

Bernadette A. Lear

The Zen of serving on thesis committees

Being a midwife for new scholarship

A year ago, I would have spelled *Buddhism* without the “h.” Not knowing anything about the world’s religions, *abhidharma* registered as something I might have heard George Harrison sing about.¹ But now I know how the meditation practiced by some Buddhists relates to some of the therapies used by psychologists.

A student told me.

Each semester, I provide a three-hour workshop for Psychology graduate students, covering every conceivable feature of *PsycInfo*, as well as finding psychological tests and identifying journals for manuscript submission. In January 2005, the students organized a brown-bag lunch following my presentation. Everyone discussed research interests while munching on sandwiches and the like.

When a student raised the question of who could serve on thesis committees, my ears perked up. *Could I be eligible?* After lunch, I talked with the chair of the Psychology program and my library’s director.

At the time, I was interested in serving on a thesis committee because I had the blahs. I came to Penn State-Harrisburg in August 2004 after years of working in public libraries. Whether patrons at Enoch Pratt Free Library were trying to beat a traffic ticket or get a recipe for Lady Baltimore cake, all were deeply interested in their quest. Motivating myself to help them wasn’t an issue. Yet in college libraries, so many patrons describe their research assignments as “jumping through hoops.”

After a semester, I was wondering how I could keep caring, if students didn’t seem to. But observing these graduate students convinced me to give academia another try.

I recognized that I could be useful to students, their programs, and our institution. Although Harrisburg began enrolling freshmen a few years ago, graduate studies remain an important strength and priority. At the same time, Harrisburg’s School of Behavioral Sciences and Education (the parent of the Psychology program) has faced significant faculty turnover, mainly due to retirements. Twenty (about one-third) of its faculty members were hired over the previous three years. Given curricular changes, vacancies, and sabbaticals, finding volunteers for any kind of committee can be challenging.

My first committee

My first experience on a thesis committee was with a graduate student in Harrisburg’s Clinical Psychology program. He is a practicing Buddhist, who saw many parallels between his school of Buddhism (which emphasizes social activism) and psychotherapists who help heal communities. The interdisciplinary nature of his topic required the student to explore literature outside of *PsycInfo*, so having a librarian who was equally familiar with Psychology and Humanities information sources would benefit his committee. The student and his thesis chair were also aware

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that conflicting interpretations of Buddhist concepts and texts (as well as misunderstandings perpetuated by the popular press) could make it difficult to pinpoint sources that were both reliable and relevant.

At first, I was daunted by the complexity of the topic. But the student had chosen the Psychology program chair, another psychologist, and a Buddhist monk for the committee, so I felt he was in great hands intellectually. Dubbed the “methodologist” of the group, my limited role matched my abilities well.

I had thought that understanding the topic would be my greatest challenge. The day after I agreed to be on the committee, I diligently thumbed through Robert Buswell’s *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* to find out the basics. Yet integrating and making sense of university, campus, and departmental policies within Penn State was a challenge, too. A case in point is the required qualifications for committee members. Since the criteria for inclusion emphasize teaching ability in credit-bearing graduate courses, it would seem that librarians can’t serve. But given Harrisburg’s emphasis on applied studies, some of its programs *do* allow master’s degree candidates to choose working professionals as “third members,” as long as two other members are on the graduate faculty and the third member has a graduate degree and relevant experience. Thus, the upshot is that although I can neither chair a committee nor serve on a doctoral committee, I may sit on master’s-level committees when my background is especially helpful.

Is serving worth it?

Deciding to serve involves more than understanding written policy, or even the question of whether you have the time. Tenure-track librarians especially need to gauge how such service activities are credited on their dossiers. At Penn State, serving on a thesis committee may indicate that the librarian’s expertise is respected by his or her peers. Yet it is not rewarded as much as one’s published works. Given this and my role as coordinator of library instruction on my campus, I decided

to limit myself to serving on no more than two thesis committees at any time.

More important than the intellectual challenges and procedural hurdles, I also had to learn about managing a long-term working relationship with a student. To my dismay, I did not find any helpful guides in *Library Literature* (hence this article!). Using *PsycInfo* and ERIC, I found an old item by Judith Blanton of the California School of Professional Psychology, which discussed the changing problems graduate students face during different phases of their research.² I also found a recent piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by Barbara Katz Rothman.³ Interestingly, both use the metaphor of midwifery to describe the relationship between advisor and student, emphasizing that the student has to do much of the “pushing,” while advisors provide encouragement. They particularly discuss the paradox of being responsible for the quality of students’ work, while also granting students autonomy.

How the duties differ

I discovered that there are several differences between being a librarian and serving on a thesis committee, but many relate to one key issue. As a librarian, I seldom see the end-product of students’ research, much less am I able to document that my instruction and reference service have directly influenced the quality of their work. Yet by becoming a member of a thesis committee, I would be signing my name to the cover page of a thesis, making a direct statement of responsibility. Particularly given the enormous problem Ohio University has had with plagiarism,⁴ I realized I had to hold myself to a higher level of accountability than usual.

Thesis responsibility is different from a librarian’s everyday duty on the reference desk in other ways. Having worked in public libraries, I was used to producing answers to customers’ factual questions. Providing library instruction over the past few years has made me more aware of my responsibility as an educator, but my first impulse is still to find and send information. As a committee

Attending my student's defense, I felt similar to a proud aunt attending a recital: I found myself nodding in rhythm to the presentation, waiting for him to hit a certain crescendo, delighting in the joy he showed in exhibiting his mastery, and listening in rapt attention afterwards as he explained how certain insights were revealed to him.

member, I had to remind myself to help my students *develop their own* research skills, rather than retrieve documents for them. Doing the work for students could stunt their development as independent scholars and practitioners. In the first weeks of working with my first advisee, I forwarded many new book advertisements and other items to him; but over time I gradually weaned myself from transferring information to him.

Another issue was choosing which projects in which I would participate. As librarians, our first ethic is to “provide the highest level of service to all library users.” Yet I could not serve on every student's committee. At first, I wanted to develop a rubric or survey to objectively gauge matches between students' interests, abilities, working styles, and my own. But some things are awkward to put in a matrix. When discussing the possibilities with one student, I sensed that he was considering me primarily because of personality conflicts he had with other faculty or an impression that I would be “easier” than other instructors. Agreeing to his proposal could have caused a lot of damage, the worst being that he would not have the best expert on his committee.

Since students don't encounter librarians as frequently as other faculty, one must convey that serving on their committees is a different kind of relationship than the usual reference desk interaction. I was advised to use a “Memorandum of Understanding” to ensure that my students and I would share the same expectations. This also helped me gather and clarify my own thoughts. Other committee members offered their documents as starting points. Importantly, I added a

section on the “Role of a Librarian in Your Master's Research Project,” and substituted ALA's Code of Ethics⁵ in an existing section that discussed American Psychological Association and American Counseling Association ethics. I also expanded sections on literature searching and how to avoid plagiarism (see www.personal.psu.edu/bal19/masterscommitteeguidelines.htm). Nowadays, when I agree to serve on a committee, the student and I meet to discuss and sign my memorandum.

It's important to communicate—both to the student and the committee chair—the scope and limit of your expertise. This involves subject areas, research methodologies, and technical skills. For example, my undergraduate degree is in History, and my current research agenda is the history of American librarianship. I have read extensively about the history of the book, popular culture, and American History during the 19th and early 20th centuries. As a historian, I am skilled in textual analysis and qualitative research, and I am an expert user of Microsoft Word. With this in mind, I should shy away from projects that involve (living) human subjects, statistical analysis, or data management software, such as SPSS.

Though the way wasn't rough, I did encounter a few unanticipated bumps. For one, students underestimate the time they will need to collect data, mull it over, and rework (multiple) drafts of their papers. When agreeing to serve on a committee, one should anticipate that the process could take more than a year—possibly two or more, if the student has a full-time job or other commitments. I also discovered that the defense date for fall graduation—the last week of September or the first week of October—was the worst time for me to read and comment on lengthy manuscripts, since I often provide two or more course-related instruction sessions each day during that time.

I now caution students to send their papers to me a few weeks (rather than a few days) earlier than the date of defense, so I can give their work full consideration.

In conclusion, serving on thesis committees offers important benefits for students, faculty, institutions, and librarians. For new academic librarians—particularly ones who have never written a thesis—it provides much insight on the workflow and stresses of graduate-level projects, and greater empathy for customers. Also, within the process of reading a scholarly paper, hearing a presentation, and asking questions, one has a rare chance to learn in-depth about an area within discipline. This is invaluable for liaison librarians who cannot attend academic conferences outside the LIS circuit.

Sharing in the work of our academic colleagues can help raise awareness about librarians and our work. Maybe I'm naïve, but I think that the more faculty and administration rely on us to fulfill the research and educational goals of our institutions, the stronger is our argument that we deserve faculty status. Successfully serving on thesis and other academic committees also reinforces the notion that information literacy skills are central to the production of knowledge at all levels. Having begun the journey with our freshmen (e.g., through first-year seminar), we should continue through their college careers. This path rightly culminates in graduate studies, which involve the highest investment and stakes.

On a final note, the psychological benefits of seeing the results of students' research—not only a finished paper, but a knowledgeable and confident professional—are immense. Attending my student's defense, I felt similar to a proud aunt attending a recital: I found myself nodding in rhythm to the presentation, waiting for him to hit a certain crescendo, delighting in the joy he showed in exhibiting his mastery, and listening in rapt attention afterwards as he explained how certain insights were revealed to him. I even took pictures.

Walking back to my office, I felt intensely joyful and peaceful (a kind of nirvana, perhaps?). A few weeks later, I happily agreed to work with another student who is researching bestselling self-help books, and I keep my ears open for other opportunities. I know I

can be a good “midwife” for new scholarship on my campus.

Notes

1. For instance, see George Harrison's “My Sweet Lord” from album *All Things Must Pass* (1970).
2. “Midwifing the Dissertation,” *Teaching of Psychology* 10, no. 2 (1983), 74–77.
3. “Pushing Them Through,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 16, 2005.
4. See Kathy L. Gray, “Plagiarism Confirmed at OU; University Might Revoke 21 Degrees,” *Columbus Dispatch*, April 1, 2006, 1C; “Panel on Cheating Says Fire Chairman,” *Columbus Dispatch*, June 1, 2006, 1B; and other articles about the scandal in the *Columbus Dispatch* and *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*.
5. American Library Association Council, Code of Ethics of the American Library Association (1995), www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.htm (accessed March 1, 2007). *zz*



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