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Creating an Engaging Doctoral Seminar: Ideas for Junior Faculty

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Junior faculty members at research universities are periodically tasked with the responsibility of running a research-based doctoral seminar course. Doctoral seminars present exciting opportunities for doctoral students and the faculty member teaching the course. On one hand, junior faculty, having graduated recently, have fresh perspectives on what it takes to successfully write and defend a dissertation that is timely, relevant, and rigorous. Junior faculty are also closely familiar with trends in the job market for academics and can guide students on how to succeed in these markets. On the other hand, junior faculty members, due to less time spent in academia and toward producing scholarly work in their respective fields, may not possess the broad understanding of the history of the discipline and vision for the future, that senior scholars develop from decades of experience. In this TREO talk, I posit that junior scholars can harness their comparative strengths to create engaging and effective doctoral seminar classrooms that complement seminars conducted by senior faculty members. I share several tools and strategies that I have found successful in my experience teaching information systems seminar courses over two different semesters titled “The Economics of Digital Platforms” and “Algorithms in Business and Society”.

The core objectives of my seminar courses, irrespective of the topic, are to train students on the critical appreciation of literature in the field, and to help them transition from consumers of research to active creators. As the course progresses, I shift the emphasis from consumption to creation of research. With these objectives in mind, I developed a variety of pedagogical approaches. In a typical doctoral seminar, the instructor assigns papers which the students read during the week, and then present and discuss with other students during class, with the instructor moderating the discussion. In my seminar courses, this reading and discussing of papers is still a core component; but I also include additional components to keep students engaged in an active learning environment. I introduce and elaborate on seven pedagogical approaches. These are (1) viewing the syllabus as a living document partially co-created by students, (2) developing and expanding mind maps for literature synthesis, (3) inviting scholars for a meet-the-author series, where students get behind-the-scenes insights into the research and publication process, (4) encouraging students to pitch research ideas frequently for critical feedback, (5) hosting idea development workshops where each student is matched to a mentor based on their needs, (6) running a research oriented book club and (7) agile-writing exercises to instill discipline and consistency in writing. It is my hope that junior faculty members find some of these approaches in line with their pedagogy. For those who are already implementing versions of these ideas, it is my hope that delineating the approaches as above introduces intentionality in their efforts to create an engaged classroom.