

Things I have Learned Reading Theses on the Hill.

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Enthusiasts of David Mamet's work may wonder why I have borrowed the title of one of the essays, "Things I have Learned Playing Poker on the Hill," from *Writing in Restaurants* (Mamet 1986). That book was one half of the reason I found my way into professional academia. I was in my third year of college, walking by Waterstone's on Broad Street, when the book's cover—featuring a fountain pen, and some fragments of handwriting on a paper napkin-- caught my eye. As Mamet himself might say, I bought it. And then, I *bought* it.

That evening, reading in the college library, I got to the end of "Notes for a catalogue of Raymond Saunders." The laughter bubbled up so fast that it was already spilling out before I could get to the door and out in the the quadrangle. Then it exploded out loud. Three times I had my hand on the door handle to go back to my desk inside; three times, Mamet's punchline hit me again, and I had to try, in some folk-theory of energy transfer, to walk it off. After I learned a little more about Mamet and what inspired him, and his vision of the writer's craft, I decided to apply to graduate school in anthropology at the University of Chicago. If it was important to listen to the way people actually talked and write it down, that was what I was going to do.

The other half—probably the part that really mattered—was the intellectual mentorship I got as a smart kid from the middle-class suburbs of Southern England. My principal tutor through the last two years of my undergraduate career was Nicholas Purcell, a young and brilliant ancient historian who took the tutorial system seriously. His reading lists for each weekly essay were intimidating works of scholarship in their own right, demanding knowledge of the original sources, reflection on the range of alternative analyses already extant, and imagination in our own responses. I don't know honestly know if my peers struggled as much as I did with this crash course in the life of the mind. I do know that without his nudging me to undertake a major research and writing project over one break; his detailed comments and suggestions on my personal research statement for graduate school; and what I have to believe was a persuasive and enthusiastic letter of recommendation; I would not have actually made it to Chicago.

I imagine many faculty could point to one or more key mentors that they encountered as undergraduates. And so I'm probably not alone in questioning whether and how I might be able to pass that gift forward in my own work. I think of this particularly in the context of current conversations at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, about how to best serve concentrators in the three interdisciplinary concentrations that the Institute now houses—International Relations, Development Studies and Public Policy. And in that spirit—of asking how we are doing—I dug up two documents produced from similar conversations at the

Institute, and also across the College, in 2008-2009. These are, respectively, the Report of a Committee on the future of Watson Institute's relationship with International Relations and Development Studies, from 2009; and the Final Report of the Task Force on Undergraduate Education, released in September 2008.

Gratifyingly, these documents show how swiftly institutional culture can change. In both documents, the concept of the capstone experience was still sufficiently novel on campus that it was introduced in scare quotes. Since then, all three Watson-housed programs (IR, DS and PP)—as well as many more on campus—have provided a range of pathways for all concentrators to identify and undertake a capstone experience—including designated senior seminars, research experience with a faculty member, or internship, as alternatives to the long-established form, the senior thesis.

The capstone was a response to an issue flagged in both documents; a perceived mismatch between what students wanted, and what students were getting, in terms of significant, extended, intellectually stimulating interactions with one or more faculty members. Absent those interactions, these reports remind us, students run the risk of reaching the end of their undergraduate careers with the vague feeling they have not made the most of the academic opportunities; more concretely and crudely, who do they ask for the personal references or recommendation letters that fellowships, graduate schools and employers still demand?

The data in the Watson report made clear the disconnect that existed, at that time, between the Institute and in-depth undergraduate research in the two concentrations it then housed. In the years between 2001-2008, 137 out of a total of 1045 concentrators in International Relations were awarded honors, or approximately 13% of the graduating class. Of those, Watson faculty served as first reader for around 45%. So across those years, the closest scholarly connections available between Watson faculty and IR students occurred for only 6% of possible cases. Among Development Studies students—where a senior thesis was required-- Watson Institute faculty served as primary readers for just four of 150 senior theses completed from 2000-2008. (p.14).

Low numbers of Watson faculty members, especially in Development Studies, was clearly part of the reason for these numbers. The campus-wide Task Force report also noted that faculty may perceive committing additional time to instruction beyond regular course commitments as a betrayal of Brown's pursuit of greater distinction in research. Throughout, though, the report's authors strove to present teaching, advising and research in holistic and mutually reinforcing terms, by moving beyond zero-sum discussions of "standard course" requirements for students and faculty. The overall thrust of the Task Force Report was to argue for the value of student-faculty interaction around research. The introduction of

different capstone options beyond the highly labor-intensive senior thesis, in this regard, helps lower the cost-threshold, and broaden the range of ways to foster such interaction.

Cultural change, then is possible. However, in this case, it might be argued that it has outstripped institutional innovation. Capstone seminars fit neatly into an accounting system for faculty contributions to the undergraduate curriculum, in which the basic unit is the solo-taught class. The other modes of capstone fulfillment suggested in the Task Force report fit this template less well. Working with students in either an individual or group independent study does not count. Nor does supervising an UTRA that serves a student as their capstone experience. And whereas liberal arts colleges like Wesleyan and Haverford count advising a certain number of thesis projects as aggregating into a course release for faculty; and whereas at Princeton, where all students write theses, there are evident norms whereby all faculty indicate their availability and expertise, and share the load; Brown's concentrations share no standard procedures by which to acknowledge faculty investment in this domain of scholarly life.

This is not the only anomaly in the way that the work represented by senior theses is treated. Although the library's digital repository provides a portal where undergraduate theses could be made more broadly available, it is not being used. There are no senior theses in International Relations, Development Studies, or Public Policy there. Nor can one find any of the six undergraduate theses that won the Distinguished Senior Thesis award in 2015. The norm at present is clearly not to deposit undergraduate work. Whereas Princeton has a single online access point, for Princeton community members, to all previous senior theses, Brown students, staff and faculty are reliant on the archival practices of individual departments and concentrations, to get any sense of what the University's most committed, creative and focused students have produced over many hours of research and writing in their senior year.

Perhaps, though, this is as it should be. And not because—as some might suspect—there is something about the theses that Brown students produce that is not quite ready for prime-time. In some cases, to be sure, there may be reasons for undergraduate work to exist in semi-private form only, which demands a certain level of doggedness, perseverance and local knowledge to access. Over the years, expectations about IRB clearance have become stricter, so there may be issues about making undergraduate research public. One could also argue that if the function of the thesis is as the vehicle of exchange and learning between student and faculty member, then it does not demand or perhaps even warrant a public after-life. And if it constitutes the student's intellectual property, in either a strong or a weaker sense, then it is apt that the student should preserve at least a modicum of control over who does and doesn't get to see it—so storage and distribution should remain in their hands. And if faculty readers receive no other compensation or recognition for their contribution, then perhaps it is appropriate that they

maintain a special bond with the student and their work, which would be dissipated or diminished if the work was simply “out there” in plain view.

But I don't think so. Increasingly, it seems to me an archaic throwback to an obsolete model of knowledge-creation, and a tragic missed opportunity, to treat the products of our shared academic enterprise this way. We should acknowledge that Brown undergraduates are, in the best case scenarios, producing original contributions to scholarship. And perhaps the knowledge that all such work would be more widely available could serve as a further prompt for students and faculty (if any is needed) to strive for that best case scenario. It would also serve to make more widely visible the work of faculty committed to this avenue of student mentoring, showcasing the benefits for all concerned, and providing solid data that would reveal trends and patterns across different concentrations.

Individual concentrations are taking steps in this direction. International Relations, for example, is building an online catalog of all honors theses (an average of seven per year since 2009), including information that shows the commitment of senior faculty to thesis advising (in 2014 alone, six Watson-affiliated full professors served as either first or second reader on IR theses).¹

Students, too, are taking up the opportunities offered by new media to make their work available and accessible. I would flag in particular three recent theses in which were built around ambitious and innovative qualitative research, and which offer a rich resource for diverse communities of knowledge. In her 2014 honors thesis in International Relations, joint Brown-RISD student Youbin Kang examined the circumstances under which multinational companies embrace and implement human-focused, ethical production practices (Kang 2014). The thesis drew on multiple internships across her five years of study, and worked in tandem with creative, irreverent visual work which in one iteration, an art installation, cast unions and factory owners as adversaries in a wrestling smack-down. In his Development Studies thesis, Bo Schlagel documented the multi-generational, quasi-familial ties between U.S farmers and “their” undocumented Mexican farmhands, and the effects of new legislation that put all those involved at risk, thereby severing those ties. Benefiting from a forward-leaning change in thesis options, Schlagel was able to submit a documentary film, depicting one case, as an integral part of his thesis project (Schlagel 2013a, 2013b). And finally, in her 2014 Independent Concentration in Politics, Film and Journalism, Emily Kassie also combined text and film in a two-part thesis project, built on iterated fieldwork in Rwanda, which explored the circumstances by which individuals choose to marry across the Tutsi-Hutu divide, and the grounds for hope and reconciliation that such marriages signal. (Kassie 2014). Her thesis work served as the basis for a feature

¹ Professors Richard Locke, Michael Kennedy, Ashutosh Varshney and Edward Steinfeld all served as first readers, and Professors Peter Andreas and David Kertzer (a faculty fellow) as second readers.

length documentary that in Fall 2015 won an Academy Award for Student Documentary (Kassie 2015).

I learned so much from working closely with these three students, as I have from others whose theses I have read over the past fifteen years. That learning follows two paths. First, they remind me of the excitement of discovery, and of risk-taking. With all the multiple commitments and obligations that accrue over time, pulling us in different directions, there is something revitalizing about spending time with students who have the license, the energy and the commitment to devote themselves body and soul to a single project. They get to spend all hours in the library, to live and breathe the data they have collected, to glimpse unlikely parallels and connections and pursue them; and perhaps more often than at any other time in their lives, to open themselves to the sheer joy of the academic pursuit.

And second, I think I understand better what drove my own undergraduate mentor to invest as much as he did. I certainly didn't teach him anything like these and Brown students have taught me. But I suspect he got a kick out of noticing, in the course of my third year, that I started experimenting with new media of expression in my written assignments. After that evening with David Mamet in the library, I began rendering some of the dilemmas in philosophical and historical interpretation as imagined conversations in American diners, on park benches overlooking Lake Michigan, or—in one case I still remember vividly—over poker hands. It was the moment when I started to put the pieces of my transformative college education together, taking ownership of what I had been given so generously. Or, as Mamet might say again, I *bought* it. The contract, I realize now, is to pass it forward, and rejoice in the transformative work of each new generation.

References

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