Advice to PhD Candidates

Julian Le Grand

Many Ph.D. supervisers tell their students – rightly - to start writing early. But it is even more important to finish writing early. For every thesis, there will always be more that could be done to improve the work: another article or book to read, another interview to undertake and to analyse, another argument to refine, another data set to explore, another regression to run. But these are false sirens; like Odysseus’ sailors, the student must plug his or her ears to their songs and steer for port.

This applies not only to theses but to post-doctoral publications. I know of many academics who have got an article – or even a book - 90% of the way towards publication, but cannot bring themselves to complete the final 10%. I’ve also had one or two Ph.D. students in the same position with respect to their theses. This is partly because of a misplaced perfectionism: the feelings of the kind I’ve just described. All the loose ends have to be tied up, every argument must be polished, every counter-argument effectively rebutted. But it also arises from a reluctance to put one’s head above the parapet. Once the thesis is submitted, the article sent to a journal, or the book manuscript dispatched to the publisher, they are open to judgment. No longer can they, or their author, remain in the realm of glittering potential; now they, and their author, are out there in the open, for peer assessment - and for peer criticism.

Of course these two concerns are related. The desire for perfection comes in large part from the fear of criticism. But, to misquote Kipling, these two imposters must be faced down. Nothing can ever be perfect, nothing immune from potential critique. There will never be a finishing point where it is all done. To misquote someone else – Iris Murdoch, I think, but irritatingly I’ve never been able to find the source - you never finish a piece of academic work; you only abandon it.

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