

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

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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

[illegible]

Thank you

Good luck
Enjoy your PhD