Your Thesis is a Distraction

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“...learning is not a process of dishing out information...Education...is learning to think for oneself under the guidance of a teacher...”

Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West*, p. 68
Contents

- Why do a PhD?
- Misleading objectives
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Why do a PhD?

Some good reasons:

- you enjoy solving problems
- you enjoy learning
- you're curious
- you like making sense of the world
- you enjoy creating things
- you like a challenge
- you want to contribute something to the world
Why do a PhD?

• A bad reason: to prove how clever you are
  • Does that make the work enjoyable?
  • Do you want to spend years doing that?
Good and bad aspects

- **Freedom**
  - Very few people have so much time and freedom
  - You may never have it again!

- **Frustration**
  - A PhD is hard
  - You may not be used to the lack of guidance
  - Things will go wrong

- **Uncertainty**

- **Misguided objectives**
Uncertainty

Problem: Uncertainty
- What should I do now?
- Is my work correct?
- Are my results good enough?
- Has this been done before?

Solution: avoid worrying
- Make a plan
- Accept that you did what you thought was right
- Move on
Misleading objectives

- Before PhD study, students get marks for everything
  - A common objective is to get high marks, but this can be misleading
  - Does a high mark prove you understand?
    - No. You can memorise a formula without understanding it

- You don’t get marks when doing a PhD
  - What should your objectives be?
  - Publishing papers?
    - Publishing (in good places) is good
    - But it should not be your only objective
  - Writing a great thesis?
Importance of your results

- You get a PhD if your thesis is good enough
  - BUT a PhD is a journey, not a destination

- The PhD results are not so important
  - How many people will ever read your PhD?
  - How relevant will it be in 10 or 20 years?
  - Will your future work build directly on it?
The impact of your thesis

- Don’t expect to have the last word on a major issue

- Do advance the state of knowledge
  - Build on past work
  - Provide a foundation for future work

- That’s all that’s required to get a PhD
What is important about a PhD

- If results are not so important, what is?
  - The skills you learn
  - That you become a mature, independent researcher

- After your PhD you’ll have another journey
  - How different will the subject be?
    - Technical knowledge learned during your PhD may or may not be relevant
  - What skills will you need?
    - The skills and experience from your PhD probably will be relevant
What you need for an academic career

- Two things:
  1. A PhD
  2. to be a competent, independent, mature and well-rounded researcher

- When hiring someone, I ask myself if they are the second
  - A PhD is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for a career
  - The thesis is just tangible evidence for the second point
  - Don’t let your thesis distract you from the second point
Overall aims

I suggest they should include:

- to become a competent, independent, mature and well-rounded researcher who is prepared to pursue an academic or scientific career
- to do good research
- to enjoy it
- to help others do the same
Specific objectives

- Critical thinking skills
- Communication skills
- Planning and management
- Networking skills
- Social/interpersonal skills
- Lifelong learning
- Independence
- Initiative
- An understanding of professional and ethical standards
- Self-knowledge
- Contributing to the academic life of your group
Suggestions

- Take taught courses
- Give a guest lecture
- Give a seminar on your work
- Set and mark coursework
- Organise something
- Review papers
- Propose and coordinate a group project
More suggestions

- Propose and co-supervise a student project
- Contribute to your research group
- Take personal development courses
- Attend seminars
- Read 'How to get a PhD'
- Arrange a research visit
- Write a grant proposal
Reviewing your progress

- http://www.cs.bris.ac.uk/Teaching/learning/phd-guidelines-form.doc

- To help you think about what objectives you can improve

- A matrix: activities (rows) and objectives (columns)

- List your activities
  - writing papers
  - reading
  - attending seminars
  - attending conferences
  - emailing authors...
Reviewing your progress

- Note which objectives the activities contribute to
  - Breadth of knowledge
  - Initiative
  - Networking
  - Communication skills
  - Personal development
  - Feedback on PhD
  - Collaboration
  - Planning
Evidence of lifelong learning, seeking feedback and developing transferable skills

List a sample of activities and tick the objectives to which they contribute. The list does not need to be exhaustive. If you have little in a column you may want to focus more on it. *Feedback on PhD* refers to people other than your advisor and reviewer.

<table>
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<th>List of activities</th>
<th>Breadth of knowledge</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Networking</th>
<th>Communication skills</th>
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Thank you

Good luck
Enjoy your PhD