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Pushing Them Through

By BARBARA KATZ ROTHMAN

**FIRST
PERSON**

Personal experiences on the job market

I read somewhere that seven is the largest number of anything that people can hold in their heads. You can look at a stack of plates, for instance, and see as many as seven without counting. You can see a flock of seven birds, a litter of seven kittens, a table of seven diners. But make it eight or nine, and you have to count them one by one.

As a sociologist at the City University of New York, I am supervising 10 doctoral dissertations. I'm also involved with a bunch of others, but there are 10 -- count 'em -- for which I am personally responsible.

Ten is the most I've ever had at a time; five or six has been more typical. Ten is probably too many -- for the students, for me, for our mutual sanity.

A lot of people use the metaphor of "juggling" to describe their complicated lives. I've always preferred that plate-spinning guy. I watched a Chinese circus once, and there was a man who got plates spinning on the top of each of a bunch of long bamboo poles. By the end of the act there more than seven poles with spinning plates on the stage. The man ran from one to another. As one plate wobbled, ready to slip off, the pole drooping, he got there just in time, gave the plate a twist, sent it spinning, and ran off to give a push to another.

My life has always seemed a lot like that, but lately the plates I'm spinning represent my graduate students' and my own often-overdue work. Having so many graduate students is bound to take time away from my research, but they are a handy excuse when I don't feel like working on my own projects. It's always easier to be engaged with someone else's issues than your own.

Just keeping track of all 10 is a problem. I have a folder for each student in which I keep their work and copies of my comments on their drafts. As the students' work moves forward, I find that rereading my old comments reminds me more sharply of what they are struggling with than rereading their earlier drafts. Sometimes I see problems in what I was saying, and revise my suggestions. Sometimes I see recurrent problems that they're not dealing with.

I keep the most recent e-mail from each of the students in my inbox, and every once in a while I go down the list to see if anyone is wobbling too far over, just off the edge of my vision. I check up on them, giving their plate a spin as it were.

It feels disrespectful to even talk about my students like that. A mentoring relationship is very personal. To see my students as a big amorphous mass, or a bunch of problems waiting to happen, would be

wrong. And it's really not how I see them. But the very individual things that happen to each of them -- well, I've seen those things before in more than 20 years of advising.

So maybe there are too many, and maybe I should cut back, but meanwhile, let me share what I've been learning as a result of having so many students. Dissertation advising involves its own unique set of skills, which, like everything else, are probably best learned by doing. That said, I have two basic lessons which might help others.

Lesson 1: It's All About You

If you're going to help someone write a dissertation, you really have to know how you work, what your own limitations are, and what skills you can specifically bring as an adviser/editor, rather than those you might pride yourself on as a researcher/writer/scholar.

Oddly enough, the topic of my own dissertation -- midwives in the American home-birth movement -- provided a model for me to emulate in advising others on their dissertations.

It's hard to imagine anything more personal than a birth, especially one in a woman's own bedroom. And the relationship the midwives established with the women they served were personal. And yet, a good midwife could walk in on a stranger in labor and do a good job. That made me realize that it wasn't all about the relationship, but, at least partly, about the midwife's skills, the bag of tricks that she brought to the woman giving birth.

Now that makes the pregnant woman sound like an object, the passive recipient of the midwife's skills. And if there is one thing a pregnant woman is not, it is a passive recipient. No midwife on earth can walk up to a woman who's not at the end of her pregnancy and coax a birth out of her. The woman has to be giving birth for the midwife's skills to be of any use. And 9 times out of 10, if you left the woman all by herself, she would push out a healthy baby with no problems. What the midwife does, once in a while, is make a difference in the outcome, and more often, make a difference in the process.

And that's how I feel about my graduate students. If the student is not ready to do the work, nothing I can do will make a difference. Every once in a great while, maybe every 10th student or so, I feel like my presence mattered, that there's a dissertation that might actually not have been finished if I hadn't done my job right.

But most of the time, I sound just like a midwife: "There, there, you're doing fine. You can do it. This is normal, just keep pushing."

I cannot know as much about any particular dissertation topic as the person writing it. But I certainly know more about dissertation writing than my students. Just like a midwife knows when to suggest a change of position, a warm bath, a walk, I too know when to suggest a shift. That chapter that's killing you? Leave it alone for a bit and do an easier one. I can also recognize when someone is afraid to put their all into a project. I can say it's time to buckle down and do what you have to do. Concentrate. Push!

But it's not as simple as that. There are many ways to write any given dissertation. What I've learned is to offer my approach as just that -- my approach. I tell students, here's how I would handle that, here's what would probably work for me.

Sometimes what works for me is to go find someone who knows what he or she is doing. And I suggest that to my students as well. The best resource is often other graduate students: I know I would still be

rewriting chapter seven of my dissertation if not for my study group, and I strongly encourage my students to find a writing group. And while I often link students of mine who are doing related work, I also encourage them to reach beyond that circle, to get themselves away from my influence and open themselves up to other people's ways of working.

To be a strong dissertation adviser, I have had to learn to distinguish my own skills, limitations, and work style from those of my students. For example, I can't work from an outline. If the student likes outlines, fine. I can show her how that might be hindering her, but only if I understand that my work style is mine, not hers. Which brings me to my second point.

Lesson 2: It's Not All About You

Besides the midwives, the other place I learned how to supervise dissertations was from my first editor, Mary Cunnane at W.W. Norton. She is not a sociologist or an academic, but she is widely respected and I was one of her first authors. She took my dissertation and accepted that I knew what I was talking about, methodologically and theoretically. Her job was to help me turn it into a book.

She was infinitely supportive and ever practical. Just telling people "That's brilliant," isn't really helpful. Showing them where it is sort of brilliant, and where it needs work -- that's helpful. And that's what I try to do for my students.

One very important part of the adviser's job is quick turnaround -- returning a draft while the author still remembers what it was that he or she was trying to do. Probably the single biggest complaint that students have about their advisers is that things take too long. I am as busy as anyone else, but I never let dissertation chapters sit unread on my desk for weeks. I give students a specific deadline for when I'll have the work back to them, and I tell them to nag me if they haven't heard back by that point.

When I see problems in the work, I give suggestions -- not just "fix this" -- but specific ideas to get that rolling. Even if the students reject my ideas, it starts them on the problem.

My most important lesson from Mary Cunnane and from the midwives: Stay calm and cheerful. You're there to help, but the dissertation itself is not your problem.

When I supervise students, my job is to encourage them, but they set the course. A few of my students have come to me precisely over that issue: They knew what they wanted to do with the dissertation but other faculty members they approached wanted them to do something else. I might look at the project and agree with those faculty critics. But sometimes, I side with the student and decide that the project is one I can support. Then I switch to mentor and agree to midwife the project.

It's easier to maintain the appropriate distance when you have a bunch of students: They don't each have to represent you to the world in quite the same way. I can make suggestions on a dissertation -- "try this for chapter three" or "read this book and use it as a model for your format" -- but it's not my project, my work, or my life.

I don't have to love it. I don't have to raise this baby, I just have to help the student push it out.

Barbara Katz Rothman is a professor of sociology at the City University of New York's Baruch College and Graduate Center.

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