How to examine a thesis

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Question:

As an early career academic, I would like to find out more about examining theses. Is some particular expertise expected? How do I find out how to examine a thesis? What if I am asked to examine theses with a kaupapa Māori framework, one I didn't use myself?

Keywords: assessment; evaluation; thesis examination

Answer:

As you advance through your academic career you will be called upon to do things you have never done before without being given 'training'. Examination of theses is a typical example of this: Tinkler and Jackson (2004) found that of the 137 examiners they surveyed, 92% had not had any training in the task (p. 109). If you feel that you have been invited to examine topics that are too far out of your experience or, that despite your own expertise, a fair examination would be overly time-consuming and difficult, then you should refuse. However, many academics find that examining theses is amongst their most satisfying work. You have the privilege of reading cutting-edge work brought to you in a plain brown wrapping. Over time and with experience you will develop strategies for contributing to research and the fostering of new generations of academics by giving good advice in your comments as an examiner. You are right to begin looking for suggestions as to how to carry out this important work fairly and thoroughly while still fitting it in to a busy professional life with a heavy workload.

There is an excellent book on how to examine a thesis, and that is exactly what it is called: Lynne Pearce's (2004) *How to Examine a Thesis*. Furthermore, it is available as an ebook. This is one of those short succinct books that gives some cold hard facts (for example comparing regulations and practice in different countries, which is relevant if you are an external examiner) and concrete advice, including suggestions about how much time to spend on different aspects of evaluating, and it also burrows down to some of the stickier or more contentious issues. Pearce cites several incidences: for example, when a junior academic had been approached to examine a thesis and was given signals by academics more powerful than her that she was expected to pass it; on examining it and finding that she was not willing to pass, it she felt vulnerable to being excluded from a collegial circle.

Occasionally relationships between individuals involved (supervisor, another examiner and you) can compromise the examination process; you need to consider not only your time availability and your expertise match to the thesis topic, but also who the supervisor is, and whether that may exert pressure on you, before accepting the role of examiner. Pearce's book (2004) is well worth looking at for its grounded advice.

Barbara Lovitts (2007) gathered descriptors of *excellent*, *very good*, *acceptable* and *not acceptable* theses from hundreds of academics; her book summarises her findings and gives a very helpful indication of how the academic community sees the boundaries of standard achievement. Lovitts (2007) is particularly good for the descriptors on what is an acceptable (i.e., passable) thesis: these reassuringly put the bar that must be cleared at an achievable level. For example, her sample includes "Is not very acceptable or significant; Is not interesting, exciting, or surprising; Displays little creativity, imagination, or insight; Writing is pedestrian and plodding; Structure and organization are

weak; Project is narrow in scope" (see pages 35–38). Her descriptors come from a rigorous study and give a good reminder that a doctoral thesis is just that. It does not need to be Nobel Prize candidature. Constructive examiner's comments from you could give direction for improvement, however.

Some other literature gives good general advice about how to examine a thesis. Although Tinkler and Jackson (2004) are mainly interested in the *viva voce*, the living voice of the oral examination, and in protocol around the examination process, they offer a section with examiners as the intended audience (pp. 95–123), advising on how to decide whether or not to accept the invitation to examine and providing suggestions on what to look for and how to judge what the standard is. Tinkler and Jackson (2004) include a tidy case study from Pam Denicolo, *Criteria for Assessing the Written Thesis in the Social Sciences* (pp. 114–116).

Although none of these writers specifically talks about kaupapa Māori frameworks, some of the ethical issues they raise will resonate and probably help you to feel more confident about how to evaluate a thesis that has such a framework. Given the recent increase in interdisciplinary theses, all in need of examiners, it is good professional practice in any case to develop strategies that work fairly and professionally with non-standard theses. When theses are innovative, they are challenging to examine; yet the best theses are often those that break the common pattern. In a recent conference presentation with Peter Macauley, Terry Evans reminded doctoral examiners that they are examining a novice work and should not expect the thesis they would have written or supervised themselves; instead, they should keep an open mind to different approaches and ways of working (Evans & Macauley, 2010). Tinkler and Jackson (2004) similarly note that "To examine fairly you must be prepared to engage with the candidate's work on its own terms. If you feel that…you are not willing to do this, then you should decline the invitation" (p. 101). The desire for fairness and for listening to the voice of the other actually fits within core kaupapa Māori principles.

Examiners should give kaupapa Māori thesis writers credit for the fact that they are held accountable by two ethical and critical systems: the academic Western one and the Māori social one. A kaupapa Māori thesis is often more challenging to produce: authors will have positioned themselves according to Maori community values, respecting protocol, which may have made the research process a bit tougher and slower. Usually they must use Western theories and methodologies as well as kaupapa Māori principles, meshing sometimes epistemologically disjunctive models in order to conform with both frameworks. Linda Smith points out that "in all community approaches *process*—that is methodology and method—is highly important. In many projects the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate. They are expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination" (Smith, 1999, 127–128). The work of negotiating respectfully within a community so that research benefits that community is more time-consuming and cognitively challenging than simply following a single theoretical model. The more difficult route is taken for ethical social reasons; the additional challenges should be kept in mind during examination.

References

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