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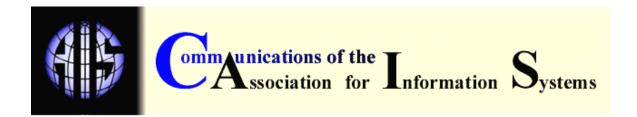
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Recognizing Good Ideas: An Essential Skill of a Doctoral Student Advisor

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RECOGNIZING GOOD IDEAS:
AN ESSENTIAL SKILL
OF A DOCTORAL STUDENT ADVISOR

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ABSTRACT

Ideas are the driving force behind a doctoral thesis. It is the ideas inherent in a thesis that determine the impact that the thesis will have on research and practice. It is a doctoral student's role to generate these ideas about thesis topics, about scope, and about methodology, but it is the advisor's role to recognize the good ideas from the "not so good" ideas, and to help the student develop and complete a doctoral thesis. This paper explores the advisor's role in recognizing good thesis ideas. One of Gary Dickson's greatest skills is his ability to identify and encourage thesis ideas that are of high quality and high potential impact.

Keywords: information systems, doctoral thesis, ideas

I. INTRODUCTION

Completing a doctoral thesis in the field of Information Systems is a daunting task. Information Systems (IS) is a broad, applied field with many reference disciplines. This means that IS dissertations can be in many topic areas, based on many different research literatures, and use a variety of research methodologies. The problem of generating good ideas for a thesis topic or for other aspects of the thesis is not a trivial one. The potential impact and quality of an IS thesis depends on these ideas. Some examples of good thesis ideas in the IS field over the years have been the initial work on IS user satisfaction, IS adoption, and IS strategic alignment.

The role of the Ph.D. student is to generate and refine these ideas because after all, it is the student's doctoral thesis. The role of the student's advisor is to help the student generate the ideas and to recognize ideas that will contribute new knowledge and have an impact on the field.

This ability to recognize good ideas is an important characteristic of a Ph.D. thesis advisor. When I say "recognize," I mean "to acknowledge or take notice of in some definite way" [Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary 2007]. This recognition of a good idea is essentially an identification and evaluation that an idea is a "good idea," plus proactive support and commitment to that idea. It is an explicit process of distinguishing a good idea from a bad idea and actively working on that good idea with commitment, passion, and a drive to create new knowledge.

A "good thesis idea" means an idea that is important to the field and an idea in which scholars and practitioners are interested. It means an idea that will have an impact on the way people

think about IS, about the way they research IS topics, and the way practitioners work with IS. It means an idea that is understandable and feasible.

At the most general level, a good thesis idea can be related to a problem area or a thesis topic. But a good thesis idea can also be more specific, such as an idea for an appropriate theoretical approach or a research design to address the research question(s) under study.

II. GARY DICKSON AND RECOGNIZING GOOD IDEAS

One of Gary Dickson's abilities as a Ph.D. student advisor that I truly admired was his ability to recognize good thesis ideas. He was able to distinguish ideas that were important, that had potential and that would lead to high quality research, from ideas that were not important, would not work, or were simply not good enough. When he did recognize a good thesis idea, he pushed himself and the student to take that idea and explore its limits.

I believe this ability came from a number of sources. First, Gary had high standards. He also expected his students to do more than they thought they could do. He wanted every thesis he was associated with to be a top quality thesis. Therefore he would not accept anything less than high quality ideas. Second, he knew the research and practitioner literature. This was not "surface knowledge" but an in-depth understanding of the important topics and issues in the IS field. He knew what had been done before, and he knew what practitioners felt was important. Third, he knew what it took to develop a high quality thesis in a reasonable amount of time. He could recognize good ideas as not only being important ones but also doable ones. Fourth, he would tell you when he thought an idea was not a good one. In this sense, I thought of him as "intellectually aggressive" but supportive at the same time. He would challenge you to defend your ideas and to convince him that what you were saying was a good idea.

I started my Ph.D. thesis work at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1983. Gary Dickson and Gerry DeSanctis had agreed to be my thesis supervisors. I remember one of my first ideas for a thesis was "to identify the skills and attributes for excellent systems analysts." Gary thought this idea was an "okay" idea but not a good idea for a thesis topic. He said other work had been, and was being, done in this area and anything additional that I would do would not have an impact. I found this advice to very wise.

Gary (and Gerry) liked my second idea. This idea was to study the use of decision support systems for groups or teams. I remember Gary being "skeptically optimistic" about this idea. He thought research in this area was new.   He thought other researchers would be interested in it, and he thought practitioners would also like the idea. He knew that papers were starting to be published on this topic, but very little empirical research had been done. I believe he recognized this idea as having not only substantial potential but also some risk. I think he assessed the risk and determined (quite rightly in retrospect) that enough original work would probably come out of my proposed thesis to warrant its execution and completion.

Not only could Gary recognize good thesis topic ideas but he could also recognize good "within thesis" ideas.   In my case, he determined that doing only a conceptual group systems design thesis (that is, design and build a group systems prototype) was not a good enough idea. He recognized that I needed to develop a small prototype group support system and test it out in an experimental situation if the thesis was to have impact. He also recognized that if an experiment was to be conducted, the experimental task was extremely important to ensure credibility of the results. He recognized some good ideas (and bad ideas) in the measures I was proposing for my dependent variables which I believed helped strengthen the thesis.

Gary could recognize good thesis ideas, but he could also recognize ideas that would help get papers published in quality IS journals that had been based on a thesis. In my case, he recognized that the experimental task I had used in my thesis, a "problem finding" task, was important to scholars and practitioners and recommended that this task should be the focus of the

major research paper coming from my thesis. This was good advice and the paper was published in the MIS Quarterly in 1988 [Gallupe, DeSanctis, and Dickson 1988].

Gary's abilities in this area were not unique to my thesis but were apparent to other doctoral students at Minnesota as well. Not only did fellow students in my cohort remark about Gary's ability to recognize good ideas, but discussions with Gary's students who graduated before I did, and those who graduated after, all point to his "idea recognition" ability as one of his great strengths.

In summary, during my thesis (and during others that I am aware of), Gary was able to separate the good ideas from the not so good and enable me to complete my Ph.D. thesis and to generate respected publications from that work.

III. THE LITERATURE ON GENERATING AND RECOGNIZING GOOD THESIS IDEAS

The importance of ideas in thesis work is well recognized in the literature on completing doctoral theses. First, the interaction of student and advisor in working with ideas is the focus of a number of authors [Bolker 1998; Phillips and Pugh, 2000]. They examine how students choose and work with an advisor and how the compatibility between student and advisor plays a role in the sharing and understanding of thesis ideas.

Second, a number of authors discuss selecting a suitable research topic for a thesis [Rudestam and Newton 2001; Davis 2001]. These authors stress selecting an important topic idea. However, little guidance is given on how to decide what is important. What is important at one point in time may not be important in two or three years. One piece of advice is to select topic ideas from the "future research directions" of important papers published in top journals. However, the downside of doing this are that the authors of "future research directions" may already be following their own directions, and other researchers who have read the paper may also be following those research directions. This may decrease the chances of producing an innovative piece of research that has impact.

Third, Cryer [2000] stresses the need for originality and creativity in research. She argues that a key to success is the creativity of a student's thesis ideas. The creativity of one's ideas attracts advisors as well as interest from others in the potential thesis. However, along with creativity comes some risk. A thesis idea that might be considered "too creative" may be too risky to justify doing or may simply be infeasible.

Finally, Davis and Parker [1997] argue that generating thesis ideas is the student's task. They also note that the student and advisor must work together to decide which ideas to carry forward into a thesis. They suggest that one of the best ways to share ideas between student and advisor at the early stages of a thesis is the "mini-proposal" that outlines in one or two pages the main ideas that will form the basis of the thesis. I use the mini-proposal with all my Ph.D. students. The mini-proposal forces students to formalize their thesis ideas and to show the importance and contribution that a thesis based on the ideas will have. The mini-proposal includes a very brief literature review of the most relevant papers related to the idea and this helps the student and the advisor see where the thesis might fit and the contribution it might make. The mini-proposal is not a big investment in time, but it could prevent a great deal of wasted time if a full proposal is developed and then rejected.

To summarize, authors of books and articles on completing doctoral theses stress the importance of generating important and creative ideas and of understanding the roles of student and advisor in working with those ideas.

IV. LESSONS FOR THE ADVISOR ABOUT RECOGNIZING GOOD THESIS IDEAS

There are a number of lessons I have learned from Gary Dickson specifically about recognizing good thesis ideas.

LESSON 1: HAVE HIGH STANDARDS

As a Ph.D. student advisor, I will not let a student proceed with a thesis idea unless I think the research will have impact. There are hundreds (possibly thousands) of thesis topic ideas at any point in time in IS, but I believe there are only a relatively few ideas that will have impact. A thesis topic idea can not be a "satisficing" idea. It should be one that has potential and one that will still be relevant in three to five years. For example, I believe that empirical work on how information technology affects organizational transparency is a good thesis idea that will have lasting impact. I ask my students to visualize the main paper from their thesis after it has been published in a top journal. Will they be proud of the work? Do they think other researchers will cite the paper after it is published? If the answer is no to these questions, I ask them to think of new ideas.

LESSON 2: KNOW THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

It is difficult to keep up with the research literature in a field like Information Systems. There are now many streams of research and many journals that publish work in our area. I do not think it is possible, however, for doctoral student advisors in IS to recognize good thesis ideas unless they are familiar with previous research in the topic area. This means not only knowing what has been recently published in top journals but also knowing what is being presented at research conferences and what is being worked on in laboratories and in the field. A Ph.D. student advisor needs to have his or her "finger on the pulse" of research in the topic area plus related areas to ensure that an idea will not duplicate one that is already being investigated. For example, a Ph.D. student approached me with a thesis idea about IT governance; however, it was an idea that had been, and was continuing to be, explored in accounting research. The student did not realize this. I advised against proceeding with the idea.

LESSON 3: KNOW WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO PRACTITIONERS

Gary Dickson was always able to combine the practical perspective with the research perspective. This is important in an applied field such as Information Systems. He was always able to see ideas through a "practice" lens as well as a "research" lens. I attempt to do the same thing. About three years ago, a Ph.D. student approached me with a thesis idea about how to improve the process of IS strategic alignment in organizations. As I usually do, I asked this student two questions: how does this improve the "practice" of information systems, and how does this improve the "theory" of information systems? He was able to answer these questions well and his thesis has now been successfully defended.

LESSON 4: BE WILLING TO TAKE SOME RISK

All thesis ideas have an element of risk. This risk is reflected in the importance and feasibility of the idea. Gary believed that all good thesis ideas have some degree of risk, because a Ph.D. thesis is essentially an attempt to create new knowledge. As noted, I believe my thesis idea about group decision support systems in 1983 involved some risk. What Gary was able to do was encourage his students to take some risk with their ideas. I attempt to do the same thing with my students. I ask them to think about the risk inherent in their ideas through questions such as: What are the specific risks? How high or how low is the risk? Can anything be done to mitigate the risk?

LESSON 5: SAY A BAD IDEA IS A BAD IDEA

It is sometimes difficult for a Ph.D. student advisor to tell a student that his or her idea(s) is a bad one. This is particularly true after the student has invested considerable hours of effort investigating and developing the idea to present to the advisor. However, it is the advisor's role to act as a quality check on a student's thesis ideas and prevent the student from producing a thesis that will be irrelevant, unimportant and unpublishable when it is finished. I have found that I have had to do this on numerous occasions (for example, ideas that are too general or too broad to be doable or ideas that didn't involve the IT artifact) but I have not regretted doing it as I believed it helped the student in the long run. Also, after the students complete the theses, they are free to pursue their own research agenda, hopefully being able to recognize good research ideas from bad.

LESSON 6: CONTINUALLY EVALUATE YOUR PERFORMANCE AS PH.D. STUDENT ADVISOR

Advising Ph.D. students is not an easy task. Continually evaluating his performance as a Ph.D. student advisor, and more specifically as a "recognizer of good ideas," is something that Gary did well and something that I attempt to do. Every advisor should periodically ask themselves the following questions. Has my advice to my students about their thesis ideas helped them progress in their theses development, in completing their theses, and in their academic careers? Were my standards high enough in the advice I gave to my students? Is there evidence that researchers and practitioners valued the ideas that were in a student's thesis? Did I provide the right amount of push to my students to take risks, while at the same time provide the appropriate safety nets in case their ideas did not work out?

V. CONCLUSION

I believe that one of Gary Dickson's greatest strengths as a Ph.D. student advisor was his ability to recognize good thesis ideas. He had the ability to see an idea as a good idea when other people could not. He then worked with the student on that good idea with intensity and commitment until a high quality thesis was completed. I do not believe this ability is unique to Gary, but Gary refined this ability to a very high level. I believe that good thesis advisors continually work to enhance their thesis idea recognition skills. They do so by remaining current with the research and practitioner literature, by challenging their students to come up with better ideas, by encouraging their students to take measured risks when proposing ideas for their thesis, and by continually challenging themselves to provide more intellectual value to their students.

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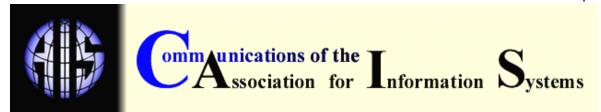> 3. The authors of the Web pages, not CAIS, are responsible for the accuracy of their content.

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