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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH
POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3
Thinking About Preparing Ph.D Students for the Viva as One Purpose and Role of the Ph.D Supervisor

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Teaching Cycle 3, August-September 2010: Thinking about preparing PhD students for the Viva as one purpose/role of the PhD supervisor

1. An account of the issue, including reference to relevant literature

This cycle was initiated by my thoughts about what the key purposes and roles of the PhD supervisor are, and how these might relate to what Eley and Murray refer to as the 'stages involved' in a doctoral student's work and research for their PhD (2005: 58). To date, my experience as a supervisor has been confined to: supervising the dissertation projects of undergraduate and MA students, taking on the role of first supervisor for two PhD students who are yet to reach the end of their third year of doctoral study, and taking on the role of second supervisor for three current PhD students plus two PhD students who have now submitted and passed their PhDs. In the case of the students who have now passed their PhDs, I was actively involved in preparing one of these students for her viva (through the holding of a mock-viva where myself and the first supervisor, who is a much more experienced and senior colleague, examined the student as a way to prepare her for the viva itself). I also had my first experience as a PhD examiner last year, when I served as the internal examiner in the viva for another PhD student in the department.

These initial experiences got me thinking about my role as first supervisor of my two current PhD students (plus another student who, at the time of the cycle, was about to start her PhD with me as first supervisor), and, specifically, the question of whether it is beneficial to initiate discussions about the viva with these students a good while before they reach the stage at which they submit their PhDs for examination. The literature that I have read (specifically on PhD supervision and more generally on issues relating to tutor feedback and student assessment) has suggested that it might be worthwhile to try out this approach and consider its effectiveness, for a number of reasons.

Delamont et al have argued, in their book *Supervising the Doctorate*, that effective PhD supervision should be underpinned by a kind of 'self-consciousness' on the part of the supervisor, where the supervisor ensures that they make explicit to their students what the 'processes and issues' involved in supervising them are and how these might relate to the student's own progress through the stages of their doctoral
This need for explicitness relates to the argument (made by both Taylor and Beasley and Delamont et al) that supervisors often assume that their students have an 'intuitive grasp' of the standards and criteria against which their doctoral work will be judged and assessed, and that, because these explicit discussions don't always take place, supervisors therefore think students already ‘know things’ about the requirements of a PhD ‘that they do not know' (Taylor and Beasley, 2005: 102; Delamont et al, 2004: 1). Consequently, Eley and Murray argue that ‘students should know precisely how their work will be assessed right from the start of their doctorates’ so that they can ‘begin to develop an understanding of what is expected’ from them, in terms of the kind and standard of work that they need to aim for (2009: 126 & 120).

The key issue that this teaching cycle therefore aimed to address is: what strategies can be employed by the supervisor, to allow his or her students to begin to develop this kind of understanding about what the viva examination is for, and how this relates to - or, for Eley and Murray, is 'inextricably linked' (2009: 119) to - their doctoral work and its purposes and aims. Through this, I hoped to formulate tactics and strategies which would allow my PhD students to develop an understanding of the role and purpose of the viva in their PhD, and how this relates to their ongoing work and progress with their PhD work (in terms of the standard of work they need to have achieved by the time their work is assessed by examiners in a viva, and in terms of their development as PhD 'candidates' who will need to confidently and independently defend and justify their work in the context of a viva examination). In addition, I also hoped that this cycle would enable me, as a relatively inexperienced PhD supervisor, to think further about and reflect on what Eley and Murray (2005) and Delamont et al (2009) see as one of the key roles of the PhD supervisor, namely to prepare PhD students for the viva examination that will take place at the end of their time as a doctoral student.

2. Proposed Teaching Practice, Intended Outcomes and Method of Evaluation

(N.B. For reasons of ethics and confidentiality, I have changed the names of the PhD students that I refer to below).
I organised a mock-viva session, where four PhD students (for whom I am either first supervisor or second supervisor) acted as examiners of my PhD thesis. A fifth PhD student, Rachel to whom I serve as second supervisor, chose to sit in on the mock-viva and post mock-viva discussion but not to serve as an examiner or take part in the other preparatory tasks that were set, because of other work commitments. The four students who engaged in all aspects of this teaching cycle were, at the time of the cycle, at different stages in their doctoral work: Nicola was about to start her PhD, Ellen was about to start the second year of her PhD, Ethan was about to start the third year of his PhD, and Susan was near the end of the third year of her PhD. These students were all given, in advance, copies of my PhD thesis (which was passed in 2004) and a document outlining two tasks that they needed to complete prior to the mock-viva. Firstly, they were asked to fill in a brief questionnaire, which asked for their own views on the purposes and role of the PhD viva, and their perceptions of the kinds and types of questions that are likely to be asked in a PhD viva. Secondly, they were then asked to read through my thesis and, as they did so, to try to put themselves in the position of an examiner reading the thesis in preparation for a viva. Specially, as they read through the thesis, they were asked to note down at least three questions that they would like to ask me (as the PhD candidate) in the mock-viva, and to try to relate these to the kinds and types of questions that they’d noted down in their questionnaire.

In the first half an hour of the mock-viva, it was agreed that I would leave the room, and the four students would then be asked by the mock-viva chair to discuss (as a group) the questions that they’d come up with, in order to determine which questions would be asked in the mock-viva and in which order. This particular part of the mock-viva task was designed to simulate the liaising and conferring that occurs between examiners prior to a PhD viva. After this discussion had occurred, I then returned to the room and the mock-viva took place, with me acting as the PhD candidate and the four students acting as the PhD examiners. After the mock-viva, it was agreed that a discussion with the students would take place (which would be recorded) about what they have learned from the mock-viva, about the purpose of the viva and its relationship to their PhD and to them (as PhD students).

There were a number of intended outcomes to this cycle, which I summarise below:
As Taylor and Beasley and Delamont et al both note, the viva (in the UK and in many other countries) is fundamentally a private event, meaning that it is not possible for PhD students to witness other vivas and, through this, to become familiar with their conventions and procedures and learn from the viva experiences of other PhD candidates. For Delamont et al, a key way to ‘demystify’ (2004: 149) the processes involved in examining a thesis is to hold a mock-viva (with one PhD student being examined by their supervisor, or one PhD student being examined by their peers, or a member of staff being examined by other staff and/or students), which enables the students to become more familiar with these processes (and the conventions, concepts and terminology involved) at an earlier stage in their doctoral research. Consequently, this teaching cycle aimed to enable me (as a PhD supervisor) to begin to address one of my key roles (to prepare PhD students for the viva examination) through viva simulation and subsequent discussion with students, while also aiming ‘to give students a clearer sense of ‘why there are external and internal examiners, and what they are supposed to do’ (Delamont et al, 2004: 141).

2/ Relating their ongoing doctoral work to the judgements and expectations of PhD examiners:
Based on my own experience of being a PhD student (and my experience so far as a PhD supervisor), it is common, during the course of a student's period of registration as a doctoral student, for the student to lose sight of the viva and the fact that other people outside of the supervisor will eventually be assessing the student's completed work. PhD students can, during this time, become focused entirely on the feedback they receive from their supervisors, and, in some cases, remain dependent on their supervisors in terms of conceptualising and articulating the direction and purpose of their project. Giving PhD students the chance to think about their ongoing doctoral work in relation to its final assessment in the viva and to other potential readers of their work - or, in Delamont et al’s terms, the ultimate ’implied reader’ of their writing and work (2004: 145) - can allow these students to develop new ways of perceiving and thinking about their work.

Firstly, the fact that this mock-viva focused on someone else’s PhD meant that students had an opportunity, in this context, to think about the more general criteria
that will be applied to their own work in the viva (rather than the more specific issues and questions that might be raised by examiners in relation to their particular doctoral project). For instance, this kind of mock-viva can help students to think, as they continue to work on their PhD, about more general issues that are raised and discussed in the vast majority of vivas, such as the original contribution to knowledge that their PhD might make and their work’s relationship to ongoing academic debates within relevant disciplines and fields of study. Secondly, a further aim of the cycle was to highlight to students that they will be required to defend their work and its approaches and methods independently (and without the help of the supervisor) in the viva itself. This specific approach would, hopefully, allow them to recognise that one important process that should occur during the student’s period of registration is the development of their confidence in terms of owning and being able to independently defend and 

\textit{justify} their own research and its aims and purposes (as a PhD 'candidate' rather than, or as well as, a PhD student).

3/ Self-assessment, peer assessment and becoming the Examiner:

As outlined in my report for my second teaching cycle, much of the literature on good practice when giving students guidance about or feedback on their assessed work has focused on the importance of the feedback generated from 'formative assessment' tasks in terms of enabling students to 'possess a concept of the goal/standard... being aimed for' in their final assessed work, to compare their current 'level of performance with that goal or standard', and, through this, to be able to 'self-assess' their current work against these standards (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 4). However, through reference to a range of prior higher education studies and research, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick argue that for students to become 'actively involved in monitoring and regulating' the standard of their current work, they 'must already possess some of the same evaluative skills as their teacher' (2004: 4). For Phil Race, one of the key ways in which these evaluative skills can be developed in students is by encouraging students to assess each other's work (in a form of peer assessment). By taking on the role of the teacher or assessor and assessing the work of someone else, the student, for Race, can be let 'in to the assessment culture [that] they must survive' and this can 'help enable students to really understand what is required of them' in their own assessed work (2001: 94). While these arguments are focused on the undergraduate teaching and assessment context, I would argue that these methods and approaches
can also be applied to PhD students and their perceptions of their work in relation to the viva. In this sense, the initial pre-viva tasks that I gave the students (and the taking on of the role of examiners in the mock-viva itself) could be perceived as a series of 'formative assessment' tasks for PhD students, with the discussion after the mock-viva serving as an opportunity for me to provide feedback to the students, on their questionnaire answers and chosen viva questions, and as a platform for further discussion with the students about this feedback as well as their developing thoughts about the purposes of the viva.

Further to this, and in relation to the arguments from Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick and Race outlined above, taking on the role of the PhD examiner, peer assessing their supervisor and then discussing the outcomes of this with me should hopefully allow students to begin to develop the kind of evaluative skills that will enable them, as they continue with their PhD work, to self-assess and consider the progress and development of their own work and writing in relation to the standards and requirements expected of completed PhDs that are ready for submission and examination. This form of peer assessment also, in turn, allows the official criteria that is sent to external examiners in order to assess the vast majority of PhDs to be applied to a particular PhD, and thus prevents such criteria from appearing to be an 'abstract' set of requirements and questions that are difficult to apply or relate to a particular (or indeed to their own) research project (Bley and Murray, 2009: 120).

4/ Allowing students to become more familiar with the research and doctoral experiences of their supervisor

While this cycle is informed by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick and Phil Race's conceptions of 'peer assessment', I made the decision that my PhD students should assess me (as their supervisor) rather than one of their fellow PhD students. This is, firstly and practically, because it would be unfair to put a PhD student through this quite intimidating process as part of a teaching cycle for my PGCTHE qualification, and, secondly, because it would also be, potentially, beneficial for the students to compare their conceptions of the viva with those held by their supervisor and to relate these conceptions to their supervisor's doctoral work and examination experiences. Indeed, explicitly discussing the students' own conceptions of the viva and comparing this with the viva experiences of their supervisors could be seen to be another role or
function of the PhD supervisor, in terms of further ‘demystifying’, and encouraging students to think about, the submission and viva stages of the PhD. In the mock-viva itself, this process was informed by the fact that the assigned chair for the mock-viva, Professor Martin Barker, was not only an extremely experienced PhD supervisor and PhD external examiner, but had also been the external examiner of my PhD and its associated viva at the University of Nottingham in November 2004.

Feedback on student learning produced as a result of this cycle was generated via:

1. The initial questionnaire that the students were asked to fill in.
2. The recorded discussion that occurred after the mock-viva.

These forms of feedback will enable me to chart how these students’ perceptions of the viva (and its roles and purposes) develop, modify or change during the course of the teaching cycle: from them filling out the questionnaire, to reading the thesis, to discussing (as a group) what questions will be asked, to taking on the role of the examiner and assessing someone else, to then reflecting on and discussing what they have learnt about the viva through this process. The initial pre-viva questionnaires will be invaluable to me in terms of gauging what these students already know or have grasped about the viva and its purposes and functions (and the extent to which they are able, at the different stages of their PhD that they are currently at, to put themselves in the position of an evaluator, examiner or assessor). The recorded discussion will then enable me to consider how effective the mock-viva has been in terms of opening up debate about the viva, and allowing students to consider the relationship between the viva examination and their ongoing doctoral work.

This cycle took place over a very short time span (as the thesis and guidelines document was distributed to students two weeks before the date of the mock-viva). However, the students returned their questionnaire answers (giving their initial perceptions about the purposes of the viva and the kinds of questions asked) to me prior to the mock-viva, and this enabled me to refine and modify the kinds of questions I asked and issues I raised in the discussion session after the mock-viva (in the sense that, during the post mock-viva discussion, I drew on some of the answers
they gave in their questionnaires, so that we could discuss these student perceptions of the viva as a group.

3. **Summary of feedback on, and evaluation of, student learning**

**Questionnaire Response Analysis**

I received the viva questionnaire responses, from the four students taking part in the mock-viva, a week or so before the actual event took place (and these are reproduced in Appendix 4 of this portfolio). My first thought, when looking through the students' answers, was that these students already had a very clear sense of the kinds of questions that might be asked by examiners in a viva. Furthermore, the students' thoughts on what the purposes of the viva are were very close to those given by Taylor and Beasley in their *A Handbook for Doctoral Supervisors*. For Taylor and Beasley, the key reasons why PhD thesis are examined through the viva oral examination are:

- to check that the work has been undertaken by the candidate and that he or she understands it; to ascertain that they have developed appropriate research skills; to see whether they have a wider knowledge of the field to which the research relates; and to establish whether they are capable of defending their thesis to experienced researchers drawn from the subject community (2005: 183).

Each of these reasons or purposes were referred to by at least one student in their questionnaire responses. Ellen, Ethan and Nicola all noted that one purpose of the PhD viva was 'to check that the work has been undertaken by the candidate', while Ellen and Nicola, in particular, also saw a key purpose of the viva as being to assess 'the extent to which a student has developed an in-depth understanding of a subject' (Ellen) or to 'uncover the candidate's deeper understanding of their own work' (Nicola). When discussing these questionnaire responses with the mock-viva chair, prior to the viva taking place, we noted that Nicola and, in particular, Susan had also drawn attention to the expectation that a PhD student is required to 'defend' their thesis in a viva as well as illustrate their understanding of it and its relationship to
existing relevant literature. For Nicola, 'by challenging the work the examiners can better grasp the candidate's understanding of their own work, by their ability to defend it', while for Susan, in a response which was largely focused on ideas of defence and justification, 'almost every time I make a decision regarding my PhD I imagine being asked to account for it and justify it at my viva'. I therefore resolved to bring up this question of whether the viva should primarily be envisaged, by the student, as a 'defence' of their work in response to critical challenges from the examiners in the post mock-viva discussion, in order to further open up debate on this issue and its importance to the viva.

Another questionnaire response which particularly intrigued me was a comment made by Ellen about the need for external examiners to 'put to one side their own perspective/views in the subject matter that is being discussed, which I imagine is not always straightforward'. I therefore also resolved to bring this up and further discuss this with students in the post mock-viva discussion, as what it seemed to be drawing attention to was: 1/ the student expectation of what a 'good' and appropriate examiner should be and do in order to undertake the role and 2/ the fact that a student's expectations about their examiners' performance and conduct in the viva could be just as valid and important, in planning and preparing for a viva, as a student's thoughts on what the examiners' expectations about the PhD candidate's performance and conduct are or should be.

Brief Description of the Mock-viva Process

I was absent from the room during the portion of the viva where the students suggested possible viva questions, agreed on the order in which they would be asked, and determined which of them would ask these questions. This process was overseen by the chair, Professor Martin Barker, who had a clear idea about the aims of my cycle and who I trusted implicitly (because of his experience as an external examiner) in terms of over-seeing this section of the viva. Indeed, this cycle would not have been so effective without the help of Professor Barker, who ensured that the whole process was taken entirely seriously by the students, and that the mock-viva took place in exactly the way that it would have done if the situation had been real. Consequently, during the course of the mock-viva itself, everyone completely took on the roles that they had been assigned (myself as candidate, Professor Barker as chair,
the students as the examiners) and none of us slipped out of these roles (or spoke informally) until the mock-viva had been completed. Indeed, the mock-viva felt so real that, when I entered the room, I felt incredibly nervous and actually felt that I was about to have my PhD re-examined.

The mock-viva lasted for around forty minutes. Professor Barker, as chair, asked the first and last questions, with each student asking at least one designated question each (with, for instance, Susan asking a question about my use of academic debates and literature, Ethan asking a question about the methods I’d employed in my thesis, and Ellen asking a question about the ethical implications of my research). Professor Barker’s last question focused on a key concept (‘moral panics’) which had played a central role in my thesis, and I found this a difficult question to answer. Consequently, before answering this question, I took a moment to pause and think about what my response would be, before answering. This was entirely spontaneous on my part (and wasn’t designed in any way as a demonstration to the students of how a ‘good’ candidate should respond to a particularly difficult question). However, despite this being a spontaneous reaction, this particular moment was noted and discussed by the students in the post mock-viva discussion in a very interesting and productive way, as I will go on to outline.

3/ Key Outcomes of the Post Mock-Viva Discussion

After a five minute break, the post mock-viva discussion began, with myself and Professor Barker moderating and posing questions for discussion to the students. The discussion that occurred was extremely rich, interesting and productive, and this in itself illustrated to me that the mock-viva exercise had been successful in terms of opening up debate about the viva amongst the students. Topics focused on during this section of the teaching cycle included discussions of the purposes of the viva, how the viva might relate to and inform the students' ongoing doctoral work, and, perhaps most significantly, discussions about how the mock-viva had impacted on their expectations about the viva and the ways in which they might need to prepare for it. The full transcript of the post mock-viva discussion is given in appendix 5 in this portfolio. However, I will summarise below some of the main areas of debate and the key issues raised during this discussion.
The impact of becoming the examiner on student expectations about the requirements of the viva and its relationship to their ongoing work

Earlier in the report, I noted that the design of this cycle was centrally informed by Phil Race’s argument that, by taking on the role of the teacher or assessor and assessing the work of someone else, the student can be let ‘in to the assessment culture [that] they must survive’ and this can ‘help enable students to really understand what is required of them’ (2001: 94). The post mock-viva discussion seemed to clearly illustrate and support this argument, in a number of ways.

Firstly, Ellen, Ethan and Susan all noted that the ‘prelude’ phase of the viva (Taylor and Beasley, 2005: 197), where the students were required (in their role as examiners) to determine the range and type of questions that would be asked in the viva and the order in which they would asked, had been useful for them, in two key ways. Firstly, it allowed them, in Ellen’s words, to have a much clearer ‘map’ or sketch’ of what might happen in a viva, and therefore to see it as an event with clear purposes and a clear logic and structure rather than ‘a blank hour’ (Ellen) or a ‘black hole’ (Susan). Delamont et al argue that one key reason for holding a mock-viva for students is because 'many candidates are scared of the "unknown" aspects of doctoral examinations', and that the supervisor 'can reduce anxiety by organizing mock and practice vivas' (2004: 7). On the basis of the students' comments in the post mock-viva discussion, this particular mock-viva appeared to have been successful and effective in reducing anxiety, not by the supervisor just providing words of comment or reassurance to the students but through a simulated viva which allowed the viva to become, in the students' heads, less of a 'black hole' and more a concrete event that, in Ellen's words, made the viva seem 'more real'.

Secondly, Ethan and Ellen also felt that this exercise had enabled them to begin to think about how they could go about the process of preparing for their real, future viva. As a result of the process of taking on the role of examiners and planning the structure of a viva, Ethan and Ellen seemed to now have a much more concrete conception of the kinds of questions they might get asked in their viva, and that, while it would never be possible to predict the exact questions that they would be asked, they now had clearer ideas about practical ways in which they could prepare for the
viva (by, for instance, making lists of possible kinds of questions that they might get asked, or putting labels in a copy of their thesis for reference in case particular kinds of questions were asked). Ellen also made an extremely illuminating observation about the way in which she had read and approached my thesis, in her role as an examiner. Ellen’s research interests are quite close to my own, so Ellen was already familiar with the book version of my thesis (which I published three years after passing my PhD). However, by reading the same material as an examiner rather than as a student, she had started to question the structure and chapter order of my work in a way that she hadn't before. This discovery seemed, for her, to impact on and inform the work she was currently doing for her PhD, in terms of the current decisions she was making about the structure and focus of her work. As Ellen noted in the discussion, the decisions she was currently making about her PhD might ultimately impact on 'all those questions and things that could come up in my viva’. This seems to support the arguments of Race, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, and Taylor and Beasley about the usefulness of an exercise like this in allowing students to 'learn what the standards are' (in terms of their PhD work and its assessment and examination) and, as a result of this learning and recognising, to 'become able to critically assess their own work' (Taylor and Beasley, 2005: 102).

**B/ Humanising External Examiners**

Taking on the role of the external examiner also seemed to demystify the viva and reassure the students in another way. As Delamont et al note, vivas can be conceptualised as a pleasurable or vital experience for PhD candidates, 'a two-way exchange of views and ideas' which can allow the viva to be conceived of as 'altogether more egalitarian and less confrontational than that term [examination] normally conveys' (2004: 147-8). By going through the same processes that examiners need to go through prior to a viva, the students began to reflect on what the motivations and agendas of an external examiner might be. As a result of this, the students acknowledged that, while examiners were there to challenge students and critically assess their work, they must also have an interest in the work to agree to be an external examiner in the first place and that they therefore might not be aiming to, in Susan’s words, 'fluster you’, or 'throw you or try and catch you out' for the sake of it.
Reflecting on the relationship between the quality of the written work and the need to 'defend' your work in a viva

As noted in my questionnaire analysis section, the conception of the viva as an event where a student is required to 'defend' their work was referred to in a number of the questionnaire responses. On raising this issue in the post mock-viva discussion, two students, Rachel and Ellen, made comments which were directly related to the idea that, if the written work was of an extremely high quality, that there would be less need in the viva to defend the work. These student comments enabled the chair and myself to provide clarification on this issue, particularly in relation to Eley and Murray's contention that 'the student's performance during the examination can theoretically influence the examiners’ decision' (2009: 129). Firstly, Rachel noted that, as a result of the mock-viva, she planned to make her work so clear and comprehensive that she would be able to avoid being asked difficult questions in the viva, and this allowed the chair to highlight and reiterate Ellen's earlier point about the viva, that 'the viva is partly about you being able to say it out loud and not just have the security of writing it down'.

Secondly, Ellen then drew attention to a key flaw in my teaching cycle design - that all four students knew that I had passed my PhD viva without needing to make any corrections to my PhD and that, as a result of this, there had been no need to ask me, as their examiners, to defend my work or justify any of my arguments or methodological decisions. However, I was then able (through my position of looking at the mock-viva from the candidate's perspective) to point to the ways in which Susan's viva question (which was a quite standard viva question about the literature I had chosen to use) had required me to defend my work, and thus to illustrate the extent to which the defence of a thesis was an inherent part of any viva examination, regardless of the perceived high quality of the work. Indeed, this issue also allowed the chair, as my real external examiner, to explain that it was the way in which I defended my work in my real viva that had ultimately determined my success, and therefore for both the chair and myself to further illustrate to the students that the success of the viva was never a foregone conclusion (based on the quality of the work) and that the student's planning and preparation for a viva was therefore an essential part of the process of working towards and obtaining a PhD. This in itself drew attention to the benefits that can be gained, for students, by taking part in a
approach to bear on the examination of a particular PhD. Firstly, I found this interesting and productive because, as noted above, it allowed the students to consider that the examiner had certain responsibilities and that there are certain expectations and standards required of the examiner in this situation, just as there are with PhD candidates. However, this issue also allowed us to have a very useful discussion about the process through which lists of potential examiners are put together for vivas, and the importance of considering a range of factors when putting together these lists (factors which, potentially, should go beyond just a consideration of the research interests of particular potential examiners).

4. Conclusions, and comments on the implications for the professional development of my teaching practice

This teaching cycle, and the exercises of the mock-viva and post mock-viva discussion, has proved to be one of the most rewarding and thought-provoking experiences I have had in my academic career so far. I took on the role of supervising PhD students quite early in my academic career, and, while it has always been a particularly enjoyable and rewarding aspect of my job, I have always felt a little unclear about what the key roles and responsibilities of being a PhD supervisor are (particularly in the sense that I am currently not that much older and more experienced than some of the students that I am supervising). This particular teaching cycle seemed to have clear benefits and outcomes for the students involved (as outlined above), and (as also indicated above) the discussion Professor Barker and I had with the students after the mock-viva seemed to allow the students to think through and reflect on what they had gained from the mock-viva in terms of their perceptions and expectations about their own future vivas.

Firstly, the mock-viva and subsequent discussion allowed the students to think about the importance of the viva to their PhD, as an event which would allow them to discuss their work with experts in the field but which would also require them to defend their work in particular ways and for particular reasons. Secondly, the exercise allowed the students to begin formulating practical strategies for preparing for the viva event and responding to questions within the viva itself. And, thirdly (and in relation to the arguments put forward in all the key literature I have consulted
on PhD supervision and examination), the mock-viva exercise (which involved them watching a person going, moment by moment, through the process of being examined) seemed to give the students a more concrete, 'real' sense of what a viva could be like, how it's likely to be structured, and the kind of responses that could be given to typical viva questions. Importantly, Ellen also noted, in the post-viva discussion, that a departmentally run mock-viva event like this one served as a useful addition to the University-run research training modules that all PhD students are required to attend, in that it allowed these students to practice for the viva with a group of students and staff who were all from the same subject and disciplinary area. This suggests that this kind of exercise could be usefully incorporated into the PhD supervision process within my department on a regular and long-term basis (or, at the very least, that it could be something that I continue to factor into my own PhD supervision duties and activities in the future).

However, the cycle also had other benefits for me, in terms of the development of my teaching practice and my conceptions of my roles and responsibilities as a PhD supervisor. Because this mock-viva exercise focused on my own PhD, and because the discussions afterwards drew on my own and Professor Barker's experiences and perceptions of my original PhD viva, the exercise allowed me to further reflect on how my own previous experiences as a PhD student (during the course of my studies and in the viva itself) could inform the guidance and supervision I give to students on managing their PhD work, and planning for the viva examination. This illustrated to me that the duties of a PhD supervisor not only involve drawing on my knowledge of the academic literature and research methods associated with a particular PhD student's project, but also involve drawing on my own experiences of managing, preparing for and experiencing the PhD viva in order to help students to connect the viva examination to their ongoing PhD work.