

PhD dissertation strategies

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I'm right in the middle of my second PhD year. Slowly my thoughts are taking some kind of shape. I think it's a good time for some reflections on dissertation strategies.

Monographic vs. cumulative dissertations

I guess the two main approaches across the different disciplines are either to write a monography – a coherent book – or to write a number of research papers, which taken together should also have a loose narrative but rather represent individual research projects.

Which of these general strategies is most applicable seems to depend mainly on the discipline you're writing in. However the disciplines seem to align on a continuum. On the one side you have the traditional ("old") disciplines like most of the humanities and maybe history (as "the thing on the doorstep" between humanities and social sciences). From what I know, reputation in these research communities is predominantly built through books. The value of a book can be approximated by the reputation of the publishing house you slipped it in. I'm sure all these disciplines have conferences and journals as well, however their importance in terms of their value on the job market seems to be subordinate.

On the other end of the continuum are the natural sciences. A good friend of mine is currently writing up his dissertation in computer science as a monography, however what counts in terms of employability is the number of conferences you presented your work at. Publications in conference proceedings here even seem to be more important than publications in journals, as this is the place where you find the most cutting edge stuff. Time really matters here. His monography seems to be more of a formality, a document in which he collects and documents the bits and pieces of work that he had done in the last years.

Management studies

Management studies must be somewhere in the middle of this continuum. In fields like accounting or finance I got the feeling that cumulative dissertations are the thing to go for. In our department for industrial relations the PhD candidates are strongly recommended to plan and conduct their research in terms of three individual papers. The modus operandi here is that the papers do not have to be published to eventually graduate, however they have to be in a state which is approved as "ready to publish" by the faculty. On the other side, in the group of organisation scholars I'm working in, monographic dissertations are the norm. One of the explanations I heard, and which makes much sense to me, is that only in the length of a monography a marked-off question can be investigated in sufficient depth to make a contribution that clearly demarcates a PhD work from any other academic work produced at earlier stages of the academic education.

The third way

As I said I totally subscribe to the idea that only through the length of a monography I can still my research interest in a way that gives me the feeling of "being done" after my PhD years. Yet, as I plan to continue on the academic path in the future, I should also make some preparations to get papers published with a reasonable amount of extra work put in. Although monographies are encouraged within our research group, the job market for the larger field of

management studies is heavily rationalized. If you want to get tenured at some point, you have to publish a certain number of papers in journals that rank high in specific peer-produced lists. Whether this is the best systems to allocate researchers on the market has to be fought about at some other place.

I therefore try to design my monographic dissertation in a “third way”, between a monolithic book and some loosely connected papers. I will write a coherent book but try to arrange the chapter in a way that allows me to carve out three single papers without too much extra work in the end. (In an ideal world) I will write an problematization, theory chapter, and methods part, which I will be able to re-use for all three papers. These chapters therefore have to be large enough to apply a slightly different focus in each of the papers.

My analysis section then will be split into three parts. Each of the parts will contain a section for more specific methods, a part where I show my data and a specific discussion where I feed in some more literature. In my book these three chapters tell a coherent story, however their focus will allow me to make them a center piece in each of the papers as well. The dissertation then ends with a cross-case discussion. This might bring the previously mentioned reflexive depth to the book, however only some ideas might go into the papers.