

## ***BEATING THE ISOLATION BLUES***

*Reprinted from the UC Berkeley Graduate Student Newsletter, The Graduate, Spring, 1989*

Does your dissertation research keep you in a lab where you have ample contact with people who know what you're doing? Or do you find yourself working alone, with no one to talk to about your dissertation or the stress involved in working on it?

"All Ph.D. students on campus have the same problem," says Public Policy student Walter Wong, "finding someone to talk with about their dissertations, someone who's really interested."

If you're in the social sciences or humanities, chances are that you don't have regular contact with people who are interested in your dissertation, and working in isolation can be discouraging. Recently we talked to some students in those fields who have teamed up to help each other through the trials of dissertation writing.

### **SHARING THE "WILLFUL MADNESS"**

Naomi Yavneh and Sharon James are Comparative Literature doctoral students who have formed a two-person dissertation group. Both are just beginning to write their dissertations, and both recognized early on that they could profit from the support and constructive criticism that another student could provide.

"We decided that it would be nice to have a supportive meeting with somebody before handing something over to our dissertation directors," says James, "to have someone else read it and say, 'Well, it makes sense to me.'"

The two women, who knew each other from seminars, decided to meet weekly over lunch. They usually exchange about four pages of work ahead of time and then come prepared to discuss it.

"It's both a discuss-your-ideas and a support group," says Yavneh. "It's really important to feel that there's somebody who cares what you're doing."

"I'm not taking classes, and that is isolating," says James. "And that is why Naomi and I have started meeting every week. Otherwise I am working in a vacuum."

James feels that such groups are particularly valuable for students in the humanities where, as she puts it, "There's a willful madness. You have to be that way because there is no guarantee that what you're doing will be of any use to you, practically speaking. People who don't understand that willful madness can't possibly be understanding of a dissertation writing project."

### **"ONE STEP AHEAD OF ME"**

Siggy Brauner, a student in German who plans to file this spring, meets once a week with a friend, Maresi Nerad, who last spring filed her dissertation in Education.

"She is one step ahead of me," says Brauner, who also meets with another student in German who is writing his dissertation. "I think because Maresi has been through the whole process, she has a better idea of what is really necessary and what isn't."

Nerad not only reads and comments on sections of the dissertation, but also helps Brauner plan her schedule and set her weekly and long-range goals.

"She always thinks she can do more than is possible, and then she gets very frustrated," says Nerad, who has helped Brauner work out a schedule to accommodate both teaching and writing. "I tell her, 'Next time you can only do this section.'"

At the end of each meeting they discuss exactly what Brauner will bring to the next one. If Brauner has trouble deciding what to do next, Nerad takes notes as her friend lists the possibilities and then presents those notes to Brauner as an outline of the next week's work.

Nerad models her role as dissertation mentor on her own experience: she was "talked through" the last year of her dissertation writing by another friend, Anne Machung, who had just completed her own doctoral program.

"She gave me deadlines, lots of do-able deadlines," says Nerad of that experience, which, like her work with Brauner, involved weekly meetings. "I think the most valuable part of our meeting was that she would schedule my time...we would rank priorities and she would be very rigid...Up to then I had not learned how long things can take."

None of these three women is in the same department, although they have broadly related interests. Brauner, however, feels that the fact that Nerad has already finished is more important than whether or not she can provide specific comments on content.

"With Maresi, the practical part of my writing is more important," says Brauner. "I really need to write at least five pages a week and the more the better. My focus right now is to work with her more because I really want to finish."

Brauner, by the way, has already chosen the dissertation writer she plans to help after she files.

### **SEEING YOU THROUGH**

Finding someone who will read your work, discuss your ideas, and perhaps help you plan your time can make a big difference. Whether it's another student in your department, someone you know who has finished a Ph.D., or a group of students who are writing, regular meetings with people who will give attention to your work and provide short-term deadlines can give you much-needed structure and support as you write your dissertation.

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## FIRST-AID FOR RELUCTANT WRITERS

Find it hard to get much done when you sit down to write?

These tips may help:

**Don't write and edit simultaneously.**

Remember that writing is a dual process: an outpouring of ideas and then a critical shaping and forming. One student said he edited only after he finished 60-page blocks of his dissertation. That's a way to avoid getting stuck making one small (and probably shrinking) section of your thesis absolutely perfect.

**Keep a writing log.** Keep a notebook nearby as you write so you can log any distracting thoughts that occur while you're writing. Sometimes these are self-doubts, sometimes errands that need doing, and, often, good ideas that might be useful in some other part of the thesis or for future projects.

"I have a list of things that are related but I don't think will fit into the dissertation itself," says one student. "I keep those in a list of things I will talk about in my Modern Language Association interviews about what my next book will be about, because they always ask you what you're planning to do next."