

CLAIRVOYANCE IN CATS: OR EIGHT GOOD REASONS TO PUBLISH BEFORE WRITING UP YOUR THESIS

(This note appeared in PsyPAG Quarterly, 69, December 2008).

After a hard day testing participants and worrying about how to analyze the data, the last thing most of us want to think about is generating more work. Here we are, wanting to make the process of becoming “Dr X” as short as possible. Surely a straight line is the shortest distance between two points?

Yet sometimes things are not so simple. It could seem like a diversion of time and effort from the direct path to a PhD, but writing up findings for journal publication can bring a lot of benefits.

1. Original research may be ‘scooped’ by rival workers if you wait till completion of your thesis before beginning the task of writing it up for publication. Don’t underrate your expertise: if you have been working for two years on an investigation into Clairvoyance in Cats, this probably makes you the world leader in the subject. Make the most of it and get your stuff out there first.

2. Getting published is a great morale-booster. It is a public acknowledgement of the quality of your research, and can recharge that enthusiasm which might be running low after two years of hard work with insufficient holidays and coping with awkward questions from relations about “tell me what exactly it was you were doing again?”.

3. What do we dread most on that day of the oral examination? An overzealous external examiner who terrier-like, focuses on a minutely critical examination of your sample selection policy, methodology, analysis, or worst of all, originality. What better response can there be to the portentous words “I’m a bit concerned about your claims on page 119”, than “I’m surprised by that: my development of standardized tests for clairvoyance has been accepted for publication in the Journal for Quantum Phrenology (impact factor 13.5), and the two expert reviewers actually found the discussion on page 119 one of the strongest parts of the paper”. Wouldn’t it be great to be able to say that? They can hardly deny that your work satisfies the “of publishable quality” criterion if already published.

4. If you write up your results as you go along, you are forced to analyze the data and draw conclusions from it as each chunk of data gathering is completed. This means that if an experiment is good, it can be relied on confidently as a basis for further research, but if it turns out to be a failure, you can go back and redesign it so as to redeem the failure, or perhaps take other corrective action eg try another type of experiment or another approach altogether, before it’s too late.

5. Journal reviewers and editors can provide an excellent, unpaid source of independent advice and criticism. This is linked to reason 3 above; *you* may think your demonstration of Clairvoyance in Cats is fireproof, and your supervisor may agree, but you may both be mistaken, or may not have been aware of related work being done by a group elsewhere.

Reviewers may point out confounds or statistical errors that make your work unsound, but correctable with some adjustments to the experimental design. They may also express astonishment that you failed to refer to important work by Nutkin and Potter showing similar results in squirrels, which you can then incorporate into your literature review. Better doing it at that stage than as a thesis rewrite.

6. If you write up the results of your studies for publication as you go along, you minimize the aversive task of sitting down to make sense of it all right at the end, under time pressure. Many of us have experienced that feeling of paralysis at the prospect of having to change gear after a solid chunk of data-gathering and (a) think theoretically about our results and (b) write what can at times be tedious summaries of other people's research in the literature review (who cares about Nutkin and Potter's work on squirrels? You're working with cats). But if you already have one or two papers written up, it is a lot easier to adapt these to form separate chapters of the thesis. The job is more than half done already.

7. And sadly, it's a competitive world out there. When it comes to applying for jobs in the final year of your PhD, if you have two or three first-author publications to put on your CV you have to be in a stronger position than those with none. Publications are a guarantee of quality: even if you happen to come from Allington University, Barsetshire, which has not yet established the reputation it deserves for academic excellence, this will not matter if you personally are already famous for publishing seminal studies into Clairvoyance in Cats in the pages of Nature Neuroscience.

8. Finally, there is a bonus for the supervisor: he, or she, will get their name as (usually) second or final author on papers that you publish, adding to their own CV. This is not unreasonable in those cases (common, but certainly not universal) where the supervisor may have suggested the paradigms or given heavy theoretical/practical support to the student. This bonus might, incidentally, serve to motivate the supervisor to give you even closer and better support than they would otherwise have done.

Are there any drawbacks? Yes, publication can be a frustrating business. It may be months before you get reviewer comments, and when you do, be warned: their criticism of your cherished draft can hurt. But most reviewers are reasonably constructive and some at least of their points are useful. And in my experience, comments which look dauntingly hostile often turn out to be quite manageable after mulling them over for a day or two. Anyway, you always have the alternative of ignoring them and just getting on with your research: the process of drafting for publication will still have saved you time at the stage of writing up your thesis. And you are going to have to get used to critical reviewers at some stage if you are to stay in research.

So get started now. Mr. Fluffy tells me that you won't regret it.