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## Do Research Thesis Examiners Need Training?: Practitioner Stories

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## Do Research Thesis Examiners Need Training?: Practitioner Stories

### Abstract

We are thesis examiners within the Australian academic system who formed a “community of practice” to try to resolve some of the issues we were facing. Stories of examiners reflecting on and examining their own practice are a notable silence in the higher degree research literature. In this study we have adopted a storytelling inquiry method that involved telling our practitioner stories, firstly to each other and then to a wider audience through this paper. We then identified issues that we believe are relevant to other thesis examiners. We have also found that engaging in a “community of practice” is itself a valuable form of examiner professional development.

### Keywords

Thesis Examiner Training, Storytelling, and Practitioner Research

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# **Do Research Thesis Examiners Need Training?: Practitioner Stories**

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*We are thesis examiners within the Australian academic system who formed a “community of practice” to try to resolve some of the issues we were facing. Stories of examiners reflecting on and examining their own practice are a notable silence in the higher degree research literature. In this study we have adopted a storytelling inquiry method that involved telling our practitioner stories, firstly to each other and then to a wider audience through this paper. We then identified issues that we believe are relevant to other thesis examiners. We have also found that engaging in a “community of practice” is itself a valuable form of examiner professional development. Key Words: Thesis Examiner Training, Storytelling, and Practitioner Research*

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## **Introduction**

We are all colleagues within the “community of practice” (Wenger & Synder, 2000) of the Action Learning, Action Research, and Process Management Association (ALARPM). Over time we became aware of each other’s experiences and concerns with examining action research theses. As we began to talk informally about our concerns we came to recognise that these might apply as much to any research thesis, action research or otherwise.

The general process for thesis examination in Australia is that they are examined by two or three examiners, external to the candidate’s university. While the supervisors through their Director of Postgraduate Studies and Research suggest potential examiners to the Higher Degrees Committee (this is the name of the committee at Southern Cross University. It may be called by other names in other universities), it is the Committee that makes the final decision. The name of the examiners chosen is not made known to the candidate, but the candidate would know the identity of their examiner after the examination process if the examiner agrees to it. Some Australian universities also require an oral defence.

Several studies have been conducted on the process of thesis examination. This literature appears to focus on improving the quality of the thesis rather than illuminating the examiner process and examiner practices.

Nightingale (1984) reviewed examiner's reports and university regulations pertaining to the various degrees. She concluded that the then, current practices of thesis examination were dis-empowering in that they did not clarify the criteria by which a thesis would be evaluated. She recommended explicit assessment criteria be made available to both students and examiners. Simpkins (1987) similarly examined the practice of thesis examination by undertaking an analysis of examiner's reports to determine whether examiners subscribed to common thinking about theses and research. The study revealed that overall there was a common construct of critical evaluation. Simpkins suggested that examiners expected a research thesis to draw on established methods of investigation, and that there was also a willingness, at least of the examiners in his study, to accept some of the assumptions expressed in the new research traditions. This was a significant move towards making explicit the examiner assessment criteria.

Hansford and Maxwell (1993) replicated the Nightingale (1984) study and focussed on the examination of Master's theses. Their study identified the range of reasons that examiners provide for a thesis not meeting the standard, and thus inferred the indicators of a quality thesis.

Nightingale (1984), Simpkins (1987), and Hansford and Maxwell (1993) used examiner reports as their primary data. Mullins and Kiley (2002) critiqued the use of examiner reports for investigations into thesis examination, suggesting that by the time the report was written, the examiner had already gone through several processes of reading/examination, and hence these studies failed to capture the immediacy that is the experience of the examiner, novice, or otherwise. They also went on to use an interview process to attempt to articulate a range of examiner practices.

We agree with Mullins and Kiley's (2002) critique of the examiner report as primary data, and used our own practitioner stories, rather than interviews, to capture the immediacy of our examiner experiences.

Practitioner stories have provided rich insights for a number of educational research studies (Ballantyne, Bain, & Packer, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986). Practitioner stories have been used to make explicit the practices of higher degree research students (Comber, 1999; Francis, 1996; Hall, 1998; Hanrahan, 1998; Lovas, 1980) as well as the practices of higher degree research supervision (Maor & Fraser, 1995; Salmon, 1992). We have not found evidence of practitioner stories being used to improve the practice of thesis examination. We believe that they would operate in the same way as they did for other stakeholders in the higher degree research process, the students, and research supervisors, and help to make explicit our intuitive practice of thesis examination, thus improving our examiner practice.

### **Methodology**

We have come to our conclusions through a process of reflective story-telling within a community of practice (Wenger & Synder, 2000). Over the course of time we have become aware of each other's experiences and concerns with examining theses. We

were determined to share our own stories to find common concerns and to make suggestions for improving our practice of examining theses.

Denning (2001) believes that storytelling is an appropriate way for individuals in organisations or human systems to see things in a different light, and from that insight, to make changes within those systems. Denning suggested that stories will “work” if they are brief, but with enough texture and relevance to a specific audience; are inherently interesting; are true rather than invented; embody a change message; and if the tacit knowledge of the stories *springs* the reader to a new level of understanding.

Our storytelling started informally. On the occasions when we met as professionals, our discussion would often turn to our experiences of examining. Initially we wrote our stories for each other, but found that the tacit knowledge in these stories did not “spring” us to new levels of understanding, as Denning’s (2001) criteria suggested. We suspected that it was because our stories had been written rather than told, and we decided to tell our stories to each other, and in the presence of Gita Sankaran, a naïve listener.

In the first telling of stories, Shankar’s and Pam’s stories were about being examined, and Geof’s story was about his examination of a thesis. In an initial analysis we recognised that our thesis examination practice had been informed by our experiences of being examined, and we resolved to tell additional stories so that each of us had told a story about being examined as well as a story about being an examiner.

Pam’s and Geof’s stories about examining a thesis were influenced by the thesis they had recently both examined. As Geof’s story later elaborates, he initiated the first conversation between Pam and Geof about thesis examination. On hearing Pam’s and Geof’s stories, Shankar also recognised that Pam and him jointly examined a thesis, and they both resolved to incorporate those events into their story.

What was happening in this initial stage of storytelling were iterative cycles of reflection and analysis, leading into reformulating and retelling of the stories.

We audio-recorded and transcribed the stories and explored the transcriptions for additional common themes. Themes began emerging from the transcripts, firstly in the form of reference to each other’s stories and then in words and phrases that expressed similar sentiments. For example, Shankar, in his story, mentioned that he had “absolutely no guidance about how examiners are selected,” while Pam, in her story, said that she made a presumption about one of the examiners, “but do not know for sure,” and Geof in his story commented that “throughout this time I felt I was not kept in the loop.” Each of these comments indicated a feeling on the student’s behalf of not understanding the examination process.

We started off with several common themes and reviewed these in the light of our research, reducing the list of common themes to ones that were directly pertinent to our practice as thesis examiners. In our discussion, we recognised that while we had started talking specifically about action research theses that we had examined, that our thoughts might apply as much to any research thesis, action research or otherwise.

We looked for what was common between the stories, arguing in this stage of the analysis that what was common among three thesis examiner storytellers may also be common to other thesis examiners. Although our intent is not to generalise from our findings, we believe that stories can be generative, prompting rippling conversations as

other readers read them, agree or disagree with them, and essentially make a more formal reflection on their own practice.

The choice of our themes was, as Schön (1983) suggests, “intuitive”.

When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of actions of every day life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action. (p. 49)

Our attitude of co-operation, rather than a prescription of choosing, enabled individual speakers not to hold onto their own ideas and to seek to develop common ideas. For example, in the early writing of our stories, Pam exclaimed that she did not agree with writing in the passive voice. As she read Shankar and Geof’s stories she suggested changes to the active voice. Neither Shankar nor Geof were aware of their writing in the passive voice, and so these changes were not so much negotiated as agreed with, the development of mutual understanding of each other. In contrast, as the paper reached its final draft, Pam and Shankar recognised that the appendices, which both had included in the paper, in original stories, were no longer relevant. They suggested that all the appendices be dropped. Geof pointed out that the appendix that he had added was important to his story because it represented his publication of assessment criteria. Again, there was agreement to remove all but Geof’s appendix. This was not so much a negotiation as recognition of the importance of various parts of the text for different writers.

On completing the stories and our analysis of the stories, we began sharing these with people outside of our triad, inviting comment on the stories and the draft paper in which they were contained. This added rigour to our expression as it generated requests for more explicit illumination of our method. It also produced some affirming comments from readers who recognised processes in their own examination process that resonated with our own. The feedback on this paper from *The Qualitative Report* generated both types of rigour-producing feedback.

In presenting the stories in this paper we have written the first stories in random order, then we have changed this order in telling our second stories to facilitate the references Pam’s story makes to both Shankar’s and Geof’s stories.

## **Stories of Being Examined as Doctoral Students**

### **Shankar’s Story**

When I was working as a senior operations manager in Singapore, in 1994, there was an advertisement about a PhD program. I had some doubts about whether I could really do a doctoral degree because, to me, a PhD was about academic research. I decided to attend an information session anyway. During this information session, I was told that this PhD was different. It was about action research. It was about solving problems at the

work place and writing a thesis about it. So I decided to join this program, as we were facing major operational problems at work at that time and I thought I could use action research to help me solve those problems. I used action research for over 3 years to implement a major change in the way we worked (work model) on major projects. Action research could also be aligned with the quality circles that were being promoted in my company by the Japanese management.

In 1998, I had completed my work model project and had written most of my thesis. It was time to appoint examiners for my thesis. The university in which I was enrolled in gave us absolutely no guidance in regards to how examiners were selected or about the examination process itself. However my supervisors, who were from a different university, explained a bit to me about the examination process and asked me to suggest suitable examiners. I suggested three examiners who would comprehensively cover areas in my thesis. Two of the examiners I had come to know through conferences and was very confident of them being good examiners. As for the third examiner, I asked some of my friends about somebody experienced in action research, and they recommended an academic from a university. I was told that he was sympathetic towards action research. I had some concerns because I wrote my thesis like a story and I was aware that sometimes, examiners come from positivist perspectives and may look for different things in a thesis.

Finally, the three examiners were appointed, my thesis went for examination and the results came back from the university. The fax from the university said that two of the examiners accepted my thesis as it was. The third examiner had comments about the thesis, but the university did not explain what these comments meant, and I was very disheartened. That examiner had said, the thesis needed a lot of changes and had criticized my literature review and my capacity to critically think in the thesis. I had actually written my literature review in a way that managers understand what's going on in the research area. My supervisors agreed that I need not write a conventional literature review. I thought I had failed and was frustrated, but when the actual examination report reached my hands I was very relieved because I found out that I did not have to send my thesis for examination again, but my supervisors were allowed to check whether I had carried out the necessary corrections. I decided to write a rejoinder to the third examiners' criticism at the end of each of my chapters because I did not want to spoil the flow of my thesis and my supervisors were happy with that. Then my thesis was accepted.

### **Pam's Story**

When I started my research for my thesis, I had two premises in mind. One starting point was that I didn't understand action research so I thought I would do a thesis on it and use it to learn about it. I started my action research with the idea of doing "pure" action research to see what it was. "Pure" action research, according to the literature, *had* to be participatory research, so that was what I determined I would do.

Trying to do participatory research gave me a very painful but powerful learning experience. One way that I explored action research was by comparing it with something it was not, the scientific method. Therefore, part of my research involved reflection by two groups of practitioners, a group of scientists and a group of action researchers, on

case studies of their own research. I ran these groups for six sessions each, in parallel, using pretty much the same process, co-facilitated by my thesis supervisors to ensure that the processes were pretty much the same in both groups. Interestingly and painfully, I had violently different reactions from each group. The action research group said, “If this is participatory, how come you’ve made all the decisions so far?” The scientists said, “We don’t want to be involved in decision-making. We just want to help you out with your thesis. We’re just here to be your *Methods and Materials*.” What I learned was that I had not taken the reality of the situation into consideration (i.e., what did other people want in terms of participation). Prior to doing this, I had determined that it *would* be participatory action research. So, not responding to reality can hit you very hard. What I found from the 22 case studies of applied research, scientific, and action research was that none of these case studies reported using a “pure” or prescribed methodology. They all, as we are doing with this paper, were developing a methodology to address a problem.

This was one of the main things that I learned from doing my own thesis: The criteria of a good methodology, according to John Dewey (1938), are that it fits the function. When it does fit, the end result is an internally consistent piece of work and the researchers can support any claims they might make. So, I am conscious of the need to develop an appropriate methodology for my own work, and when examining, I look for the methodology that emerges as a candidate addresses his/her problem or question. The evidence will be an internally logical piece of work, whether they used positivist research, action research, or anything else. However, the only way to find this emergent methodology is to “get inside” the thesis rather than apply some external criteria to it.

Furthermore, if a candidate also tries to use participative research, I am keen to know the contract they established with the participants.

My second premise came from my supervisor, Bob Dick, who advised me to write with a specific reader in mind. He advised me to write for “an open-minded non-expert.” The head of the school was a positivist, but an open-minded one. So Bob said, “Write for him. He should be able to see your argument, not necessarily agree or disagree with it, but accept it.” So he was the reader I had in mind.

My big shock came in 1998 when Bob Dick set-up *Action Research International (ARI)* as an on-line journal, with the intention of making the editorial process explicit. Being somewhat competitive, risk-taking, and gung-ho, I wanted to be the first paper. That was an experience I will never regret, but certainly do not want to repeat! It was probably the most read paper in the entire universe that year, but most of the reactions to it were extremely critical. This was shocking for me because the subscriber list to *ARI* was probably the crème de la crème of the action research community and I was almost universally trounced by that community. It seemed to me that people responded to my paper without reading it or certainly without reading it all the way through to the end. They seemed to respond to their own ideas without engaging in mine. This was not universally true. There were some people who were prepared to read the paper on its own basis and then comment from within that. Also, there were people who allowed me to get them to that same point through a very long process of response/rebut, response/rebut until, surprisingly, we found we were saying the same thing! Although a process of debate is supposed to be one of the things that distinguish the academic community, this sort of debate seemed to be a luxury that I did not have with too many people. So, it was

a shocking experience to be so badly criticised. I am also pleased to say, that painfully, I learned something about my own writing style. It can tend to be a bit confronting - even when I don't intend it to be.

This experience happened just prior to submitting my thesis in and at the point where my supervisors would be suggesting examiners. My supervisor suggested that I write for "an open-minded non-expert" but my experience showed me just how very few of them there actually were. The scary thought was "Will we choose open-minded examiners?"

The end result was that two of the three examiners we chose were open-minded, but one was not. Two examiners gave me glowing reports and were prepared to accept my thesis without changes. The third examiner wanted major changes. While the Higher Degrees Committee had the option of sending it to a fourth examiner, it chose to accept my thesis on the basis of the two glowing reports. I presume, but do not know for sure, this was because the third examiner was the most "junior" academic of the three.

I was quite disappointed about the third examiner's report because he was Australian, part of my own network, and I thought he would be sympathetic. Not long after my thesis was accepted, I had to chair a conference session at which this examiner was presenting a paper. Then, as always, I had great regard for that person and was pleased to be chairing his session. So, to "ease" the situation, prior to the conference session, I gave him copies of all of my examiners' reports. He read them, congratulated me, and complained that examiners do not get enough feedback. He would never have known how his examination fit into the whole process if I had not shown him. So, how can examiners learn to examine or improve as examiners if they do not even get feedback?

### **Geof's Story**

I started my doctorate very quickly after graduating with my Master's research degree. My doctoral topic was actually a response to some of the dilemmas I had faced within my Master's degree, and particularly dilemmas about the way in which action research was understood in higher education. What was interesting was that over time I moved away from those issues to a more general doctoral topic to look at higher education practices rather than specifically at my own unresolved issues.

When it came time to examine my thesis, I already felt part of the academy of researchers (the academy to which one becomes a member on doctoral graduation), so I was pleased that I was involved in the choice of the examiners. My supervisor suggested an examiner who had previously been involved with my research as a supervisor. I endorsed this recommendation, as I believed that it was living out this idea that the examiner had been in conversation with the student. By being asked what I thought, I was also living out the idea that I was an integral part, as a student, in the choice of those examiners.

There was quite a lengthy process leading to examination at the university where I was studying. Once the student had a final copy of the thesis it is given to two quality assurance readers who approve its readiness to proceed to internal examination. Following quality assurance, the thesis is given to a panel of four internal examiners (one of whom can be a person who undertook quality assurance) who read it. The student then

presents his/her work in a presentation and the panel comments on the readiness of the thesis to be sent for external examination. These steps were completed for me with appropriate speed, and the thesis was submitted to external examiners. I later learned that it had also been sent to a third examiner and was surprised as this, I thought, only occurred when the first two examiners disagreed.

There was quite a long delay for the examiners' reports as one of the three nominated examiners took an inordinate amount of time to examine the thesis, and that therefore put a lot of pressure on me. When I got the responses back, I had to act quickly in order to graduate in time. So that was an added factor.

Throughout this time I felt I was not kept in the loop, but I was quite assertive in asking about the delays in the examination process, as I had learned from the literature that this was where many delays occur. I suggested to my supervisor that he make inquiries when the examination process seemed to be taking longer than was warranted. When the three examiners' reports came in, one of them, the third examiner, was quite critical of my thesis. My first action as a student was to question the policy of having three examiners. This challenge was met with an explanation that my thesis was the last of those that were assigned to three examiners. I then moved to another strategy, which was to respond to that examiner. With my supervisor's help, I went through and looked at what the criticisms of all the examiners were, and I then wrote a document in response to all the examiner's comments and made proposals as to what the changes would be. I think the most political part of my response to the examiners was that I agreed to make certain changes, provided I could footnote that I did not actually agree with those changes; that they were the comments made by an examiner. I actually won that argument. So my final thesis, I think, had this representation that the student really was in control of the thesis and the examiners were readers, albeit informed readers, but it was the student's thesis.

I came out of the doctoral process having turned around my initial anger at university authorities over thesis examination into one where I felt empowered as a student. I felt acknowledged as a student, and I definitely felt that at the end I had owned my thesis. I think this very positive and assertive outcome left me with a strong feeling about the higher education process, and made me want to similarly make a positive and empowering contribution back as an examiner.

### **Common Themes from Authors as Students**

We looked for what was common among the stories, arguing in this stage of the analysis that what was common between we three thesis examiner storytellers may also be common to other thesis examiners. Although our intent is not to generalise from our findings, we believe that stories can be generative, prompting rippling conversations as other readers read them, agree or disagree with them, and essentially make a more formal reflection on their own practice.

All three stories tell of our lack of understanding, as students, about the examination process. For example, Shankar mentioned that he had "absolutely no guidance about how examiners are selected," while Pam said that she made a presumption about one of the examiners, "but do not know for sure," and Geof added that "throughout this time I felt I was not kept in the loop."

All three stories tell of our desires as students to be examined from the practice-based research tradition in which we had written, rather than from a positivist tradition. We felt that we had provided internal arguments for the methodological approaches we had taken, and we hoped that our examiners would “get inside” our theses rather than examine us from their own expectations about methods of investigation or their own ideas of what constituted a doctoral thesis. Shankar mentioned that he “had some concern because I wrote my thesis like a story and I was aware that sometimes, examiners come from positivist perspectives and they may look for different things in the thesis.” Pam was advised by her supervisor that she write for “an open-minded non-expert,” but “my experience showed me just how very few of them there actually are.” Geof also talked about the supervision process saying that his “supervisor suggested an examiner who had previously been involved with my research as a supervisor. I endorsed this recommendation as I believed that this was living out this idea that the examiner had been in conversation with the student.”

All three of us saw the need to engage the examiner as a reader. Pam’s ARI experience taught her the disadvantages of not having debates with readers. Geof and Shankar wrote rejoinders to the examiner’s comments in the final thesis submission. All three of us talked about the importance of choosing examiners, and as students trying to estimate a potential examiner’s open-mindedness. Shankar mentioned that “my supervisors, who were from a different university, explained to me a bit about the examination process and asked me to suggest suitable examiners.” Pam commented on her examination saying that “the end result was that two of the three examiners we chose were open-minded, but one was not.” Geof’s experience was slightly different. He explained,

When it came time to examine my thesis, I already felt part of the academy of researchers (the academy to which one becomes a member on doctoral graduation), so I was pleased that I was involved in the choice of the examiners.

### **Stories about Being Examiners – More Learnings!**

#### **Shankar’s Story**

Soon after I joined academia in 1999 I was asked to examine a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) thesis. Our DBA theses are examined by two examiners, at least one of which must be external. And, there was a shortage of internal examiners who had a doctoral degree in my school. I was initially asked to examine theses written by out DBA students from South East Asia, where I had lived and worked for more than 20 years. Supervisors assumed that this gave me an understanding of the student’s environment. I was not sure how I should go about examining a thesis, as the criteria given to me were very brief and general. So I went and got some information from an academic staff member in another college who had written papers about it thesis examinations. I was also unsure whether I could talk to the external examiner as his/her identity was not known to me. At this time the DBA examiners were not told who the other examiner was. As time passed internal supervisors started looking for me as an

examiner in content areas where I was teaching or the methodology I was familiar with – action research. Then one of my colleagues who had moved to another university asked me to be an examiner in my content area. As I examined some theses for them, the university started asking me to examine theses in areas which I was not familiar. I was not sure whether I was the right person. I thought, “I will send it back,” but decided to read the thesis and found it to be quite interesting. I learned a lot about the content area as well, which became helpful with a new student I was supervising. Due to my setting up a centre for action research in the university, slowly, other universities started looking for me as an examiner for action research theses. I had started becoming confident in my abilities as an examiner until one incident brought me face-to-face with reality.

I was asked to examine a DBA thesis about innovation. At that time I was actually quite busy because I was travelling to Malaysia to teach, and I was hard-pressed for time to read this thesis as well. So when I actually read the thesis I felt this thesis had something worthwhile to say. In my own mind I felt that this was a passable thesis. I actually examined the thesis while I was on a flight to Malaysia. Then I read the thesis a second time when I got back to Australia to make sure that I got all my detailed comments on the thesis, and I passed the thesis, with comments.

Then I was given the report from another examiner who was examining the same thesis and whom I knew very well, Pam. It was just after I sent my examination report that I saw her report. When I read her examination report I found that she had actually found the thesis to be inadequate. I was not sure what to do. Should I talk to her about this? Then, I found that between the two of us there was a divergence of opinion and I felt that this could not be reconciled. Therefore, I suggested to the DBA Coordinator that this thesis be given to a third examiner because the two views were divergent.

Later I reread Pam’s comments and I felt that she had a lot of things to say which were reasonable about the thesis, however, based on my own understanding of the requirements for a practitioner-based DBA thesis, I stood by my review. Although I appreciated Pam’s comments, I still felt my judgement was fair.

### **Geof’s Story**

Soon after completing my doctorate, Shankar invited me to examine my first PhD thesis. He told me that I had been invited to examine because I had some knowledge and practical experience with action research, but I also believe it was because as soon as I graduated I advertised my keenness and availability as a thesis examiner to my community of colleagues, which included Shankar.

While I had not previously examined at a doctoral level, I felt I had a fair amount of experience and background from examining a large number of Master’s research projects. I had recently finished a large project that involved examining over 80 Master of Education Action Research reports, and while undertaking this, in response to student inquiries, I developed an explicit marking criteria for what I believed was a “good” action research report (see Appendix A).

Once I accepted the invitation to examine, the first thing I did was to send a letter to the student, via the university, making explicit my criteria for a good thesis. By this time it had been amended so that it also included the doctoral requirement of contributing to the knowledge base. I felt that it was important for the student and the examiner to be

in conversation, and I hoped that this letter might initiate that conversation. Later, when I received the examination criteria from the university I reformatted my own criteria to fit it into the university's assessment criteria. I found that this made the criteria more explicit and made it easier for me to respond to the university criteria.

When I got the thesis, I finished an initial reading within 24 hours. I was struggling with it! I think it was problematic because what the student said he/she was going to do was not turned into reality in the thesis. It frustrated me that the first PhD thesis that I was going to examine was turning out to be quite a problematic one. I was battling. I wondered whether this was because I was a new examiner and therefore I was finding more problems with it. I spoke to Pam who was one of the other nominated examiners. I had been given the names of the other examiners and was advised that I could make contact with them.

I came away from my meeting with Pam feeling more confident about my assessment of the thesis' problem. Pam, who was much more experienced than I, had identified the same problem and proposed a different solution to it. With that in mind, I then read the thesis for the second time. I was still reading with an open mind, thinking that maybe it was the first reading and I might have been wrong. Or, if I was not wrong, then I needed to be very clear about what the problem was. By the end of that second reading, I was really clear about what I saw as the problem, and that then led me into my third reading. As I read, I wrote a report that was as much trying to communicate to the university as it was trying to say to the student, "This is what I see is problematic." I wrote as if I sensed that there was a conversation between the student and me.

I learned that my examination was the most critical of the three examining reports, and I thought that that's where the experience would have ended and that the university would say, "Let's go with the other two, because both of those are saying that this is a suitable thesis." It was what happened then that really excited me about thesis examination!

The university firstly wrote and said, "This is how the other two examiners have examined it, do you want to re-consider your assessment in the light of what they've done?" That conversation was an on-going conversation and it eventually resulted in the student responding to my recommendations, and my re-reading the thesis changes. I thought that I would have been dumped as an examiner. I was actually quite excited that I was still being entertained as a viable reader of the thesis. Seeing the other examiner's reports was also valuable insight into how other people examined.

Given that that was my first PhD thesis to examine, I think the experience was a really rich one. What I learned through that, and was excited about, was how helpful it was to be in conversation with another examiner. Concurrently, I was also chatting with Pam, the other examiner, and Shankar about examination as we wrote this paper, and that was also helpful. So, I came out of it feeling a bit more confident as an examiner because I had these two types of communities of practice: I am actually looking forward to the next thesis. I felt that I have consolidated a criteria for what I feel makes a good thesis and what is a good examination practice, and I am keen to put those into practice again.

## **Pam's Story**

Both Shankar and I were asked to examine the same DBA thesis on innovation in the pharmacy industry. He was the internal examiner and I was the external examiner. It turned out to be the most difficult thesis I had ever been asked to examine. The job was not made easier by the fact that there had been some delays in the university administration procedures and I received it fairly close to a proposed "graduation" date. Therefore, I agreed to examine it as quickly as I could.

This put me into a bind because I had agreed to try to help the candidate make the graduation date, but was very unhappy with the thesis. Like a lot of examiners, I guess, I really want candidates to be successful. I only suggest changes if I think the candidate can make them reasonably and practically, within a fairly short time-frame; recognising the amount of time candidates have already spent on their thesis.

In this case, I appreciated that the candidate had done an enormous amount of work, but, for me, the underlying framework of the thesis was inherently flawed and I thought the results were not validated. Such a thesis is not easily fixed. The other dilemma that I faced was that I know and have great respect for this candidate's supervisor. That was one reason I was not happy in finding such serious faults with it. The other reason was that I could not suggest any ways to make moderate modifications to the thesis to overcome what I saw as fundamental flaws. Therefore, I failed it, but was open to suggestions for changes from the candidate.

During the examination process, the DBA coordinator passed my report on to Shankar, who was the internal examiner. Shankar decided that our reports were so divergent that he advised the DBA coordinator to forward the thesis to a third examiner. My respect for Shankar goes without saying, and I appreciate that it is difficult for him to wear two hats, but this is the university system and it meant that:

- I never got to see Shankar's report even though he saw mine.
- We were not able to engage in a discussion about our differences or try to find a middle ground (though we have since done so in the course of this research). He decided that our differences were because I took an "academic" perspective, that is, I was concerned about models of innovation and he took a "practical" perspective. From my perspective, the candidate failed because he did not deliver what he said he had: He could not substantiate his claims.
- I was not involved in making the decision to involve a third examiner.

To my mind, this was a really good example of the system not working. I think it failed the candidate and the university because there was no discussion between examiners or examiners and supervisors

Fortunately, things are improving as was evident in the thesis that both Geof and I examined. It was really useful for me to have a discussion with Geof about that particular thesis and how I examine theses. I also appreciate the way that Geof takes the initiative in providing universities and candidates with his examination criteria. I guess I was trying to do that in less explicit, more indirect ways through my examiner's reports, but Geof's way gives universities some criteria for choosing or rejecting him as an examiner. However, the fact that candidates do not get our examination criteria, either formally or

informally, until very late in their candidature, is something I think we both see as a problem and we would like to see more communication between candidates and examiners, like in the American system.

There is a bit more to this story, some of it good and some not so good, at least from my perspective. I accepted the thesis in question with modest modifications. Geof was much tougher on it and required major modifications. The chair of the Higher Degrees Committee suggested that the candidate's supervisor and he have a chat about how to progress because Geof was the tougher examiner. Now, that was a great idea, but neither the other examiner nor I were included in these discussions. It seemed that the Higher Degree Committee "managed" the process by giving one examiner's report greater "weight" than the other two.

I think that communication between all parties in the examination process is good, but I think it would be better if it was a little less ad hoc. Informally, I heard from one of the candidate's supervisors that he took on *board all* his examiners comments and made some major changes. This is wonderful to know, but I think it would have been better if this was part of the formal feedback from the university to all examiners.

### Common Themes as Thesis Examiners

Exploring the themes of our stories as examiners was more like coming to realisations at the end of our lengthy discussions, both about the practice of thesis examination and about the stories we had told. We first looked through the stories to identify any themes. For example in Shankar's examiner story the themes that arise in the flow of the story include:

1. Being uncertain about the examination criteria because it was so brief and general.
2. Moving from seeing oneself as an examiner for specific content or research approaches to a person who can examine any type of thesis.
3. Dealing with an instance of examiner's holding different views on the quality of a thesis.

In Pam and Geof's stories they dealt with these themes differently, particularly the case of examiners being in dispute over a thesis, which was the original catalyst for our stories and underwent development as a result of the different types of interventions that were made. These resolutions led us to then make concluding statements about the themes as follows:

1. We believe that it is important for examiners to be in conversation with each other, not for collusion, or for deciding who is "right" in their assessment, but as a way of understanding the different agendas around writing a thesis and attempting to find common ground for examining a particular thesis.
2. We believe that it is important to keep *all* the examiners in the communication loop so that they can gain feedback about their examination competence. We think that examiners finding out about other examiners' assessment helps an examiner to gain valuable feedback about his/her own assessment.

From the stories we have told we also believe that it is important for the student to attempt to gain some knowledge about the examiner and the framework from which they examine. The strategies we see as helpful include creating opportunities to meet the examiner at seminars and conferences. We also see that having the examiner send his/her assessment criteria to the student is a helpful way for the student and the university to determine whether this examiner would be a suitable one for a particular thesis.

### **Reflections and Conclusions**

Storytelling as inquiry is an emergent inquiry methodology. Much of it is simply learned by doing it rather than by reading about the methodology per se. However, we knew our first attempt at written stories had missed the mark when the tacit knowledge failed to “spring” forth from the stories, as Denning (2001) had suggested it might. Aside from this single source of literature, our inquiry practice was formulated through the practice of telling and retelling the stories and making the tacit knowledge explicit through writing our conclusions. Finally, the tacit knowledge was clear to us as storyteller/readers, but in the process of having this article peer reviewed we found that there was more editing and more clarification to make the tacit knowledge clear to other readers.

Through regularly meeting, initially to discuss our practice and then to discuss the writing of this paper, we formed a “community of practice” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) to share some of the difficulties we were facing as examiners of doctoral theses. As Wenger and Snyder are not prescriptive in their definition of a community of practice, we have taken the freedom to claim that our meeting was such a community. While we advocate for similarly forming communities of practice, the focus of this paper has not been to debate or discuss the operation of communities of practice. What we are claiming as a community of practice was a series of meetings in which we shared our experiences as both doctoral candidates and doctoral examiners.

The issues that came out of our stories that we believe are relevant to other examiners are:

- We think that candidates do not understand or are not prepared for the examination process.
- We think that candidates and examiners are not informed about the criteria/process for choosing examiners by all Universities. While the supervisors recommend examiners based on certain criteria (for example content or methodology), the examiners are not told by the Higher Degrees Committee why they have been selected as examiners.
- We think that candidates, universities, and other examiners do not know the criteria examiners use. Universities give broad guidelines which are open to interpretation.
- We think that problems can be avoided by engaging the examiner prior to the examination process in conversations with other examiners or with supervisors/candidates.

It seems to us that some of these issues could be addressed if examiners were better prepared for the job and received some feedback on the job. While there are many ways that this can be done, we have found that:

- Our community of practice process has taught us all a lot about being better examiners.
- In particular what we have learned is the importance of conversations between examiners or the Higher Degree Committee, or the supervisor or candidate, when it is necessary, if we think this will result in a better examination.
- The discussions and reflections have already led us into similar conversations with other examiners beyond our triad, and we see this as the area of our future research. Our own practices as examiners have been informed by this study and when we next examine these new experiences will add to the stories we have already told. We particularly hope that our future stories provide descriptions of the ways in which universities collaborated with us and encourage greater engagement between the examiner and the student.

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## Appendix A

### Geof's Thesis Assessment Criteria

#### 1. **There is a clearly framed practice that is being investigated.**

The issue or practice is framed both by the investigator's practice experiences (experiential or practice-based epistemology) and by the identified discourses that impact on the practice. There may even be need for an argument regarding which discourses impact on the practice.

The assumption underpinning this requirement is that there are discourses that frame a practice. These discourses might include policy documents, procedural manuals, correspondence and observations. By using the broader term of "discourse" here, rather than "literature," there is space to argue that while a practice is evident in a range of discourses, it has notably not been articulated in literature. Also, by using the broader term "discourse" there is room to include the practitioner's own story as a discourse.

In discussing the discourses it would be expected that the discussion would help a reader (examiner) understand:

- A. The debates surrounding the particular practice.
- B. The silences within and across the discourses. For example, a practice might be discussed in the popular literature but is notably absent in the academic literature; or a practice might be talked about in web-based literature but not in mainstream refereed journals. These constitute silences that inform the way in which the community understands the practice.

#### 2. **There is a well argued approach to investigating the practice.**

As the report is communicating the findings from an investigation, it cannot be assumed that the appropriateness of the investigative approach is clearly obvious. I believe the rigorous way is to clearly articulate the argument for the particular investigative approach. This would involve:

- A. Recognising the specific ways in which the practice is observed and articulated and has been observed and articulated in the investigation.
- B. Showing how the ways used to harness relevant data for the investigation are congruent with a stated epistemology and ontology.
- C. Showing how meaning-making about the data is congruent with the stated ontological position.

3. Following this argument there should be **congruence between what the report says you will do** to collect and analyse data, **and what you actually did** to collect and analyse data, or there is an explanation as to why, what you proposed was not possible. If the investigation has adopted an action inquiry or other iterative approach, then there needs to be clear links between the individual cycles of investigation.

4. There is a **statement of conclusions** drawn and evidence to show that:

- A. The authority of the application of these findings is agreed rather than assumed.
- B. The relevance of these findings to a wider population (generalization or generativeability) is discussed. In this instance there might be arguments for generalization – the application of the findings from the small study to a broader population, or generativability – an acknowledgement that the issues raised are pertinent to conversations about this practice but that no claim to generalization is made.
- C. There has been an attempt to **communicate the findings** with other practitioners and that this is seen as a factor of authenticity.

5. There is evidence of **rigor throughout the report.**

- A. First level rigor in spelling, grammar, style of citation and bibliography.
- B. Second level rigor in the way in which the argument itself is presented:
  - i. Conclusions reasonably arise from the analysis.
  - ii. Discourses used to make sense of the data, and to frame the practice are shown to be relevant and authentic for this particular practice and its data.
  - iii. The investigator recognizes that his/her perception of the practice is just that. A given situation might be understood in many different ways, and the investigator is not so much arguing for the sole truth of his/her interpretation but for a reasonable logical acceptance that his/her interpretation is a viable way to understand the practice. Alternately, an investigator adopts a positivist stance and argues for single truth.

6. When the report has been prepared for a doctoral degree, there is an expectation that the investigation has made a **contribution of knowledge**. There are many ways in which this could be achieved:

- A. Contribution towards the knowledge about the issue or practice.
- B. Contribution towards the knowledge about the particular investigation methodology chosen.
- C. Contribution towards the field of practitioner investigation.

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### Author Note

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