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How to Survive Your Viva: defending a thesis in an oral examination

Rowena Murray

Maidenhead and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003, 160 pp. ISBN 0-335-21284-0 (pbk)

The title is the least satisfactory part of this book; its reference to 'surviving' is presumably a marketing ploy that plays on students' anxieties about the supposed gladiatorial nature of vivas — a perception that Rowena Murray acknowledges but does not over-play in the text itself. Before receiving the book for review, I had expected it would focus upon the time after the viva — see the Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'to survive' as 'to continue to live after the end or cessation of some thing or condition or the occurrence of some event: to remain alive, live on' — yet the book barely touches on this. The subtitle tells the real story and the title does the book no favours. This is a pity because it is a worthwhile contribution, both practical and analytical, to a developing literature on this particular form of assessment.

The book attempts to hold in balance the undeniable truth that the viva is, viewed from different points in time, both extremely important (in prospect and while it is happening) and of almost no account (the moment it is over). As the author observes, who ever asks you how you did in the viva once you are successfully through it?

The book is organized into ten chapters that cover pretty much all that students might need to know about the viva, including aspects of it that they might never have considered. It leaves little to chance. Each chapter is divided into very small parts with plentiful subheadings, while advice is presented in boxes throughout the chapters. I found this busy and distracting, but others may like its sound-bite format.

The introduction sets out the author's rationale for writing the book. She claims the book is relevant for all three protagonists in the examining of research degrees — candidates, supervisors and examiners. In practice it is primarily addressed to research degree students, with some explicit reference to supervisors and only occasionally to examiners, who are left to work out how the research, practical advice and skills practice best apply to them. It is conceived as an extension of her existing book *How to Write a Thesis* (Murray, 2002).

Chapter 2 looks at the nature of the viva and the ways in which this can vary by disciplinary subject and institution. It is a useful reminder to candidates and external examiners that there is no universal practice and that they both need to prepare for the experience, albeit in different ways. Chapter 3, 'Roles and Responsibilities', addresses who will be at the viva, what the student might expect of them and the kinds of questions a candidate might fruitfully ask about the people and their roles. 'Countdown to the Viva' (Chapter 4) sets out a 3-month schedule of preparation for the viva, with an assumption that the candidate will have this amount of time between submitting and being examined. Given that Murray is careful throughout the text to underline how custom and practice vary, this strikes me as an unwarranted assumption and inconsistent with some regulations that would require a shorter period between submission and viva. However, she needs such an assumption if the advice on preparation that is contained in the following chapters is to be viable.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7, 'Questions', 'Answers' and 'Interactions', respectively give brief accounts of the different kinds of questions and answers that might be encountered or expected during a viva, together with some suggested strategies for focused preparation — for example, drawing up a list of general and specific questions that might be asked about the thesis. These chapters also raise questions about what the candidate might do if they encounter inappropriate, hostile or apparently ignorant questions from the examiners, or if they experience a lack of feedback for their answers to examiners' questions.

Chapter 8 urges the candidate to undertake graduated practice, from re-reading the thesis through to a mock viva and practising the set of questions prepared as a result of the previous chapters. Chapter 9 touches on the possible decisions that can be made as a result of the viva, doing corrections and appeals against examiners' decisions. The final chapter is a very brief summary about the ambiguity of the viva and a reiteration of the author's view that facing it head on with time to practise skills is the best way to deal with that ambiguity.

Throughout, Rowena Murray is concerned to recognize that candidates may feel powerless, but that they can learn to be more powerful by making themselves knowledgeable about *local* regulations, procedures and customs, practising appropriate skills and preparing themselves as they would for any other form of assessment. She is clear that some things cannot be carefully predicted or controlled, but that the examination process can be made less precarious by conscientious research and intellectual application to the job in hand.

Murray's starting point, summarized towards the end of the book, is that: 'positioning the viva as a new type of communication event [for the student] helps to clarify the new expectations it brings and the new skills it calls for. It also repositions the student about to take their viva as — still — a learner' (p.142). Throughout, she urges that students should be willing, and helped, to prepare for the oral examination and that such preparation can and should be considered appropriate from the beginning of their project, not something that is left to the last moment. I would agree that leaving consideration of the issues she raises and practise of the skills she considers vital for this particular form of 'peer review' until the period around submission could be disastrous. Current students of mine and one recently graduated PhD whom I asked to read this book commented that the book highlighted things that could go wrong, that they felt worse rather than better after reading it and that they thought it might be discouraging because of its emphasis on so many new things to learn in such a short time. None of these observations is damning unless supervisor and candidate really do leave all this to the last few months.

Rowena Murray argues a strong case for research students to prepare systematically for the oral examination of their thesis, and an equally good case that commonly such preparation has tended to be sporadic, insufficiently rigorous or even considered unnecessary. While recognising that our knowledge of regulations, procedures and custom and practice in relation to this form of assessment is partial, she nevertheless argues that students and their supervisors need to be active, even proactive, in relation to the viva, so that they can take control where appropriate and reduce uncertainty where control is not possible. Underlying these arguments is reference to research and anecdotal evidence that in many respects the examination of research degrees can be a bit of a shambles — unpredictable, barely regulated and not seen through the lens of good professional practice. It is presumably in this sense of dealing with something that needs to be tamed that Murray would justify using such an emotive word as 'surviving' in the title of this book.

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Reference

MURRAY, R. (2002) *How to Write a Thesis*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.