THE VIVA VOCE: THE LIVING VOICE OF A DOCTORAL THESIS

Ndileleni P. Mudzielwana

INTRODUCTION

Studying for a doctorate may take years of intensive work and study. During the process of writing a doctoral thesis, the student needs to be given the appropriate support by supervisors until the final stage of defending the thesis. Having spent some years writing the thesis with the assistance of supervisors, the thesis will go through the process of examination by experts in the field. These are the people who will make contributions by giving comments that will strengthen the thesis. They may question aspects of the thesis or identify gaps that need to be attended to. Depending on institutional policy and processes, a thesis may have two or more external examiners who are considered experts in the field in which the study is conducted and who are appointed by the university. The primary purpose of a PhD assessment is to determine whether the candidate is competent as an independent researcher in the discipline (Department of Education 2007).

Some universities expect doctoral students to give a verbal response to examiners' reports by participating in an academic discussion with the examiners. This is commonly called a viva voce (Latin for "with the living voice"), in general called a viva for short, or oral defence. In this way, the thesis becomes alive through the living voice of the doctoral candidate. Wellington (2010:72) describes the viva as a "rite of passage, a process of legitimation, a major event for decision making, the end of an era, a stamp of approval, ... a chance to shine, closure, a climax and a platform". In South Africa, conducting an oral PhD examination is not a universal practice (Unisa 2015). At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, for instance, an oral examination is not a requirement, but may be required by the examination panel. Faculties may exercise the option of conducting a viva, or may include it as

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a standard part of the examination process (University of KwaZulu-Natal, n.d.). At the University of Johannesburg, an oral examination may be required by faculties, but such requirement must be approved by the relevant faculty board and Senate (University of Johannesburg 2015). At Unisa, doctoral candidates were subjected to an oral examination by internal and external examiners until the beginning of the 1990s, but this was largely discontinued due to financial and time constraints (Ehlers 1999). Thus, even though each South African university determines its own requirements and practices, the *viva* remains a common and accepted practice at many universities (as is the case at Stellenbosch University and the University of Pretoria).

This chapter focusses on how to prepare for this aspect of obtaining a doctorate. Take note that the procedure regarding doctoral assessment may differ from one institution to another, also in terms of the procedures regarding the *viva*. Despite its many possible manifestations, the PhD *viva voce*, as an oral examination of the doctoral thesis, constitutes the final “test” of the PhD endeavour. Potter (cited in Watts 2012:1) identified three critical functions of the *viva*, namely (a) to check that the thesis is really the candidate’s own work by posing questions that are designed to test authenticity; (b) to test the ability of the student to defend his/her work as a researcher; and (c) to present an opportunity to the student to clarify aspects of the study and clear up any misunderstandings. Burnham (1994:31) states that the “examination is an opportunity to strike up a good working relationship on which one can later draw references and in particular for recommendations when approaching academic publishers”. Adapting this positive view of the *viva* would be advantageous to oneself, as the event is evaluated with the rigour “that makes a doctorate worth having” (Carter 2012:281). The purpose of the *viva* is therefore to confirm the value of one’s original contribution to a body of knowledge and to show the examiners that you did the work yourself. It also proves that you have done extensive reading in the field, have a sound knowledge of the field, and have become an expert on a particular topic. The final examination of the thesis defence is for quality assurance. At the University of Pretoria’s Faculty of Education, the doctoral defence is a requirement for obtaining a PhD. Here, the *viva voce* focusses on three aspects:

- the intellectual component of the thesis – referring to whether you are able to demonstrate “sufficient intellectual depth, breadth and dexterity of knowledge and understanding to qualify as a doctor”;

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- the textual component of the thesis – referring to whether one understands “with sufficient nuance and insight the complexities underlying the theoretical and methodological substance of the thesis”; and
- the personal component of the thesis – referring to whether the candidate expresses a “disposition appropriate for a new scholar in the course of conducting the defence” (University of Pretoria 2014:35).

The viva voce can only be done when the examiners feel the doctoral work has met the requirements of the university. This implies that the assessment of the quality of the thesis is shared among examiners who were involved in the assessment process. When highlighting the purpose of defending the thesis, Delamont, Atkinson and Odette (1997:148) explain that “when the thesis is sound and the external examiner is the right person, the ‘examination’ becomes something altogether more open/democratic and less confrontational than that term normally conveys”.

The viva voce can be an overwhelming prospect and it may seem daunting and scary. However, defending a thesis is a live process, and should not be seen as a direct confrontation. Many doctoral students enjoy this experience of discussing their PhD research with interested experts. It is an opportunity for me, the student, to share my research with the examiners who may become my peers and colleagues within the disciplinary community. An oral defence allows me to showcase my efforts and present my research findings in a supportive environment. Such exposure provides me with the opportunity to discuss the work with experts in the field, to improve the arguments in my thesis, and to consider where to publish the work (Twigg 2003). At some institutions, such as the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB), an open invitation to attend the viva is directed to members of the public to attend the event (USB 2015). It can therefore also be a useful networking opportunity of sharing information with other academics.

Students sometimes fear that even if the thesis has been approved by the external examiners, they may fail during the viva voce – which brings considerable discomfort considering the many years of hard work that went into completing the thesis. Thorough preparation for the viva voce is therefore essential. This chapter outlines the general procedures of the viva voce and provides some insights that helped me prepare for my viva voce. The discussion is divided into three phases, namely before the defence (Phase 1), during the defence (Phase 2) and after the defence (Phase 3).

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PHASE 1: BEFORE THE DEFENCE

One will need at least a week or two to prepare for the viva voce. I started off by familiarising myself with the viva voce policy and procedures of my institution. In general, a viva voce panel constitutes a non-examining chairperson, internal and external examiners, the supervisors, possibly one appointed staff member of a school or faculty, and the student. At some institutions, the student takes part in choosing this panel. Try to obtain this type of information to ensure that you are fully prepared and know what to expect. Your supervisor should be able to provide you with the necessary information on who constitutes a viva voce panel at your institution and the procedures that are commonly followed.

Even though the thesis is the student's own work, at this stage, it becomes public property. The community of academics – in this case the examiners – was interested to know about me and my work. During my preparation, I took into account what I considered as the original contribution my doctoral work makes, as this is usually what the examiners would like to discuss¹. This means that I had to have a command of what was happening in my subject area so that I could evaluate the worth of what others were doing in relation to my work. I needed to have the astuteness to discover where I could make a useful contribution, show a mastery of appropriate techniques that are currently being used, and provide an awareness of their limitations. I also had to communicate my results effectively in the professional arena and have a global awareness of what was published, written and discovered in the relevant academic community.

Before my defence, I took some time to practise supporting my answers with the specifics of my thesis. Watts (2012) suggests a re-read of the thesis, because without a proper re-familiarisation with the content, students will unlikely be able to offer an adequate defence of their work. I needed to be clear as to why I did the study in the first place. This included clarity on the objectives of the study, the research question, and how the objectives were linked with the research question. I had to make sure that my presentation was focussed on critical issues that could convince listeners that the work is mine and that I could add value to the body of knowledge. I had to be aware that one of the primary aims of the viva voce is to determine whether the thesis is my own work. I had to show that I am indeed an independent researcher capable of making an original contribution.

1 See the previous chapter (Chapter 18), where Emmanuel Sibomana unpacks what originality means in the context of a PhD thesis.

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I practised with a friend, summarising my thesis out loud, and spoke to colleagues who had recently had been through the viva voce process. It was important that I practised out loud, as I had to train my voice to be audible enough to be heard by all the panel members without difficulty. In most instances, a supervisor would help you prepare for your viva voce, sometimes by conducting a mock viva to ensure that you are well prepared². In general, a mock viva enables students to experience typical viva conduct and allows them the opportunity to practise defending and debating their work (Hartley & Fox, cited in Watts 2012). The mock viva may help to identify unclear or weak areas, and allow one to rehearse confident explanations (Jack 2003).

In my preparation, it was critical to update myself on recent literature. This implied that I had to practise “dropping names” of scholars, including the dates and titles of key works, into my discussion that showed my detailed knowledge of the field. I identified the possible weaknesses of my thesis and considered how I would explain them. I understood that the panel would appreciate my grasp of the study limitations. I also identified the strengths of my chapters and selected chapters or sections that I wanted to highlight. I considered ways of working references to my own work into the discussion. I prepared a short summary and practised speaking it out loud. I identified three or four key themes and prepared a few pages of points on these themes. I furthermore reviewed my research methods and made sure I could justify the choice of my methods.

Trafford (2003:118) identified four general questions that examiners typically ask to conclude the viva voce, which I kept in mind during my preparation:

- What was your contribution to knowledge?
- How would I critique your research/how would I repeat this research?
- What have you learned from completing this research?
- How will you use your research findings/what do you plan to publish?

PHASE 2: DURING THE DEFENCE

The defence may be up to an hour long, depending on the institution and the procedures followed. Because I practised my presentation, I was well prepared and confident. Thereafter, I faced questions from experts in the field. Usually an examination panel first asks the student to tell them about him- or herself and how they came up with the research question. Wellington (2010) recommends that giving students this opportunity to demonstrate enthusiasm and passion for their topic at

² See in Chapter 2 how Zondi Mkhabela recounts his experiences of this process.

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the start of the *viva voce* helps build their confidence and settle their nerves, which acknowledges the inherently stressful nature of the process.

During my presentation, the examiners asked questions to determine whether the work was indeed my own, what my personal disposition towards scholarship was, and to get an idea of my intellectual depth. They were also interested in my understanding of the field of study, my scientific textual knowledge, and my understanding of the theoretical and methodological substance of the thesis. This was the opportunity to relax and showcase my work. No matter how nervous I was, I had to focus and listen carefully to the questions they posed. I took a moment to pause before I answered the questions. Examiners are not looking for quick responses, but rather for thoughtful and precise answers. “Examiners are impressed by thoughtful, reflective candidates who give consideration to constructive criticism and are able to modify their arguments accordingly” (Burnham 1994:33). I expected to be asked to address the more controversial aspects of my thesis. I kept in mind that I did not have to defend everything about my thesis. If I did not have an answer to a question, I refrained from answering it or making promises – I rather replied by saying that the question is interesting and that I would consider it in future³. The more you relax, the easier it becomes for you to think logically and present yourself competently. It was necessary to remember that my work had both strengths and weaknesses. In identifying both the strengths and weaknesses beforehand, I was ready to discuss both these aspects of my thesis. This helped me not to take criticism personally, but rather see the examiners’ comments and questions as an opportunity for me to share and discuss my work with other academics. I also had to prepare to ask questions and enter into a dialogue with my examiners. I need not wait until they invited me to develop my answers. If they did not allow me to develop my answer or if they kept interrupting me, I could ask, “May I finish answering my previous question, please?”

The following should be taken note of during the *viva voce*:

- Be prepared to discuss your research in the context of other work done in your field. Impress the panel by referring to recent research in your field as it relates to your work.
- Be ready to admit if you do not know the answer to a question.
- Be prepared to express opinions of your own argument, which should be presented in a friendly but decisive manner.

3 Also see the chapter by Soraya Abdulatief (Chapter 6), where she describes how she learned to answer questions from a scholarly audience.

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- If the panel gives you the opportunity to sum up your thesis, spend the time wisely; always act professionally.

PHASE 3: AFTER THE DEFENCE

The academic judgement of the examiners is the crucial factor in arriving at a decision. This is the phase in which the importance of examiners gathering sufficient, relevant oral evidence to enable them to judge the worth and authenticity of the thesis is central to this process, and therefore the role of the viva in the final decision should not be underestimated. It is not customary for the panel to discuss the results in your presence. You may be asked to leave the room for the examiners to consider their decision and recommendations at the end of the viva voce. Usually the candidate and supervisors are called back by the non-examining chair after consensus has been reached.

You have the right to appeal if you feel that you have been treated unfairly during your viva voce. Rudd (1985, cited in Murray 2009:155) identified several grounds for appeal, including unfair treatment during the viva voce due to “ideological differences between students and staff”, supervisor error, failure by the supervisor to alert the student during the early stages of the work to significant weaknesses in the study, and personal hostility directed towards the student by an examiner. This, however, does not mean that any student who receives a negative result should automatically appeal – you should be guided by your institution’s regulations in this regard.

I felt drained after undergoing this strenuous, yet rewarding exercise. I rewarded myself by celebrating with those who supported me. If you are required to make corrections based on the report written by the panel, it is advisable to start with this as soon as possible after your viva voce, while the content of your thesis and the discussions during the viva voce are still fresh in your mind (Jack 2003). Then, it is once again time to plan for the future. Smith (2014:162) gives the following advice:

You should consider continuing to publish your work along with your supervisors after you graduate. ... It might be possible to publish your work as a book chapter, or in some cases, as an entire book. Research shouldn't stop at graduation. In many ways, your journey has only just begun. Be prepared to continue your learning journey, and to pass on your experience and advice to other students.

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CONCLUSION

This chapter provides ideas that can be useful during the oral defence of a thesis. It is clear that writing a thesis can be challenging. Reaching the final stage of the doctoral journey, this chapter encourages students to make a success of the last phase of the study – the viva voce. Going through the process of a viva voce can be emotional and taxing. However, if you remain focussed and prepare well, you will find that you can survive and succeed this last hurdle positively and professionally.

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