the latest work, which might have helped the distinction between the thematic gloom and the novelistic elan, for which Mrs Smyth has been reaching.
- 5) Though the 'colonial' themes are well to the fore, as they should be, I thought that Mrs Smyth neglected the more "existential" - for lack of a better shorthand - A of the "abyss", which is at least as important from Book D onwards, and which regional critics have tended to miss.
- 6) Most important of all, she neglects A's subtleties of form, most particularly with Books A, D, G (limiting an otherwise excellent chapter), and above all Book F. She is not alone in this, but it is a great pity in a thesis that has so much intrinsically to do with relations between differing kinds and tendencies of imagination in the same author.

I hope the following brief comments on individual chapters may prove useful.

Chapter One: More attention to the tone and style of the book and the contrast with other regional writers?

Chapter Two: How does the idea of Book F begin to form also in Book L (although it is Book E that is being written). What is the process of Book L, its development? What are the imaginative differences between the two books on Country I, and what the political?

Chapter Three: Interesting chapter marred by insufficient attention to A's development, so it came to seem miscellaneous. One became aware, as with the previous chapter, of what was being lost by structurally dividing non-fiction from fiction, instead of tracing the whole development in one complex critical 'story'.

Chapter Four: Good chapter. Something on the "sub-test" growth of feeling for the slave and indigene? More on the novelist's imagination used historically?

Chapter Five: A's first use of the stories/novel. Formal advantages? The development of the narrator is neglected.

Chapter Six: What about the techniques of A's comedy?

Chapter Seven: Why two books? Why Prologue and Epilogue? Relation between 'history' and 'myth' (i.e. vision of an underlying abyss beneath the surface of "reality").

Chapter Eight: Interesting chapter. Needs to point up the universalising mythical emphasis: (the change between Book D and Book F), and pay slightly more subtle attention to the end, which is not infused with Religion

Y. (A tension at the end of Book L?) Chapter Nine: Ruined by the absence of attention to the whole form of the book, the three different kinds of imagination in the three 'books' 'Myth' and 'History' now? How criticised by the final section of the novel?

Chapter Ten: Amongst the best, yet again doesn't consider the form (cf. Book A) or process. How does one read the title story differently because one has read the others? How does one measure the difference between the first journal entry and the final one in imaginative terms? Chapter Eleven: Interesting chapter. But is A's novel, dark as it may be, either wholly gloomy (its art?) or lacking

in imaginative compassion? Chapter Twelve: Might Author C help one plot the essential space between A and Character S? 7 April 1991

Handout 2.5: Thesis Examination Criteria

Introducing the study

- Clear definition of the purpose
- Scope appropriate to level of degree
- Familiarity with relevant literature
- Ability to critically examine the literature

Explaining the methods

- Clear description of what was done
- Adequate justification of method (considers alternatives and explains choices)
- Demonstration of 'technical' competence

Presenting the data

- Relevance to stated purpose
- Clear summary of data
- Accuracy of data presentation (figures and tables)
- Verifiability of data

Discussing the results

- Effective analysis of the subject material
- Critical examination of the results
- Logical argument in support of case
- Systematic and constructive discussion
- Suggestion of appropriate further work

Demonstrating originality, contribution to field

- Novel ideas
- New approach or analysis
- Valuable data

Presenting the work

- Fluency of writing
- Coherence of content (nothing extraneous, but everything that is necessary)
- Correct citations of references
- Correct presentation - spelling, grammar
- Adequate illustrative material
- Useful overviews to prepare reader for what follows
- Useful summaries to remind reader of what has been presented

Overhead 2.1

Please note:

- 1) whether the reports seem consistent with the recommendations of outcomes
- 2) whether the examiners agree with each other on important points
- 3) whether these reports will assist the candidate in any way, and
- 4) what you think is revealed about the examiners' criteria for judging a PhD

Activity 3

Overview

Time: approximately 45 minutes

This activity requires the facilitator to summarise published findings about what examiners actually say in their reports (Johnston, 1997; Nightingale, 1984) and to lead a brief discussion on these findings.

Preparation

Study the detailed advice for facilitators and prepare any notes you may wish to use as you deliver an informal briefing on what examiners commonly say in their reports.

It is strongly recommended that you read the detailed advice for facilitators of Activity 1a, Activity 1b, Activity 2, and Activity 4. You will find overlaps and information you may find useful for this discussion.

Prepare overheads 3.1 and 3.2 if you wish to use them.

There is overlap between this activity and the discussion of the examiner's reports in Activity 2. If you are following the plan for Option 2, you will want to use this concluding briefing to make general points about examiners' reports in many disciplines and to summarise the significant points that came up during Activity 2.

If you decide to use additional experienced resource people for Activity 2, they could be helpful during this discussion as well.

Procedure

You will give an informal "lecture" to sum up and conclude this session. Your personal style will determine how you handle this part of the workshop. Most groups respond well to an invitation to "interrupt" and talk over specific points.

You may also wish to include information about how your own institution, faculty, or department manages the examination process and any data about attrition, completion times and success rates that are available.

Detailed advice for facilitators

You should try to read Johnston (1997) and Nightingale (1984) if at all possible. (These articles are not available on this site.)

Johnston reviewed 51 examiners' reports covering 16 doctoral theses; I (Nightingale, 1984) reviewed 139 reports on 26 PhD theses and 32 Masters theses.

Of Johnston's 16 candidates, 10 passed without major additional work, 3 had been passed after resubmission and re-examination, and 3 more had not yet completed the required additional work.

Of the 58 students whose files I reviewed, 36 passed without major additional work, 17 resubmitted and passed, 1 chose not to resubmit, 1 was granted a lesser degree, and 3 failed. The percentages who passed without major additional work were the same for PhD and Masters candidates.

In the cases of the three failures, the material in the files revealed intractable problems over long periods of time. One student seemed ill-prepared for PhD level study and probably should not have been allowed to continue to submission. Two seemed not to have taken the advice of their supervisors and proceeded with topics or statistical approaches that they were counselled against. Remember that

these were closed files in 1984; most universities seem to have better review procedures now and I believe would be more likely to recommend that the candidacy be terminated. However, there are many cases which are not really clear-cut, where supervisor and department may find it hard to say with certainty 'this will not pass, you must change it or quit'. (See "An Academic Minefield" on this site.)

One student chose not to revise and resubmit the thesis. I thought this was a very unfortunate outcome as from everything I could find in the file, the student did not have to do a great deal of additional work and s/he was almost certain to receive the degree. The student seemed to be demanding a guaranteed pass prior to doing the work, and of course, the university could not make such a promise. I could not help thinking that if the student had been warned that revision was not an unusual request and that it did not mean a failure, s/he might have been less upset and just got on with the task.

If your University's Postgraduate Office can provide similar data, participants will certainly be interested. In the past, it was surprising how few institutions actually tabulated this information, but with changes to the funding models, you may find more data is now available.

Emphasise that there are few outright failures. However, a great many candidates never complete their thesis. Attrition rates tend to be higher in humanities disciplines and lower in experimental sciences, but a system-wide average of at least 30% is generally acknowledged. Again try to get local data for your participants.

Nightingale reported that there were 18 cases where the examiners' recommendations differed, and the Higher Degrees Committee had to study the comments carefully to reach a decision. Johnston reports on 3 cases where there were considerable differences of opinion between examiners: 2 had recommendations ranging from pass to fail, and the other received two passes and one resubmit after major revision.

Johnston suggests that it is possible that in these cases there was a poor choice of examiner. One, who recommended a pass when others found serious problems, admitted that she had limited knowledge of the statistics employed in the study. In another case it appeared that one of the examiners was not willing to accept a non-traditional approach to writing a thesis. And in the third case there seemed to be "almost an ideological incompatibility with the substance of the thesis".

On this last point, it is interesting to note that one Australian university instructs examiners that the research design of the project has been accepted by the candidate's department at a number of check-points during the candidacy and that examiners should not reject a thesis on the basis of the choice of topic or even the methodology.

Johnston comments that the difference between recommendations of pass outright and pass after editorial corrections seems to be blurry. Similarly, what constitutes a major revision with the need for re-examination and what is "minor" and can be approved within the institution seems also ill-defined. It is possible that like Mabel Smyth's examiners, many examiners, who offer critical comments but recommend a pass or pass after minor corrections, are offering feedback for the use of the student and do not intend for the institution to demand re-examination after changes.

Such a possible explanation is supported by Mullins & Kiley (2001) and Buckridge (2001) who emphasise that examiners expect students to pass and are reluctant to demand lots more work because of the effort already expended.

Participants will want to know what bothers examiners most. Johnston emphasises the importance of candidates' producing 'reader-friendly' text. This means not only text that is correct in terms of spelling, grammar, and carefully proof-read but also text that leads a reader through the argument by logical sequencing, frequent summaries and overviews, the use of signposts, and so on. Examiners may not fail a poorly edited thesis but their exasperation and impatience become apparent. If, in addition, there are other problems, these may be magnified in the reader's mind.

Nightingale emphasises the importance of the thesis having a 'thesis'. A good thesis has a strong theme or focus, it takes a stance or reaches a conclusion. Johnston and I both found many comments about overly long, repetitive theses. These theses did not 'hold together' and often seemed not to present a clear argument or point of view or conclusions.

Overhead 3.1

Reviews of examiners' reports

Johnston (1997) 16 cases, all PhD

51 reports 10 passed 3 passed after revision 3 revisions incomplete

Nightingale (1984) 58 cases:

26 PhD 32 Masters 139 reports 36 passed 17 passed after revision 1 did not resubmit 1 given lesser degree 3 failed

Overhead 3.2

Reviews of examiners' reports

Johnston (1997)

Nightingale (1984)

Summary of examiners' comments:

They do not always agree with each other.

- They are very impatient with poorly edited theses.
 - o Errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation can be taken as evidence of 'sloppiness' in the research as well as in the proof-reading.
 - o Even expert readers need 'signposts', summaries, and overviews to guide their reading.

Most important to 'have a thesis' (take a stance, reach a conclusion, communicate a well-supported main point).

Many theses are too long, repetitive, circular.