

Insights into the process of writing doctoral dissertation: challenges and advices

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Introduction

Writing a doctoral dissertation is a long, but accomplished journey for many doctoral researchers when the dissertation is finally published at the university's website. Through my interviews with a recent graduate whose graduation year was 2021 (Marja Svanberg, hereinafter called Marja) and her supervisor (Matti Häyry, hereinafter called Matti) at Aalto University School of Business, I realized that it was not a smooth journey as I had imagined. Things could go wrong at any stage, and there could be some interruptions during the journey. The aim of this short paper is to discuss some insights on the journey of writing doctoral dissertation and identify some possible challenges one may encounter at the early and later stages of the journey. This paper will end with some suggestions taken from the interviews and my own reflection on doctoral dissertation writing.

The process of writing doctoral dissertation: from personal experience to general advices

The first question is why it is this specific topic, but not another topic. Marja told me that she became interested in CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) during her working time in facility management when she and her colleagues had to work really hard and did some unnecessary tasks, only for the purpose of getting her company a certificate of being an ethical organization. After quitting her job and following her husband to California (USA) for one year, she had more time to think about business ethics and CSR until she decided to start her doctoral study to research deeper into the topic: the relationship between business and ethics. The main point here is that research topic could emerge from anywhere, but it should be the one of your great interest so that you would be comfortable with it in a long journey. Then, after having the topic, one will need to make decisions on each stage of the journey, including: (1) the structure of the dissertation, whether it is a combination of essays or a monograph; (2) research method, whether it is a quantitative or a qualitative, and sometimes research method may depend on the topic of research as some philosophical topics could not be studied using quantitative method; (3) data collection, what data to collect and how data should be collected;

(4) data analysis, how to interpret the data and (5) comprehensive writing where everything is put together in one dissertation. According to Marja and Matti, the structure of Marja's dissertation was decided at early stage, after she took a doctoral thesis writing course, to be a dissertation by essays and introduction and it was her philosophical (i.e. conceptual) topic that her research was qualitative empirical research. In terms of data collection, she observed what moral philosophers, business ethicists and business management theoreticians had to say about morality, business and their interaction and what business people and others had to say in various relevant, real-world outlets such as the literature on business ethics, CSR and the original works on moral and social philosophy. Part of the process included gathering data by reviewing thirty business ethics texts and methodically analyzing the texts by probing them with some key questions to interpret their meanings. As a result of the process of data interpretation and critical analysis, she had finished her three essays and put them in her dissertation.

However, it was not a calm and easy journey for Marja, unanticipated issues happened along the road. It took her seven years in this journey, instead of four years as usual. She became a mother of two kids and had to stop researching at some points. Her point of view regarding business and ethics was different from that of most of her colleagues who believed in conventional ethics which reject self-interest – the essence of business or what she called anti-egoist perspective. She, herself, has believed that business and ethics could possibly go hand-in-hand and there need to be a reconsideration in business ethics because in her opinion, current business ethics *“is generally about morally domesticating businesspeople, not empowering them in their self-interested desire to make money. This moral doubt against business results in an unfair and misleading characterization of businesspeople and business.”* (Marja, 2021). This resulted in her feeling of loneliness in the journey, *“... it feels like it's me against the world”*. Moreover, the main research interest of her supervisor, Matti, was mostly in philosophical bioethics which is different from hers and it took her some time to verify her ideas and her research to him. In other words, one may encounter different challenges during the long journey of writing dissertation such as unanticipated disruption, a feeling of loneliness and different research interest from supervisor. The key factor to overcome these challenges was, according to Marja, the support from both her husband who had been her co-author in her first two essays (which were already published) and her supervisor who had given her precious comments and feedback on her work with his good spirit over the years. In addition to the support, there were other factors that made it possible for Marja to finish her dissertation, which

were, according to Matti, her “*stamina, perseverance, belief in herself, hard-work, stamina, and perseverance*”. To take it broadly, both support from family, friends, supervisors, colleagues and one’s own efforts play a major part in making the journey of writing dissertation possible and successful.

Moreover, Marja and Matti have both suggested some useful tips for writing dissertation, including: (1) keeping on the habit of daily writing (at least 5-10 minutes per day); (2) writing down every idea that comes to your mind which may be useful later; (3) treating it as a full-time job and spending time to work on it (but instead of long hours with many distractions, one should spend half the amount of time to work with full concentration); (4) attending courses that are useful for writing and structuring doctoral dissertation. I, personally, believe that these tips will be of much value to me during my writing journey ahead.

Conclusions

In summary, writing a doctoral dissertation is a challenging journey with many ups and downs, but not an impossible mission. One needs to be perseverant, working hard and seeking support whenever needed to fulfill the journey. In addition, a habit of daily reading and writing will of great help in the research and writing process. With good preparation, practices and perseverance, one will be able to go to an end of the journey, no matter how tough it is. Lastly, I would like to thank Marja and Matti for their sharing and precious advices on the thesis writing topic.

References

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