

How to Become a Scholar without a Lighthouse

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1 In the Lighthouse

Albert Einstein, in a famous speech in the London Royal Albert Hall, proposed that young scholars who want to think a problem through should be given a job as a lighthouse keeper. That was in October 1934, and what he had in mind then were job opportunities for emigrated scholars. But ever since, the idea that someone did her Ph.D. in the splendid isolation of a lighthouse has lost nothing of its fascination. The picture of a young woman working hard on a scientific problem, not only illuminating passageways for the ships, but also enlightening society, fits well our romantic ideas of academic work.

Taking the picture more seriously, we may ask two questions: Whether Ph.D. students need a job, and whether they need isolation. The first question can be answered easily. Ph.D. students need a living, be it on the basis of a scholarship or a grant, be it through a job as a research assistant. Scholarships may ensure that one can fully concentrate on one's work; however, they are restricted in time, and it is often unclear whether a Ph.D. can be achieved within, say, 2 1/2 years. Hence jobs as a research assistant appear to be a good alternative, all the more since the young researcher is embedded into a research team or the chair's respective work. I assume that working at a supermarket or at the gas station, while valuable and enlightening in other regards, is not very helpful when you are to describe which constituents may fill in the German prefield (i.e., the space before the finite verb in a German sentence).

This leads us to our second question: The isolation of the lighthouse, according to the romantic idea, helps the Ph.D. student in focusing on her own thinking or on the development of that thinking. Indeed, there are students who need and enjoy the "lonely" work on a project. However, there are students who need contact to friends, spouses, and family; hence the lighthouse's isolation would be detrimental to their work. So it depends. What is true, however, is that there is no success in the creation of academic work without the chance to focus on that work. We can then ask what might be helpful for this focusing and what hinders it.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to point out some factors that enhance academic success, at least with regard to my own field of research, i.e., German linguistics. We all know, of course that there are differences between the humanities and sciences, yet linguistics is a field that has to do with both areas: it is concerned with historical and so-

cial aspects of the language, as well as the functioning of language in the brain.

Recently, there is a certain skeptical attitude towards the individual relation between a supervisor (traditionally called "doctor father" in German) and her Ph.D. candidate that is prominent in the arts faculty. The skeptics hold that, as is the case in the hard sciences, Ph.D. students should work in classes or schools, being looked after by a group of academics. What I like to point out in the following paragraph is that there are several factors that support the student's progress, and other that are hindering in this respect. These ideas are not particularly new; however, it is worthwhile to discuss them in the light of new developments in our academic system of education.

2 See the Light

Of the many factors contributing to academic success, I would like to single out knowledge, trust, and motivation. These are factors that are important in all stages of academic maturation, yet have to be parameterized according to the respective developmental stage of a Ph.D. student.

2.1 Knowledge

Being keen on outstanding, excellent, cutting-edge, pioneering work (the correct prose here is sometimes bordering on bullshitting)^[1] we often forget that ordinary BA and MA studies lay the ground for later success. So the question is not so much how new little Einsteins can be created, but rather what we can do to raise the average quality of every single student. This holds all the more when the relation between academic staff and the number of students is taken into account. Many colleagues from abroad are absolutely flabbergasted when I tell them that we have around 2.800 students at the German department, yet only 3 full-time linguistics professors to teach them.

In our department, we teach linguistics on a broad basis, i.e., the core fields of linguistics (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) as well as fields like language acquisition and language change. We also invested much energy into the creation of introductions into German linguistics, i.e., *Einführung in die germanistische Linguistik* (Introduction into German linguistics),^[2] *Schnittstellen der germanistischen Linguistik* (Interfaces

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of German linguistics),^[3] and the book series *Kurze Einführungen in die germanistische Linguistik* (Short introductions into German linguistics) edited by Meibauer and Steinbach.^[4] These works are used as textbooks during BA- and MA-studies and have proven to be very helpful in establishing a fundament for all educational purposes, i.e., teacher education as well as education of future researchers. Rather often, I overhear remarks of colleagues who speak in a derogatory tone about “mere textbook writers”. I object to such statements. In contrast, I would like to propose that textbook writing should be considered as one important qualifying property of professors. Naturally, when it is more attractive and lucrative to be engaged in activities aimed at funding, text book writers are down-ranked in the academic hierarchy.

Students, on the other hand, are lucky to have clear-written, up-to-date introductions with exercises and solutions to those exercises. And it helps when Ph.D. students have a solid scholarly fundament to build upon.

Admittedly, when it comes to more specific requirements for a successful Ph.D. dissertation, we face more problems. I would like to point out two aspects. The first is the ability to read a lot. The second is the ability to use statistical and experimental methods.

As insiders are well aware of, there is a growing amount of scientific output with a tendency of scholars to specialize in topics and theoretical approaches. Yes, one should create a law saying that every researcher is allowed to publish only one article each year! The insight into this amazing scientific productiveness comes as a shock for every Ph.D. student. How the hell is it possible to read and understand all this stuff? If someone works at a paper for 3 years, and this paper is finally published in a well-renowned journal like *Language*, do you really think you can read and understand that paper within 2 days? Two weeks would be a better estimate. This is a problem that is similar for young researchers and established academic staff. But it has to be solved within the limits of the dissertation. Try to read only the relevant papers, try to integrate what you have read and understood into your own writings, but read!

As for knowledge in statistics and experimental methods, this is something which our (in a way still philological) curriculum does not contain, because it used to not belong to the field of German philology. With linguistics becoming a more empirical and experimental discipline, things are changing. Here, Ph.D. students need the help of experts in order to keep in touch with the newest developments in methodology. Still, seemingly old-fashioned methods of close reading and interpretations will not vanish as academic virtue.

2.2 Motivation

In a famous textbook on semantics the authors claimed that they wrote the book because they wanted to be rich and famous. Alas, I admit I also want to be the George Clooney of linguistics, but this is not a very realistic goal. So what should be the motives for Ph.D. students to spend important

years of their lives at the writing desk or in the laboratory? When I answer “Because of the fun”, I usually earn raised eyebrows. Yet, I think that the fun of academic work is often underestimated.

In the humanities, it is common knowledge that attractive jobs inside and outside the university are hard to get. Because there is not much room for extrinsic motivation (becoming rich and famous is impossible, and if you are paid at all in the end for what you studied, you are lucky), intrinsic motivation is more apt. Fun arises when you have mastered a difficult problem, when you find mistakes in other’s works, when you have a “good idea”, when you detect structures in experimental results or corpus data, when you find an elegant way to introduce into your topic, and so on. Numerous occasions to have fun are waiting for you. And, believe it or not, writing this article is fun for me!

I acknowledge, however, that many students are scared. To have to write so much, to have to be better than many competing researchers is, admittedly, a high stake. I do not know of any hard-and-fast medicine against frustrations coming along with academic work, and I doubt there is one. (O.K., JunQ is an antidote!) So what remains as a scholarly motivation is the serious wish to research and to write an own book that will be useful for the community and the society as a whole!

2.3 Trust

Being well equipped with a solid basic knowledge and a good portion of motivation, what is still needed for the Ph.D. student is trust – trust in her own abilities as well as trust in the will of her supervisor to do a good job. Trust has to be balanced: The one who is too critical against her own abilities will face problems, and the one who is too naïve in this respect will also have problems. And a partnership, as is the relation between a Ph.D. supervisor and the supervised Ph.D. student, that is influenced by mutual distrust, is in danger just as much as if the supervisor was the student’s superhero, or the student the future genius in the supervisor’s wild fantasies. It’s all about balancing things out.

Let me add the truism that a supporting family and friends are also important for success. We all like to read about this in acknowledgments and prefaces – the cat, the pizza deliverer, and the coach from the fitness center. Yes, they all have their share in a high-quality dissertation, and, face it, in the end the cat might as well be more important than the supervisor!

3 Two proposals

Already Albert Einstein knew that the pressure on students to produce more and more papers leads to sort of superficial work and has exhaustive effects.

“An academic career puts a young man into a kind of embarrassing position by requiring him to produce scientific publications in impressive quantity – a seduction into superficiality, which only strong characters are able

to withstand.”^[5] (“Denn die akademische Laufbahn versetzt einen jungen Menschen in eine Art Zwangslage, wissenschaftliche Schriften in impressiver Menge zu produzieren – eine Verführung zur Oberflächlichkeit, der nur starke Charaktere zu widerstehen vermögen.”) Quality, so much is clear to everyone interested in scientific progress, ranges above quantity. Yet quantity is important with respect to all systems that measure so-called “impact”.^[6] We should fight against the prejudice that the mere amount of output is evidence for hard work and academic success.

In order to foster good quality in academic writings, I have two proposals. The first proposal is one that has to do with failure in academic enterprises. In fact, I heard this proposal years ago from my Mainz colleague Carola Lentz, an ethnologist. She said frankly that some Ph.D. students do fail, for a range of reasons, among them illnesses, birth of children, the difficulty of a task, and so on. Now failing is certainly not something which is appreciated in our society that builds on competition and in which universities are more and more managed as if they were banks. However, what is really the problem is this: If someone works on a problem, say for 2 years, and then s/he decides to skip that work, why not give him/her a sort of testimony explaining that he engaged in this and that scientific work and that the results of this work are useful to others? That would be a human reaction to academic “failure” that would reduce much stress and would contribute to harmony in the academia.

The second proposal relates to the formats in which Ph.D. students and supervisors can learn from each other in an optimal way. There are many formats on the market: seminars and colloquia, workshops, private consultations, permanent e-mail correspondence, etc. All of them are valuable, but each has also weaknesses. Too much competition with fellow students, a topic being not well understood or similarly important for each member of the group, etc. are such factors that make regular cooperation difficult. Often, students will not have time to meet, or they cannot attend meetings because they do not live close to the university at all.

Since discussing monographs and papers is, at least in the arts, an important life of the academia, my idea was to write reviews together with a group of engaged students. In writing a review, one has to carefully represent another’s work, and all criticism has to be justified. So, by taking responsibility for the review and creating a real academic product, we learned a lot from each other, and had a lot of academic fun. The results are [7] and [8]. (Let me add that it is by no means common that students of German write in English. Some even avoid reading English texts.) This was

hard work, yet I wish I had more time to do it. But I do not really know when or where to do it in our current BA and MA curriculum.

In contrast to practices in other fields, co-productions in the humanities are not very popular. They are time-consuming and the risk of not really understanding the ideas and ambitions of other researchers is high. Yet I believe that such co-operations are very important for a number of reasons. They are important for the whole discipline,^[9] they are important in order to learn from each other in a systematic and controlled way, they are important in order to appreciate the abilities of others and to relativize one’s own. In recent years, I wrote papers together with Ph.D. students, with assistants, and with colleagues, and I think we profited a lot from each other. Note that it was close to impossible to write a paper together with a professor when I was young. In sum, the times, they are a-changing, sometimes in a bad direction, sometimes, as I have also made clear throughout this essay, in a good direction.

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