

## Place and Space

By TODD SCHOEPFLIN

### FIRST PERSON

Academics share their personal experiences

I don't think The Clash were singing about graduate students when they recorded "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" Nonetheless, the song is pertinent to a dilemma that many students surely have faced: What do you do when you have reached the most important point in your Ph.D. program -- writing the dissertation -- but you are burnt out, uninspired, and ready for change?

*Where* are you supposed to write the dissertation? Do you stay put, despite your phlegmatic state of mind? Or do you shake it up and pursue a new environment?

That was the essence of the dilemma that I faced in 1998, three years into the sociology program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. My heart told me that it was time to go. But a voice inside my head kept telling me that leaving the nest would be the kiss of death.

During graduate school, according to conventional wisdom, it's impossible to write a dissertation away from the comfortable confines of the department. Faculty members may forget you -- it's as simple as "out of sight, out of mind."

Still, I wondered, how was it a good idea to stay when I felt like I had no chance of doing any substantive writing there? I had been living in a series of small apartments -- on Long Island, in Queens, then Brooklyn. The walls were closing in. The best thing for me, I decided, was to return to my hometown region of upstate New York. I rented a huge apartment in Buffalo: big, spacious, cheap, above ground. This was the place to write a dissertation.

Everyone knows the number-one rule in real estate is "location, location, location." What I learned is that that rule also applies to writing a dissertation. I truly believe that if I had not moved to Buffalo, I would not have written my dissertation.

Once I found the right place to live, I also found that it was essential for me to create a space in my apartment designated specifically for writing. As soon as I sat down in that

particular space, it signaled that it was time to write.

Having settled my place and space, the dissertation seemed a sure thing. However, instead of writing a dissertation, I wrote a one-act play (a bad one-act play), and so there I was in 1999, stuck in Buffalo, 500 miles away from Stony Brook, A.B.D., with a job barely related to my training as a would-be academic.

Suddenly I realized that I was clueless about how to write a dissertation. A.B.D. really did stand for "all but dead." It was nice that I had found a great place to live and established a good space to write, but I was not in an academic-writing mode.

I had not even formed a complete committee. Although three faculty members had agreed to work with me, I still needed a fourth. I e-mailed a professor and asked him to serve on my committee. It was a long shot: He didn't know me, I had never taken one of his classes, and his research interests were not directly related to mine. But people advised me that he would be good to work with and that I should reach out to him.

He wrote back to decline. He had tried working long distance with students on several occasions, but he was never satisfied with the outcome. The implied message was that he did not want to waste his time with me, because he assumed the collaboration would result in yet another failure. In his mind, my project was dead on arrival.

Fortunately, I found another faculty member amenable to joining, and thus my committee was formed. The most important member, of course, was my adviser, Kenneth Feldman, a professor of sociology at Stony Brook. Even though I lived in Buffalo during the entire time that I worked on my proposal and dissertation, Feldman was always committed to my project. He and the other committee members were helpful, supportive, and fair in their criticism. However, it was a long time before they actually had anything from me to read and respond to.

### **Writing the Dissertation**

So, my committee was set, I was living in the right place, and ready to write in the best possible space. I had no excuses. But I still didn't know how to begin the dissertation.

Peter Kaufman, a sociologist at SUNY's New Paltz campus and one of my committee members, gave me a bit of friendly advice: Read Joan Bolker's *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. Perfect! Now I was in business. Fifteen a minutes a day wasn't much to ask.

Imagine my disappointment when, just a few pages into the book, I read that it was impossible to write a dissertation in 15 minutes a day. "Holy false advertising, Batman!" Now what?

Despite the initial letdown, the book was incredibly helpful. It made me aware that writing a dissertation was going to take an enormous amount of time, dedication, and

hard work. In addition, the author provided many nuggets of wisdom that helped me to develop a writing strategy -- for example, her advice about incorporating time for respite and rewards. As long as you keep the diversions to a minimum, a system of breaks and rewards can be very effective.

Soon I hit writing stride and wrote as often, and as much, as I could. My mantra became "one hour at a time." On bad days it changed to "one half-hour at a time." On days that I was especially fatigued it was "one paragraph at a time."

I always kept in mind some more good advice from Kaufman: Picture yourself on a bike ride. Do not ride [write] too much on any given day, because you will be tired the following day and will not feel like riding [writing] again.

The point is that writing the dissertation is a marathon, not a sprint. Momentary bursts of writing will only add up if they occur frequently. Consistency and momentum are vital.

As I progressed with my dissertation, I became the master of mottoes, most of them pilfered from popular culture:

- When I approached the final stages of a chapter, I had to be like the salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*: "ABC -- always be closing."
- When I was in a furious writing mode, I was like Elvis: "TCB -- taking care of business."
- Many times, either in the dead of winter or in the stifling humidity of summer, I turned to John Lennon: "Nobody told me there'd be days like these."
- In times of despair, I leaned on Bob Marley: "Don't worry 'bout a thing, 'cause every little thing gonna be all right."

I gave myself plenty of mental reminders to stay on task: Be respectful of the relevant literature and theory but don't depend on it. Rely on the richness of your own data. Feel comfortable with your authority as a writer. Add original insights.

I have lived in four different apartments in Buffalo since 1999, and I can easily recall the progress made in each of them:

- Apartment 1: Hatched the idea and conceptualized the project.
- Apartment 2: Wrote the dissertation proposal and the methodology chapter.
- Apartment 3: Wrote three chapters of results.
- Apartment 4: Wrote the theory chapter, introduction, conclusion, appendices, and finished the dissertation in April 2004.

Even as I got closer to the end of the process, my mind was still riddled with questions. What would have happened if I had stayed at Stony Brook? Would I have finished faster had I not left? But the questions obscured something I now know to be true.

The bottom line was that there was only one place for me to write a dissertation --

Buffalo, N.Y. I felt like an underdog, and living in Buffalo, you get to be an underdog 24/7. Anyone not living in Buffalo views it as a second-rate city. They think of us as proverbial losers, able to get to four Super Bowls without winning any of them.

But those of us who live here love the great architecture, great theaters, great restaurants, great parks, and the very reasonable cost of living that Buffalo offers. It took a long time to find the right place, and I moved around a lot, but I finally got the job done.

Buffalo was the city that housed me. It was the community that I needed to complete the most challenging task of my life. And to the city of good neighbors and great apartments, I am eternally grateful.

Based on my experience, I offer this basic advice: Do not let anyone tell you where to write your dissertation. The place and space that you select might not work for anyone else. That doesn't matter, so long as they work for you.

*Todd Schoepflin recently accepted a position as an assistant professor of sociology at Niagara University.*