

Name: Apurva Ganoo
Date: October 17, 2022
Course: Getting Started (21L25000)
Student Number: 718143

Pre-Assignment for Session 2

This essay is derived from the insights I gathered from the conversations I had with Tua Björklund and Matti Vartianen regarding Tua's dissertation on the 29th and 27th of September 2022, respectively. I've structured this essay around a few key themes or topics I found interesting and relevant for my own studies and have added my own thoughts and reflections wherever relevant.

Dissertation is like a “driving license for academic life,” is something Matti mentioned during the interview, and perhaps something that struck with me throughout the discussions. I found it encapsulated a lot of the things I discussed with both Matti and Tua in a succinct manner, namely that while there is no doubt that a doctoral journey is a difficult one, it is simply one of the many journeys one must make as an academic. Similar to a driver's license, the doctoral studies should test and prepare you for what may lie ahead, provide an environment in which you can experiment and learn new skills, be supported, and trained by those more experienced within those fields. On a personal note, I also found this metaphor reassuring because it signifies that while the doctoral journey will be difficult, it should not be impossible and more importantly the failures that will no doubt come within the journey, should be seen as learning opportunities. With this, I will then delve deeper into some practical topics and themes that both Tua and Matti presented and are no doubt things I will make use of during my own doctoral journey.

Something I was able to discuss with both Tua and Matti was about identifying the so-called “red thread” within an article-based dissertation. While finding this concept or theme which can connect the different papers together might be difficult, Tua highlighted that, at the end of the day, as you are after all the author (in some capacity) of each one of those papers, you will have some thoughts about how they can connect, and so simply just writing down any initial ideas can be a good first step towards tackling this issue. Matti, in turn, highlighted that this is something where the supervisor can be of assistance. This discussion in particular was an important one as this topic was something of a worry to me as I have currently started my doctoral studies within one project, but most likely will be moving to another one or two more over the duration of my studies with no guarantee of any direct or obvious links. However, I found Tua's comments particularly helpful as it highlighted that as an academic scholar and author, I also should be able to find these commonalities, and more importantly it is okay if these “red threads” are not immediately noticeable. Instead, focusing upon research areas that actually interest me would be a more important aspect, and then I can, slowly but surely, begin to identify the key overlapping theoretical concepts.

Connecting to this topic, Tua highlighted how her research had looked at various topics ranging from entrepreneurship, effectuation theory, and bricolage to problem/solution co-evolvement, but she noticed the larger phenomenon of all of them tying to the idea of “developing things together.” From there, she was able to take a “higher lens” and looked at the larger themes of “proactive work” and “proactive behavior” which provided her with the red thread for her dissertation.

As the topics and themes Tua explored within her dissertation, and continues to explore further as a professor, interest me, I was able to pick up on a lot of valuable tips from her on the methods, literature, and collaboration within research projects too. As I hope to conduct research with and on various organizations and their employees, Tua mentioned how negotiating access to data is often the first crucial step towards any research within these contexts. Furthermore, when working in large projects involving private organizations, she also highlighted the importance of outlining and understanding the various, potentially conflicting, goals the different entities may have with the research project. Companies may often only be interested in the implications or outcomes, while the academic team may also have differing publication goals, and while these differences can no doubt be managed, they should also be discussed and kept in mind by the researcher.

These aforementioned points tied into our discussions on methods as Tua pointed out that sometimes the project level goals may dictate the methods, for example if the KPIs or metrics indicated that interviews were to be conducted. Delving deeper into the methods, we discussed how Tua was able to make use (and continues to make use of) various methods such as case studies, thematic analysis, quantified qualitative analysis and encouraged me to also explore these options within my own research. Moreover, she also encouraged doing multiple methods courses, and ideally do them as soon as possible. Describing the methods as the tools in your “toolbox” as a researcher, she pointed out that these courses can help you explore methods that are beyond your own current approach and can no doubt help build one’s confidence when utilizing these “tools.” On a more practical level, attending these courses can also be a great chance to network and meet possible collaborators she added.

I was also able to chat with both Tua and Matti about publication processes where we discussed, amongst other things, the process of dealing with rejections, managing the review processes, and co-authorships. In terms of a timeline, Matti highlighted that journals typically promise a timeframe for their review periods, but a good estimate for the entire process can be around 8 months for a reputable journal. Matti highlighted that keeping expectations manageable is important, knowing that getting published in JUF0 3 or similarly ranking journals can take years of experience. This of course can also help me with handling the impending rejections, knowing that getting published within the top journals will be a time-consuming process. Doing research on the publishers and journals themselves is also an important step Matti highlighted, for example by looking specifically at their expectations and the previous content they have published.

In terms of co-authorships, Matti highlighted that being proactive is the key as, being a doctoral student, it is less likely that someone will reach out to you. He also pointed out that while getting senior professors to collaborate immediately with you on a paper may be difficult, you can always reach out and send your initial thoughts and ideas for them to think about. In my discussions with Tua, she highlighted that when co-authoring papers, it is important to explicitly outline the roles and responsibilities of all the authors, as she has seen in the past that authors have been unhappy with their roles or positions within papers. She also alluded to the fact that especially in the beginning, as an inexperienced researcher, having more co-authors can be a great supporting mechanism as well as a valuable learning opportunity.

Something slightly different yet incredibly helpful that we were able to discuss with Tua was the similarities between the design thinking and academic processes. This was particularly helpful for me in visualizing the academic journey as design thinking and its various processes are things I have become very familiar with through my experiences within IDBM and Aalto

University. She highlighted that like in design processes, academic processes are also often iterative and overlapping. For example, you will be reading something to build the literature, but then may hop into action and conducting interviews, and then perhaps reiterating and redesigning the process as deemed necessary. She did; however, point out that comparison ends at the analysis level expectations between the design and academic processes.

Then, I would like to briefly discuss the simple yet profound discussions I had with both Matti and Tua regarding the emotional and mental side of the doctoral process. Both talked about the possibly lonely side to academic research, and indicated that having both, a strong support system within academia, as well as a regular life outside of academia as key aspects to keep yourself both sane and motivated. Both also indicated that while having a plan is useful, it is also okay to be abductive in one's approach towards the dissertation. Both mentioned that the initial plans can and will change, but also emphasized the importance of researching something that you do find interesting and are willing to learn about. As Tua succinctly highlighted, "as a researcher you are being paid to learn... so why not learn about what you are interested in?" This was something perhaps obvious, yet important for me to hear as I know I am often susceptible to the trap of choosing something because it "sounds good" and not necessarily something I may actually find interesting.

Lastly, I wanted to conclude this essay by reflecting upon this exercise and assignment as I no doubt found this exercise both useful and reassuring. Interviewing someone who had gone through this process before, especially someone whose research interests align closely to my own, provided me with a lot of practical advice, useful tips and suggestions, and a path that I can follow while creating my own. Moreover, the interviews also provided me with ideas on how I can rely on the support and help of colleagues and friends to ensure that while the doctoral journey can and, in some ways, should be tough, it will certainly be manageable. Connecting back to the metaphor of a license, a license does not signify mastery of one's craft or the completion of one's journey with that craft. Rather the license is just the permission to continue with that craft with a greater sense of understanding and appreciation for that craft. And that's how I will look upon my doctoral studies too.