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Provocations

The Illustrious Guest: Observations on Participation and Teaching Practice in Examining Boards



O Convidado Ilustre: Observações sobre Participação e Prática Docente em Bancas Examinadoras

Francisco Giovanni David Vieira^{*1}

ABSTRACT

Objective: a thought-provoking essay that seeks to promote reflection and debate about faculty participation in boards examining dissertations and theses in graduate administration programs. **Provocations:** it is argued that the guests perform a kind of academic spectacle during the examinations rather than analyze the dissertations and theses themselves and that this is detrimental to researchers' training. **Conclusions:** such training of researchers should be the center of attention, and particularities, idiosyncrasies, and vanities should not overshadow the performance of examinations. As the participation of professors in examining boards is a significant expression of teaching practice and can make an important contribution to researchers' training, it cannot be taken for granted, nor does it need to be perpetuated as a spectacle by distinguished guests.

Keywords: examining boards; graduate studies; teaching practice; training of researchers.

RESUMO

Objetivo: pensata de natureza provocativa que procura promover reflexão e debate acerca da participação docente em bancas examinadoras de dissertações e teses em programas de pós-graduação em administração. **Provocações:** targumenta-se que os convidados mais performam uma espécie de espetáculo acadêmico durante as bancas do que analisam propriamente as dissertações e teses, e que isso é prejudicial à formação de pesquisadores. **Conclusões:** a formação do pesquisador deve ser o centro das atenções. É um equívoco que particularidades, idiosincrasias e vaidades obscureçam a realização de exames. A participação de docentes em bancas examinadoras é uma expressão significativa da prática docente e pode representar importante contribuição para a formação de pesquisadores. É preciso que ela não seja tomada como algo dado, tampouco perpetuada como um espetáculo onde se reúnem convidados ilustres.

Palavras-chave: bancas examinadoras; pós-graduação; prática docente; formação de pesquisadores.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most particular moments in the trajectory of researchers' training through *stricto sensu* graduate programs in administration corresponds to the dissertation and thesis defense exams. In this essay, I seek to provoke reflection and debate about faculty participation in boards that are set up to conduct these exams.

I am not starting from a specific research question or from a gap present in some theory or literature that is related to the conduct of defense panels because even a search of bibliographical bases casts doubt on the existence of such literature. In another way, this essay is based on my journey as a university professor, particularly as a permanent faculty member of a Brazilian graduate program with a master's and a PhD in administration. While such perspective may suggest that my arguments approximate a kind of autoethnography, this is not the case. These are observations that reflect my experience participating as a member of the dissertation and doctoral thesis examining boards at the institution where I work, as well as at other institutions where I have had the opportunity to participate as a guest.

I make the argument that those invited to dissertation and thesis examining boards have become only distinguished guests who participate in the examinations but examine little of the work under review. It is as if these examiners were participating in an academic show consisting of themselves and their peers, a candidate for a master's or doctoral degree, and an audience. Moreover, it is as if such guests gained centrality over the title candidate themselves, whose work is being examined. This situation appears to be strange and harmful to the process of analysis and construction of knowledge, just as it seems to be harmful to the examined candidates. It contributes little to broaden and deepen the training they receive, especially because they are not passive in this process. The following remarks try to substantiate the argument presented here, and it is quite possible that they will be shared by fellow professors in the field of administration.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION AND TEACHING PRACTICE IN EXAMINATION BOARDS

No theoretical background or literature on this topic has been found. The literature has addressed academic production, which includes master's dissertations and doctoral theses, but it has basically focused on aspects of academic production or productivism and does not include reflection and debate on the performance of

assessment exams in *stricto sensu* courses. It is not at all convenient to speculate, but perhaps it is because of a lack of interest, a taboo, fear, the believe that it is something not particularly relevant for discussion, or even because it is taken for granted. Both the Academy of Management — in theory, the largest existing institution for academic discussions in management — and the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Administration (ANPAD), which promotes one of the largest academic events in management worldwide, have specific thematic divisions aimed at dealing with issues related to management education. Regarding the former, this is Management Education and Development (MED), and in the case of the latter, it is the Division of Education and Research in Management and Accounting (EPQ). Apparently, neither have contemplated papers and discussions about the conduct of examinations and faculty participation in boards that are set up to oversee them. Moreover, a survey of journals dealing with management education — such as the *Journal of International Education in Business*, *Journal of Management and Business Education*, *Journal of Management Education*, *Journal of Education for Business*, which are published outside Brazil, or *RAEP – Administração: Ensino e Pesquisa*, published in our country — allows us to verify that the subject treated in this *pensée* is not present in the articles published by them. Few are the opportunities in which this topic is discussed, as is evident from the works of [Leuby and Atkinson \(1989\)](#), [O'Mahony et al. \(2013\)](#), and [Cruz et al. \(2019\)](#).

Graduate education in administration has experienced a major expansion in Brazil over the last two decades ([Cirani et al., 2012](#); [Ikeda et al., 2005](#)). A visit to the ANPAD website allows seeing dozens of programs offering master's and doctoral degrees. The ANPAD states that it has 109 member graduate programs in administration and accounting; the vast majority, however, correspond to graduate management programs. The increase in the number of programs naturally leads to an increase in the number of dissertation and thesis defenses held each year. For each defense, as is customary, it is necessary to form a panel of examiners composed of professors from within and outside the graduate program. Because of the increase in the number of defenses in different programs of different lines of research and teaching and research institutions, clearly understanding the context of the examining boards seems to be a challenge. One may even wonder what the defenses are for. Is there a difference between the qualification board and the final defense board? Is the qualification board more rigorous? Does it characterize a moment of propositions for research development and correction in the direction of the fieldwork to be developed? Is the final examination board assessment a moment of examination, as it formally appears, or is it

a moment of celebration? In other words, is there a time for examination and a time for celebration and spectacle? What is the role of the board member, at first invited as an examiner, in the face of all these possibilities?

Researchers must fill out the Platform Sucupira¹ forms as part of the graduate program evaluation process in Brazil, which is managed by the Coordination of Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). In addition, educational institutions must present the results of their faculty's and students' academic-scientific production. It is against this background that productivism (Alcadipani, 2011; Godoi & Xavier, 2012; Machado & Bianchetti, 2011; Patrus et al., 2015; Silva, 2019) has invaded dissertation and thesis defenses. In one way or another, the need for graduate programs to have their own publications has influenced faculty participation in examining boards. It is as if Sucupira has become a kind of terror, shaping the way teachers act throughout the exams according to its demands for scores. Dissertations, theses, and what they present in terms of research results are no longer the center of attention. The most important thing is what can be done with them: articles, papers, essays, works — whatever the reader wants to call them.

The immediate consequence of the productivism generated by the Sucupira terror is that both dissertations and theses in a *stricto sensu* graduate course soon became a kind of stillborn document. The professors invited to the boards are in the habit of making suggestions, but they are almost always suggestions for the publication of journal articles. They treat the dissertation and the thesis as a document to be forgotten in some file or electronic base for remote consultation. It is as if the production of articles were the justification or the greater meaning of the post-graduate preparation of the dissertation or thesis. Graduate programs even include writing the thesis in article format. In an important article that became a reference for a whole generation of researchers, Freitas (2002) says that living/experiencing the thesis is necessary. Nowadays, however, article writing seems to be the focus.

In many situations, writing a dissertation or thesis becomes an experience circumscribed to a purpose that does not necessarily match what the graduate students have at the beginning of their research work. In addition to the imperative and already institutionalized nature of article production, one may almost give up their intellectual autonomy. It is possible to observe an uncomfortable conformity throughout dissertation and thesis defense examinations, where one must contemporize with those invited to the boards but without contradicting them. A network logic reigns: no one contradicts anyone, and only praise is given. Paradoxically, examining board guests practically do not recognize Brazilian authors as relevant

or pertinent references for citation. During examinations, guests cite several authors and much of what is investigated outside Brazil. However, they do not mention the production of national authors nor the institutions that exist in the country and that are related to the themes of the papers being defended by the graduate students. As a rule, when they quote or talk about someone they know, they refer to themselves and sometimes to the person who invited them to participate as an examiner in the defense board.

The observations reported so far suggest that the thesis defense has become a spectacle in which the board is a stage to which the examiners are invited as distinguished guests. It is as if the Academy reflected and amalgamated with the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1997). It is better for the guest to make a joke or a funny remark than to ask the candidate to explain a theoretical choice or methodological decision. In the same way, it is better for the guests to talk almost exhaustively about their personal academic background (master's degree, doctorate, etc.) than to try to discuss the findings of the research that resulted in the dissertations and theses in which they participate.

Amidst my observations of this process, I think it is possible to speak of the existence of a sort of typology or characterization of distinguished guests as examiners, as follows:

a. The corrector examiner

They are those distinguished guest who only talks about selling articles. They treat the candidate's thesis as a factory of articles that must be sold to the publishing market. At every point where they can intervene throughout the defense, they say that the candidate should think about "how they are going to sell the idea of the paper," that is, how they are going to convince editors and reviewers to buy their paper.

b. The humble examiner

They are those distinguished guests who do not recognize their own academic authority and assume a false position of intellectual humility — a position apparently well received in times of politically correct speech and behavior. In general, it is the guest who, throughout the defense, makes comments such as "I have a suggestion for you [they say this referring to the candidate and the candidate's advisor/advisor]; see if you agree ...; think about it ..."

c. The diplomat examiner

They are those distinguished guests who want to build networks and not get into trouble with the candidate or with the examined candidate's advisor because they want

to avoid not being invited to the next exam. They assume that if they have a more incisive participation throughout the panel's performance, asking several questions and questioning the work, they will not be invited at the next opportunity, and this will harm their network of contacts and take away the possibility of feeding their Lattes Platform curriculum with participation in panels. After all, participation in boards — especially doctoral boards — is somewhat illustrious.

d. The examiner who does group therapy

They are those distinguished guests who ignore the dissertation or thesis that is being evaluated and decide to talk about their academic experiences the whole time during the examination, recalling what happened in relation to the articles they submitted to journals. They talk about conversations with editors, what reviewers said, and how they responded to reviewers. These examiners believe that their account will help the candidates when they are submitting their articles to journals or going through the process of having their articles reviewed by journals.

e. The examiner who owns the authors, theories, and methods

They are those distinguished guests who think that only they can explain a certain author, that only they understand a certain theory, or yet, that no one else knows how to use a certain resource or methodological procedure. In other words, it is the guests who, for themselves and before others, defined that they have ownership of knowledge about an author, a theory, or a methodological procedure, and have no intention of sharing this property with any of their fellow examiners present in the panel — not with the supervisor or the president of the panel, who invited them, and much less with the graduate student candidate for the title of master or doctor.

f. The enchanted examiner

They are those recently graduated PhD guests who are participating in an examining board for the first time and who see in everything the thesis that they recently defended. In virtually all the remarks and comments they make throughout their participation in the examining board, they try to establish some kind of relation with the thesis they wrote and list several illustrations and examples through the research they developed for their thesis.

g. The comedian examiner

This is about the distinguished guests who think they are funny and use their time trying to make others laugh. They use irony, sarcasm, and debauchery and try to

appear cool and intelligent. Usually, this is a senior guest no one will contradict, no matter how absurd and unfunny are the things they say during the defense.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Different positions or different ways of acting as an examiner in dissertation or thesis panels can be more or less fruitful as teaching practices that contemplate not only the evaluation but also, and above all, the formation of researchers. Certainly, each of these practices is underscored by each guest's background and previous experiences. Whether or not the guest belongs to the graduate program where the defense is held is also an important factor in defining the teaching practice adopted.

What is most relevant, however, is that a guest's commitment is to engage in offering a contribution to researcher training. The moment when the board of examiners meets is something unique, *sui generis* for those who conduct the defense — in this case, the researcher undergoing training. All attention should be focused on one's work and on building a debate around it, in which contributions can be offered for researcher improvement as a whole and not only or specifically for its products or byproducts.

Researcher training, rather than the dynamics around the institutional evaluation processes of graduate programs, should be the center of attention. It is a mistake to allow the guests' particularities, idiosyncrasies, and vanities to obscure works built with effort and under circumstances of strong reduction of support to the postgraduate activities and research currently experienced in our country. The participation of professors in examining boards is a significant expression of teaching practice and can make an important contribution to researcher training. It must not be taken for granted, nor must it be perpetuated as a spectacle where distinguished guests gather. It must be debated and improved.

NOTES

1. The Sucupira Platform is a “tool that collects information and works as a reference base for the National Post-graduation System (SNPG)” ([Ministério da Educação, 2017](#)). Its name “is a tribute to Professor Newton Sucupira, author of Opinion No. 977 of 1965 ... which conceptualized, formatted, and institutionalized the Brazilian post-graduation courses as they are today” ([Ministério da Educação, 2017](#)).

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