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Viewpoint: Let's Abolish the PhD Orals

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by Katherine L. Jako

One day, of course, they'll dispense with it and heave a sigh of relief—but until then, the steamy ceremonial of the PhD oral comprehensive will continue to soak up literally thousands of hours each academic year. To my mind it represents an inexcusably costly waste of time, money, and talent to which a supposedly rational community agrees. And to what end?

- To weed out those incompetents not worthy of the degree? Nonsense. If the examinee is incompetent, someone should have noticed it before that point and confided the discovery to him. If, on the other hand, through some combination of ambition and related machiavelianisms, the not-so-bright have arrived at the orals' stage, chances are that the same skills will see them safely through.

- To serve the integrative function of drawing together a broad array of knowledge scattered in the candidate's head? Hardly. In the field of education, if nowhere else, we must know that the kind of instant replay that is the aim of most exam-type studying is neither integrative nor lasting. It's called cramming. We've been doing it since about the fifth grade, when necessary. Its purpose is to get through those three hours—period.

- To see if the examinee can perform under pressure? That's getting a little closer to the mark, but it begs the question: Why on earth would you want to know a thing like that? I mean, suppose you find one who can't, but who seems quite promising in all other respects—what do you do? What have you gained? Or lost?

- To provide the community of scholars with academic watchdogs? To guard the gates—to be sure the candidate

looks good, sounds right, represents you well, can thrust and parry, will (in short) be an asset to the club? Perhaps. But can you justify that particular brand of elitism these days? Isn't it a bit dated?

On the credit side then, by my calculations, we rack up a score of zero. Test-taking skill of any sort seems a somewhat dubious measure of competence as a scholar or researcher—and there are alternatives; and this particular kind of skill seems highly irrelevant to the qualities needed to conduct imaginative research, to pursue a scholarly interest, or to be a creative instructor. A budding politician, at age 25, might make a better showing than an incipient scholar.

#### The High Cost of Orals

Were that the only objection, however, the ritual would be merely tiresome. But what of the cost? What's on the debit side of the ledger?

- The cost in professional time—and therefore money—is high. A number of very busy and high-priced faculty members are each asked to devote a considerable number of hours meeting with the candidate, familiarizing themselves with his or her particular topics and interests, delineating appropriate questions, sitting for the exam, and evaluating the performance. The actual cost per examination varies immensely from one institution to another, but it might be an interesting figure for systems analysts to publicize. (Besides, I would find it depressing if this were a popular use of faculty time. Aren't the "good guys" examining more and enjoying it less?)

- The cost in the candidate's time is considerably greater, although also presumably cheaper—often in excess of a full quarter, and hardly ever less than a month. That time would be better spent

on learning—pursuing a question or an idea, using one's environment as best one can to these ends. Studying for orals, on the other hand, usually means absorbing scraps of knowledge merely for the sake of having them available, reviewing old notes of readings mercifully forgotten, clawing fearfully through references one really "should" look at—all of this in order to be ready to answer a question that might be asked. (One of my professors used to refer to Whitehead's notion of "inert ideas" as "sodden baggage"; it struck me as a beautiful description, and just the sort of thing one lugs dutifully to an examination and deposits on the way out.)

- There is, of course, some cost in candidates themselves. This, after all, is the official rationale behind the examination—to prevent the degree from being conferred upon the wrong people. Current folklore has it, though, that it's merely a formality. Perhaps it's time for clarification. If everyone is expected to pass the examination, then why bother with it? If it is actually intended to narrow the field of contenders, I question the criteria upon which the judgment is made. What is there about this particular charade which will smoke out the inept scholar, researcher, teacher? We may well rid ourselves of the inarticulate, the noncompetitive, the ill-prepared, the self-effacing, even the anti-academic. But let's be very sure that those are the ones we want to get rid of.

- Finally, I feel that there is a cost in learning, and here I am speaking essentially as an adult rather than as a student. A real student, I suppose, is stimulated by the prospect of an examination. It is an opportunity to excel, and in order to excel, he or she prepares in whatever ways seem relevant (for example, "mock orals"—a revolting

idea, but as unassailably logical as running laps to prepare for a footrace).

Some of this preparation may actually result in useful and relatively lasting learning, but such overlap seems to me largely coincidence. To a proper student, an examination is important in and of itself. In the case of an adult, however, to whom the student identity is secondary or even trivial, and whose knowledge springs from several decades of experiences—some more educational than others—the prospect of an examination is quite another thing. At best it's a nuisance for those articulate and assertive ones for whom it poses no real difficulty. At worst, it's a real roadblock to further progress. In these latter instances, intellectual progress is simply halted. Call it fear, call it anger—the cost is in learning, for the candidate neither adds to his or her own capacity nor contributes to any broader “learning” while the blockade is up.

In sum, what have we? An academic practice the original functions of which may be no longer defensible; a tense ritual for which the academic community pays dearly in time, money, and talent; and perhaps the least authentic of any of the scholastic ceremonials, since the skills for which it actually tests bear questionable relevance to those competencies the degree itself currently represents.

### A Search for Alternatives

What, then, are the alternatives? A survey of a hundred candidates would probably produce many workable possibilities—ways in which people could more fruitfully demonstrate their capabilities to the academic community. Here I'll suggest only the one that worked for me. To do that, and at the risk of waxing anecdotal, let me review a bit of personal history.

I met my examining committee not once, but twice. The outcome of the first meeting was somewhere between inconclusive and disastrous, depending on the observer. Between the two meetings, some six months apart, I found myself, quite unexpectedly, engaged in conversations with my examiners who, it turned out, were as uneasy about the outcome as I. A general sentiment, which cut across the whole sample, was that of regret mingled with surprise. No one, it seems, with the possible exception of myself, had expected the session to proceed as it did—and to the reader I

need only explain that I found myself with *very* little to say to the assembly on that spring morning.

Thus, faced with the necessity of evaluating what was essentially a nonperformance, they had made a sort of collective nonjudgment and invited me to come back when I felt better. Those postmortems persuaded me of three things: that I should, as much for my examiners' peace of mind as for my own, subject myself to another go-around; that, in such a case, I should find a way to present myself in a manner more in keeping with my own personal style, and more relevant to the skills I considered pertinent to my own future; and that the whole phenomenon of the oral comprehensive could benefit from a bit of agonizing reappraisal.

The first of these conversations was with an extremely articulate and competent researcher whose work I respected. He thought I was simply, in his words, “alienated from the pursuit.” In all honesty, he was quite right. My participation in the academic sphere, although personally satisfying and fruitful, spanning the years from 1950 to the present with lapses and interruptions, was never what I would consider a pursuit. Perhaps the quality missing is ambition; perhaps I had been vicariously over-exposed to the inner world of academia; perhaps I had not developed the necessary amount of enthusiasm for its specific rewards—the title of doctor, or the public acknowledgment of my expertise. The pursuit, from which I was indeed alienated, was, in my opinion, toward empty goals.

A second committee member was a well-known researcher and scholar whom I had known for many years as employer, teacher, and friend. He detected not so much alienation as an insidious mixture of ambivalence, fear, and rebellion, combining to produce a psychological state that left much to be desired. Again, all true. I need not go into the etiology of my own psychological state, but there probably exists a large contingent of ambivalent rebels scattered throughout the graduate schools, some of them worth salvaging for the academic marketplace.

### Ambivalence and Rebellion

I might suggest that any healthy woman who is in a doctoral program has at least traces of ambivalence about what she's doing. The causes of this are

so numerous and obvious that I won't even defend the statement; I'll merely note that more women are knocking on academic doors, that their skills may be quite useful to the society, and that the PhD oral is a truly ingenious device for heightening this ambivalence.

As for the element of rebellion, which has become an almost conventional mode of adaptation to the academic arena over the past decades, it may well have been unavoidable. The funny thing is that at the time I didn't really think of myself as a rebel. Compared to the front-page variety, I felt phlegmatically straight and conventional—a veritable pillar of the community. Yet when it came to proving that I could “make a good showing,” be glib with names and information soon to gather dust again, quickly marshal, substantiate, defend, and document with appropriate references my point of view, play scholar for a couple of hours—when it came to that point, I really had no choice. I rebelled, and for a very simple reason. Those are not my skills—neither as a part of my nature, nor as acquired in the course of my graduate education. It seems a little silly, somewhat demeaning, and totally unnecessary to pretend that they are.

Finally there is the problem that screening devices, such as this one, reward behavior patterns that are essentially masculine. Conventional wisdom has it that, given a benign committee, a well-developed ability to “shoot the bull” combined with even a moderate intellectual capacity is almost certain to insure a positive outcome on orals. (That bit of slang, incidentally, along with “bull session,” denotes our culture's linguistic judgment as to which sex is traditionally endowed with these skills.) David Riesman and Christopher Jencks, albeit a mite condescendingly, make the point this way in *The Academic Revolution*:

Women seem less easily caught up in the gamesmanship of the academic profession and less easily inducted into its ritualistic excesses. Just as very few girls collect stamps, play chess, become science-fiction aficionados, or take up other hobbies, so, too, relatively few women become entranced with the apparatus of scholarship that serves so many men as a substitute for thought. This indifference to academic games for their own sake can combine with passivity in

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## VIEWPOINT

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the face of adult authority to produce rote learning and mechanical imitation as answers to external pressure. Yet it still seems to us that women are somewhat more likely than men to fuse their human and academic concerns, and that this makes the admission of women in more than token numbers an asset in a graduate school. Yet this may be precisely why many scholars want to keep women out.

Feminism is, however, not the point. An examining committee may or may not harbor any number of irrational prejudices—after all, they're only human. But must the committee exist and function in the way that it does?

In my case, the solution was fairly straightforward: I merely selected a few broad topics within my field, put together a paper which included my own ideas about these areas along with what I thought to be relevant source material, and simply presented the paper to my committee, much as one would do at a professional conference, with a question-and-answer period following the presentation. For me, this provided a format which allowed me to present myself honestly; was a reasonable facsimile of a type of activity in which I might expect to participate as a professional in the field; and could be easily reacted to and judged by the members of my committee, who were miraculously transformed from examiners to colleagues.

But rather than proclaim that this way lies salvation, I would urge that each university, college, or department reevaluate its own oral procedures by asking a few basic questions. For a start, they might begin with, "Is this examination necessary, and, if so, why?" ■

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## RESEARCH

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percent) or to develop their skills and abilities (33 percent). Only three out of ten (30 percent) feel they now have jobs with good futures.

For two out of three (63 percent), the major barrier to a "good/meaningful" job is lack of education.

### Interpreting the Trends

What do these trends mean for the educator? A generation of young people who place their major emphasis on job satisfaction and self-fulfillment are growing increasingly restless with the options presently available to them when they graduate from high school—either going to work or continuing on to college. Indeed, for the large majority there are not even these two choices but often only one practical route. For, curiously, even a majority of college students appear to drift on to college rather than to make a deliberate choice.

Three out of four college students (72 percent) came from families where it was always assumed that they would go on to college. Two out of three (63 percent) attended high schools where most of the students went on to college. Three out of four (72 percent) felt that they had no other options when they graduated high school other than to go to college or take a job. For a majority of

noncollege youth, the choices are even more limited: getting a job, going into the armed forces, or—in the case of the young women—getting married and becoming a housewife.

To gauge the acceptability of possible alternatives to the present work-or-college choice, we pretested five "plans":

- *Plan 1:* A start-your-own-business program featuring training and interest-free loans.

- *Plan 2:* New types of technical schools offering certified training for skills needed in expanding industries.

- *Plan 3:* A career-planning year exposing the individual to many different fields and job opportunities and featuring new forms of career counseling.

- *Plan 4:* New types of apprenticeship programs in industry, the arts, the unions, or service organizations—where the individual is paid minimum wages while he learns new skills.

- *Plan 5:* A six-year job-and-college program where the individual works steadily at the job and receives a college degree at a nearby college for both work and formal courses.

Asked to react to each of these plans as if they were graduating from high school today, here is how the young blue-collar workers responded:

- 76 percent said that a career-planning year (Plan 3) would make an important difference in their lives.

- 71 percent would give serious consideration to the six-year combined work and go-to-college program (Plan 5).

- 68 percent expressed interest in the new types of technical schools (Plan 2).

- 66 percent were interested in the new types of apprenticeship programs (Plan 4).

- 55 percent reacted favorably to the start-your-own-business program (Plan 1).

Interestingly, college students share the blue-collar workers' enthusiasm for the career-planning year and the six-year work-college program, but are less interested in the start-your-own-business plan or in the new types of technical schools. These expressions of interest do not, of course, tell us whether young people would actually take advantage of such programs and alternatives if they were available. Our own interpretation is that the desire for new alternatives is strongly buttressed by the value structure and emerging cultural patterns of a new generation of Americans. ■

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