

Your Twelve Step Program to Completing a Multiple-paper Dissertation

Using a multiple-paper dissertation is not new at Utah State University; several departments and colleges on campus have been doing it for years. However, in our Department of Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences, these dissertations have been a rarity until recently (since 2006). Listed below is a set of considerations for doctoral students. You should have read these and thought about them prior to taking your comprehensive exams and being admitted as a Candidate for the doctoral degree. Note that this document represents a set of suggestions for following the Multiple Paper Dissertation format, formulated by Drs. Nick Eastmond, Andrew Walker, and Sandie Waters (former PhD student). A more formal document providing departmental policy on this matter may appear at some time in the future. For now, the Graduate School statement is taken as the existing policy on this matter. (See section appended to this document).

1. **Think long and hard about what you want to study**, and how it can be represented with a set of separate articles (usually three). This is a good place to strategize with your Chair, and possibly other members of your committee. Keep in mind the requirement for “conceptual coherence,” that the ideas for the multiple articles must relate to an overall topic in a logical, defensible way. *In addition, for our Department, you are encouraged to have at least two of the articles be empirical in nature. Here, empirical is broadly defined as the collection, analysis and reporting of data (either quantitative, qualitative, or mixed), as opposed to an article that is an opinion piece or a theoretical position*

paper, but one that contains no data.

2. **Get informed.** Read the graduate school policy from the Publication Guide (p.4). Read some examples of multiple-paper dissertations. Current examples are dissertations by Debora Escalante (2007), Bekir Gur (2007), and Sandie Waters (2008). Examples can be found on the Department website. If you can't find these dissertations on the shelf of the department or in the office of your Chair, feel free to e-mail these folks and ask for an electronic copy. Debora is at BYU, Bekir is at the Turkish Ministry of Education in Ankara, Turkey, and Sandie is at Utah Valley University in Orem. All are accessible by e-mail (and have indicated a willingness to share their work). Address them by their new title, "Dr.," and you will make points.
3. **Check out the journals.** You will have to sell your committee on these journals as the right place to publish your articles. Refereed journals generally trump those not "peer reviewed." You can tell the status of the journal by checking the editorial page in the journal or on the journal's web site: if it asks for multiple papers to be submitted or describes a review process going to a set of reviewers, you can label it as peer reviewed or refereed. However, some excellent journals use other review policies and ought not to be ruled out. For instance, *Educational Technology* is one of the most widely read journals in our field, and it has a sole editor, Larry Lipsetz, the owner and publisher. Also, in rare cases, you may be able to provide research reports only. Deb Escalante's dissertation used three reports on Teacher Supply and Demand that were commissioned by the State of Utah and distributed widely by the Utah State Department of Education. The

argument for your chosen source needs to be wide distribution, rigor of review, and impact on the field.

You are encouraged to submit at least one of your articles for publication prior to the oral defense of your multiple-paper dissertation.

4. **Think through the authoring arrangements.** Current policy of the Graduate School (April 2008) requires that you be the sole or primary author of the articles you include. *If you have co-authors, they must provide a written statement of their willingness to have you use the article in the dissertation.* Consider co-authoring arrangements with members of your committee. The general rule, if you are the primary author, is that you must have done the most work on the article preparation. Co-authoring with you can provide an added incentive for your Committee to stay involved with your project. But remember that their time and interest in this topic may be limited. *Note that while- you can have co-authors, you must be lead author on all articles and you must be responsible for the majority of the work on each.*
5. **Sell your committee on your idea.** Talk with your Chair about the topic and your plans prior to writing your proposal. Circulate a short “Prospectus” document (1-2 pages) to members of your committee prior to writing the full proposal. Note any “red flags” that come up, and write your proposal to avoid them. Once again, it helps to have models of proposals done before. If you can’t find one easily, ask your Chair for a sample one or write to one of the students listed above and ask for a copy of their proposal.
6. **Write a winning proposal.** Make sure that you do your best writing. Make a

strong case for why these articles will have more impact on the field than a single dissertation. Don't assume that the case for your doing multiple articles is obvious; you are blazing new ground for our department, and this is not the "tried and true way." Use a fellow student or professional editor to go over your writing (something we used to call a "Pre-Transmission Audit [PTA] in the Communication Theory class). Make a good case during your proposal meeting with your committee. (Your chair can coach you on how to do that best with the committee you have). Because the journals often limit the amount of description of methods for research allowed, be prepared to expand this section in the proposal for your committee. Similarly, the literature review may have to show the lines of research you will review, rather than provide every reference to be cited.

Because a multiple paper proposal does not obviously align with a traditional dissertation the following guidelines have been established. The goal here is to support the effort of creating multiple publication-ready articles.

Chapter 1 – Rather than an introduction to a research study, consider this as a statement of your research agenda. You want to be expansive in your citation of relevant literature here. Give a broad introduction to the area of work that you are interested in, discuss why it is an important area of inquiry and highlight the specific things that interest you in the wider context of the work that has already been done. Discuss the relationship of each article to this research agenda and how they fit together and complement each other.

Chapters 2-4 – Each study will get its own chapter and should consist of relevant

portions you would expect to find in a proposal: *Introduction, Purpose, Research Questions/Hypotheses, Literature Review, Methods and Analysis/Findings (with a focus on proposed analyses and expected results)*. Note that this topic listing assumes an empirical study; if your paper is itself a review of literature, however, you can still write along these lines. A literature review still needs an introduction along with the definition of critical terms (which will set up a scope for the work), for methods you can discuss search strategy and terms along with inclusion criteria (referring back to the definitions you've laid out) for studies you intend to review. If your paper is an opinion piece or some other non-empirical article you are on your own, the committee will have to reach consensus about what they want to see at the proposal stage. Note that getting five members to meet at a given time is difficult enough, getting them to agree on how to structure an opinion paper or the report of a development effort will likely be more difficult.

The department is willing to accept finished manuscripts at the proposal stage but this comes with no small amount of risk on the part of the student. If committee members take issue with critical elements of the paper (such as the instrumentation used) that are irreparable, then the proposal may be rejected. In order to pass the proposal stage all committee members need to agree unanimously that the proposed articles are either capable of or have the potential to lead towards publishable quality work in an acceptable journal.

7. **Obtain clearance from the Institutional Research Board (IRB).** Be advised that your proposal's clearing the IRB hurdle is not a trivial task. Because you will

be doing essentially several mini-studies, the number of details involved with all of them when combined could be daunting. First, get the required training online completed. Then, submit your documents to the IRB office. (The office is located in the building right across the street from us, behind the Military Science Building, and a visit in person can be helpful). Keep your mind on the total effort, and be sure you see how each element of your proposal to be approved by the IRB fits into the “grand scheme.” Plan to get coached as to how to look out for the human subjects you are working with. If you get stuck in the process or have an impending deadline, like a plane to catch to do your research, check with your Chair to help work with the IRB to get you unstuck.

The department supports a strong chair approach with respect to IRB. Meet with your Chair to decide whether to submit a single IRB application for the multiple studies or to do an IRB application for each study as you progress. In either case, each IRB submission needs to be sponsored by your dissertation chair.

8. **Conduct the research**, methodically and painstakingly. You should not eliminate data collected during the process. At times you will collect data that could offer interesting findings not previously considered.
9. **Draft your articles**. Use the same approach detailed in step #6 above. Look at the articles already published in the journal and match them, to some extent. If your article’s bibliography draws at least some citations from the targeted journal, that is a good sign, since you’re showing you’re conversant with past issues examined in the journal. Count on your co-authors, particularly faculty members to help you avoid pitfalls in the written manuscript.

10. **Submit the articles for publication.** If you can submit them sequentially, so much the better. One trick: contact the editor with the basic idea, asking if that is something the journal readers would have interest in. Any coaching from that editor is golden (Some will provide it; some will not). Anything submitted prior to approval of your proposal by your committee will likely count as “pilot study” work, and may not count as part of the dissertation. In the past, this point has been negotiable, as is shown in the case with Deb Escalante, since all of her articles – in this case, reports -- were published prior to the proposal’s acceptance by the Committee. (Joanne Bentley was the committee member who suggested that this route be taken. At this point, retrospective approval might be tough to obtain). *See above for discussion on using previously finished or published manuscripts. Publication in a peer reviewed journal does not constitute an automatic pass for the purposes of a dissertation (similarly rejection of a submitted article does not constitute automatic failure).*
11. **Defend your dissertation.** Draw upon the coaching from your Chair as to how to face this meeting. Some general rules are: (1) be sure that you and your Chair are in basic agreement before the meeting starts and stay in agreement as the meeting proceeds; if not, problems may arise; (2) stay open to comments and criticisms; this is an opportunity to get excellent and frank feedback about your work; and (3) answer openly and honestly. Remember that you are the expert on this information and that you likely know more than any other person on earth about the specific topic you have studied. A degree of modesty is advised, but in the analysis and interpretation of what you have found, you should not hold back

your convictions.

Once again, all five committee members need to agree that the multiple articles are of publishable quality.

- 12. Stay tenacious in your submitting of the articles.** Have a list of first, second, and third choices for the journals you are targeting. If you get suggestions for revision, get right on the task and resubmit quickly. (As in tennis, “Keep the ball in their court,” is good advice. In other words, take a minimal amount of time revising, but do it right, and get it back to the editor promptly). If you get a complete rejection from one journal, learn all you can from the feedback, and then submit the article to another journal. The rule with journal articles, observed strictly, is that you may submit to only one journal at a time. When that journal has decided it does not want the article, you can submit it to another, but not before. (Exactly the opposite is true with book manuscripts, which can be sent to various publishers until one publisher accepts it!). Remember that editors need good articles to stay in business. “The presses are hungry.” (To quote M. David Merrill, a former faculty member). Yours are good articles, or your Committee would not have passed you. Make sure that the articles get published. Draw upon the experience of your Chair and committee members in submitting to journals. Stay tenacious.

As you work towards becoming a peer, you will be asked to navigate through the academic waters. Sometimes these requirements will seem challenging.

Remember that the process is followed to be sure that the material published is quality work. It is actually to your advantage to have this publication check on

the quality of your work. If you find yourself turning out reports and not publishing about them, it is probably time to put on the brakes and do the deliberating and clear thinking that will be required to be published.

That's it. Be prepared to learn along the way as you follow this path. As the French say: "Bon courage." That's better than "good luck," although a little of that would not hurt as well.

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Additions by Andrew Walker and Sandie

Waters, completed 12 May 2008, with

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