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**As Smart as I'll Ever Be**



*Image: Brian Taylor for The Chronicle*

By David Brooks

In the spring of 2008, I sat down in my department chair's office so we could review a copy of my transcripts. After double-checking, we realized that with the completion of the fall 2008 semester, I would fulfill the department's Ph.D. requirements for course credits. Trying to sound undaunted, I offered him the familiar graduate-student line: "Now all I have to do is write my dissertation."

"Well," replied my chair, "you have to pass your exams first."

"Exams?"

As he explained the rudiments of comprehensive exams, I suspect that he read the surprise on my face. Of course I knew *of* the exams; I just didn't know much *about* them. I assumed they were some minor formality that I could hop over, and that my coursework would suffice as preparation.

After leaving the office, I did a little research into my newfound fate. The purpose of comprehensive exams hasn't changed much since the early 19th century, when German scholars systematized the Ph.D. degree by defining its four basic elements: the application process, seminars, a set of exams, and a dissertation. Ostensibly that sequence of tasks identifies talent, teaches the art of asking and answering good questions, provides a foundation in the relevant literature, and then creates some new knowledge.

Like many departments, mine requires four exams, in four fields of study, administered by four faculty members, who form a committee. One of the four represents your major subfield, two are from subfields of your department, and the fourth is from a field outside your department. Typically the process involves you and each of the four faculty members agreeing on a book list, from which you are then tested.

Each of my examiners had a different idea about what a comprehensive exam ought to entail. At first I saw that lack of standardization as a problem. For my out-of-department field, for example, the professor picked all of the books for me and gave me a clear essay assignment meant to make me grapple with the ways in which the field had changed.

In one of the subfields on which I was tested, the book list was a joint effort. I wrote a rough list of books based on what I had read, what I wanted to read, and what commonly appeared on seminar bibliographies. My faculty adviser then scratched out titles that seemed too narrowly focused, outdated, or redundant, and added some classics and cutting-edge work.

For the third subfield, it was pretty much up to me. I brought a load of textbooks home from the library and pored over their bibliographies until I had a list of about 100 books that seemed to appear most frequently or were cited most often.

For my major field, I listed everything I had already read, organizing it into themes and pertinent time periods. Wherever it appeared that I had read little in a given theme or time period, I inserted titles from seminar bibliographies.

Once the head of my exam committee scratched titles off that list and added others, it was time to begin my intensive study.

At first the only point I saw in taking the exams was to pass them and get on with my diss. Some good advice cured my myopia.

Most of the faculty members whom I cornered told me to "enjoy" the task, which sounded absurd, if not cruel, as I stared at my long reading lists. But I soon found myself savoring the experience of being surrounded with a bunch of the most important, new, or classic works in my fields.

Suddenly I was reading with the intent of organizing my impressions into a big, and hopefully clear, picture of those fields, rather than for the immediate, frantic task of cranking out another seminar assignment. The competitiveness of weekly seminar discussions with bright, motivated, and critical peers disappeared. The need to criticize each book as a single entity faded, as did the need to churn out weekly academic reviews or critical analyses. I immersed myself in the transition from working on short-term assignments to indulging in a more comprehensive project.

A bit of practical advice helped me see a shared intention behind what I had misconstrued as a lack of standardization. At different times, all of my faculty examiners pointed out that the books on my reading lists would be with me for the rest of my academic career. Aside from occasional bouts of blurred vision and wishing that those books weren't in my life at all, I started to realize that my work might translate into something useful, even marketable.

As I organized titles into ever-growing piles in my basement, I saw potential courses emerge. I started jotting down ideas for new syllabi. The process of going through the books helped me imagine teaching from them. For one of my four fields, the written exam became a survey-course syllabus with an annotated bibliography, including a justification for each reference.

The exams no longer seemed like just a hurdle to my dissertation.

Although I had no weekly seminars to attend during this time, I made a habit of strolling my department's floor and popping into open doors. Occasionally I actually had a question about some book or historical argument, but mostly I just tried to get people to talk about their exam experiences.

It was like hearing people tell about running a marathon or traveling through a third-world country for the first time. They were proud of their struggles and recounted how transformative they had found the experience. One guy recalled wallpapering his apartment with notes and holding cutthroat quiz sessions with fellow students, a few of whom became lifelong friends. I sensed a degree of nostalgia that I have never heard anyone associate with, say, writing a dissertation.

A month before my exams, I quit reading and started studying. What I knew about each exam helped me order all the notes I had taken from the books, as well as the three or four academic reviews I read for each one. For one exam, I compiled 10 essay questions, one for each theme or time period within that subfield. At test time, my examiner would give me four of the questions, and I would write on two of them.

I grouped my notes under the question that I thought they best answered, outlined essays, and even wrote out thesis statements and some key points of analysis for each of the questions.

In contrast, another of the exams promised to be a complete surprise. So I simply honed my notes into outlines, bullet points, and concise quotes. That's as close as I got to a shortcut. Since I'm a failure at using memory tricks, and I find study groups a distraction to good studying, I turned to rote memorization. I went to bed each night with my notes, and when I woke up the next morning, I sat down at the computer and retyped them. In between, I simply rehearsed them as if they were lines for a play.

Two days before the exams, I felt ready for the curtain call. At that point, I quit studying, took a few long runs and walks, played with my dog and my daughter, and did my best to go to bed early. In four separate four-hour sessions over two days, I poured out as much of what I had learned as possible into the written exams. The one consisting of the four chosen essay questions allowed me to write elaborate essays that I had carefully outlined. At the other extreme, the exam about which I knew nothing in advance challenged the flexibility of my knowledge, forcing me to make new connections between books and their arguments.

I walked away from each one with the satisfaction of having done all I could.

When I handed in my final exam, a friend who was a faculty member in a different university's history department happened to be there. She patted my shoulder and said, "This is as smart as you'll ever be."

Because I still had a two-hour oral exam with all of my examiners, I went home to give my notes one last look and didn't try to discern whether her comment was a compliment or a warning. The truth of it struck me midway through the orals—which were the most enjoyable and singularly transformative part of the whole experience. Fielding a battery of questions that ranged from curiosity about details of particular books to my own interpretations of themes within fields, I felt smarter than I ever had. More important, I felt as if I were talking my way into a new peer group.

Of all the benefits that came from preparing for and taking my exams—identifying the pertinent literature, grappling with and grouping the major arguments, imagining new interpretations and new courses, and experiencing this exercise in sheer discipline—the biggest was psychological. Field exams helped me to imagine myself as a teacher as well as a lifelong student. I will always see my faculty examiners as my teachers, but exams taught me to see them as colleagues as well.

A year out from those exams, and after teaching a survey course while trying to stay on the dissertation track, I'm already nostalgic about my year of exam prep. But I still hope they are the last exams I ever have to take.

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