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Across time and space: Examiner and candidate experiences of online doctoral vivas

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ABSTRACT

Many countries have doctoral viva examinations, mostly conducted in-person until the COVID-19 pandemic. This article explores the changing processes and experiences of doctoral vivas forced online, from the perspectives of three examiners (two UK, one NZ) and one recent candidate (UK). It sheds light on remote viva examinations exploring experiences of examination rigour, opportunities to evidence 'doctorateness' and challenges and affordances of remoteness, home location and technology. We use autoethnography, focusing on our experiences including the personal, learning and institutional dimensions. We found virtual spaces had advantages (comfort) and disadvantages (emotional difficulties), and levels of worry were often higher, especially regarding IT. Online formats still enabled examiners to rigorously assess 'doctorateness', but duty of care is needed for candidates with anxiety exacerbated by the pandemic, or technology. Our study offers insiders' insights into the remote online viva itself with recommendations for candidates, examiners and institutions.



KEYWORDS

Viva; doctorate; online; remote; supervision; insider

Introduction

In the UK, New Zealand and elsewhere where vivas are normal practice, they are usually formal with two examiners and often an independent chair while in Nordic and some European countries they are largely ceremonial, performative, confirmatory, celebratory events taking place once examiners have made recommendations. However, they exist more rarely only for special concerns for example, in South Africa and Australia.

Online vivas have historically been conducted where external examiners cannot travel to campus and have been a normal practice in New Zealand for years, largely to mitigate against distances for external examiners or students. Since March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic forcing the closure of university campuses, the online remote viva became the default experience internationally. Due to the potential convenience and financial implications for students, examiners, and university administrators we anticipate

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in the future there will be a greater number of online vivas than pre-pandemic. However, little is known empirically about how the experience of undertaking an online viva differs from one in-person. In the UK, and elsewhere, where vivas are the normal end of the doctorate, they seek to determine the doctoral quality of the work and are usually conducted face-to-face under secure, rigorous and collegial conditions. We aimed to explore the processes and experiences of online vivas, using an autoethnographic approach drawing on our experiences in our various roles as candidate, examiners, or convenor, to assess whether the online viva can and does still meet these aims and conditions.

Little has been published on undertaking the viva. The experiences, problems, or advice for vivas are mostly anecdotal (Denicolo et al., 2000; Morley et al., 2002). Historically, published work has been limited to advice to students (Murray, 2003; Tinkler & Jackson, 2002; Wisker, 2007), and some early data-based studies (Hartley & Jory, 2000; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Trafford & Leshem, 2002; Wallace & Marsh, 2001). Anecdotal and insider doctoral graduate response on the viva experience in general exists largely on social media. On WIASN (Women in Academia Support Network), a facebook group, responses from doctoral graduates indicate stress before and sometimes after the viva (mixed with both a sense of let-down and elation). Contributors report being variously proud and concerned as both their competence and achievement are under examination through the thesis, and defence in the viva. This is mostly followed by relieved responses and a sense of celebration, even when there are corrections to complete.

There is scant research literature on remote vivas, although recent blogs offer rich insights. In 'Reflections on an (online) viva' (Anon, 2021) Kelsey Inouye reports that 'the high-stakes oral nature of the viva made the weeks preceding the event some of the most nerve-wracking of my life[(np)]. However, the event with the virtual room created distance, allowing her control over her environment. Following her successful viva, she reported elation mixed with a form of loss. Another graduated doctor, Chris (Anon, 2021) notes the comfort yet constraint of doing a viva at home, acknowledging that the remote viva was for some a lifeline regarding funding and time.

Research aims

Our research aimed to explore the processes and experiences of online vivas during the pandemic. We consider the 'learning' issues, the intellectual, conceptual, cognitive challenges and the viva experiences, theorising using doctoral liminality (Keefer, 2015), threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003) and conceptual threshold crossings (Kiley & Wisker, 2006; Wisker, 2008) to understand the intellectually challenging moments of undertaking the viva remotely, online. Bourdieu's (1986, Bourdieu, 1996) work is also helpful in considering the experiences of expressing the necessary academic capital for this successful transitional learning experience, and finally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) highlights emerging issues of location and wellbeing in the online viva experience itself.

Theoretical framework

In the following subsections, we discuss theoretical perspectives that informed our thematic analysis and findings.

Doctoral liminality – the viva as an accelerated liminal space before the last crossing

Few events in the doctoral journey can be characterised as a ‘rite of passage’ (Keefer, 2015, p. 17) as effectively as the viva. A rite of passage is defined as a series of ‘ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another’ (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 10). Despite its short duration, the viva represents a personal transformative experience, shaping the student’s identity as a developing researcher, through the opportunity presented for debate and argumentation. Validation through the viva embodies peer-reviewing processes inherent to academic research. The viva allows the doctoral student to experience external review and feedback, facilitating an identity shift towards an academic identity. A successful outcome represents the crossing of a conceptual threshold from student to academic researcher (Kiley & Wisker, 2006; Trafford, 2008; Wisker, 2008, 2012).

The viva incorporates all five dimensions discussed by Kiley and Wisker (2006) central to threshold concepts: transformative, integrative, irreversible, bounded and troublesome, and as part of the process the viva includes a ‘liminal period’ (Keefer, 2015, p. 19) characterised by anxiety, uncertainty, confusion, doubt, only relieved either as the discussion progresses or when the outcome is revealed. We argue one can identify liminality just before and during the viva, itself a time and space *bounded* event, *troublesome* because testing, sometimes contestatory, and causing change through the process; *integrative* as bringing together research, writing, understanding and contribution (although not always *irreversible* in decisions because of corrections or resubmissions). It takes place before the crossing of the final threshold, a crossing only enabled through articulation, defence, and peer-to-peer conversations between emerging and proven researchers.

Acquiring the necessary academic capital and liminality

However, passing is not automatic. The role of the viva is to assess whether the student has required the requisite ‘academic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242) to be awarded a doctorate, successfully transitioning from student to colleague. Academic capital is an ‘institutionalized form of cultural capital based on based on properties such as prior educational achievement, a disposition to be academic (seen, for example, in manner of speech and writing), and specially designated competences’ (Naidoo, 2004, p. 458). Acquisition of the necessary academic capital is assessed (using university guidelines) by the examiners during the viva and finalised and agreed upon during their deliberations once the candidate has left the room (virtually or physically).

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and wellbeing: Remoteness, effects of technology

Maslow (1943) identified a Hierarchy of Needs, with physiological needs (base of the pyramid), followed by safety needs, love and belonging, esteem, and, at the top, self-actualisation. Online vivas, especially during a pandemic, may disrupt satisfying these needs, thus impacting performance. We extrapolate from work on remote supervision to identify possible impacts of online vivas on needs.

Research into online supervision emphasises the effects and influences of technology, skills in managing interactions online, and elements of the personal and emotional domains of doctoral learning journeys (Wisker et al., 2010). Zembylas (2008, p. 71) considers 'emotion talk' in online learning. Erichsen et al. (2014) identify remote supervision using technology as in a personal/emotional domain involving both relational and process experiences, potentially producing issues and note, worryingly, some students indicated feeling isolated and forgotten. Taken together, awareness of the relational aspects of supervision have fuelled considerations of personal interactions in online supervision and mentoring during the pandemic (SRHE, 2020; Wisker, 2020a, Wisker, 2020b). The power relationship and emotional demands of online work may be increased in a viva, so set-up (technology, wellbeing) and interactions between participants in a viva likely require extra care (SRHE, 2020). Given the goal of the viva is for the student to demonstrate mastery of the discipline – to achieve self-actualisation – there are basic pre-conditions below this which must be in place to achieve this transformative goal (Maslow, 1943).

Methodology

Our research uses a collaborative autoethnography approach (Chang et al., 2012), with four researchers exploring their experiences with online vivas during the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted by Chang et al. (2012), collaborative autoethnography involves researchers working together to collect their autobiographical accounts and to analyse and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of the socio-cultural phenomenon being studied (p. 24). The study had ethical approval from the New Zealand institution (reference D21/050).

The four participants (co-researchers and co-authors) comprise a UK candidate (Joseph), who has recently completed their viva, a relatively new UK doctoral examiner (Ludovic), an experienced UK and NZ doctoral examiner (Gina), and a New Zealand academic with multiple roles of examining, convening, and overseeing the doctoral examination process as a graduate research school lead (Rachel). All co-researchers were involved (2019–21) in doctoral vivas conducted online, with participants in different locations.

Data collection and analysis occurred via an iterative approach, consistent with collaborative autoethnography. First each co-researcher responded to a set of collectively developed questions, including our experiences with vivas in general- such as the roles we have taken in vivas, the purpose, and the challenges of a viva. Then we considered our experiences of remote vivas, with questions including any changes we noted moving to the online format, the protocols followed, the highs and lows of online vivas, and whether we felt the online viva was a suitable replacement to a face-to-face viva. Second, we exchanged our narratives, and then discussed these via Zoom, focusing on each other's perspectives and insights. This prompted further thoughts, helping identify emerging themes. Third, we re-analysed our narratives, guided by the theoretical perspectives to confirm and flesh out emerging themes, ensuring no new theory was needed at this stage to further help interpret and understand what we were finding. Fourth, we met again via Zoom to discuss these finalised themes, and plan our co-writing.

Results and discussion

Our discussion, re-analysis and thematic analysis of our narrative data produced the following themes, seen together as aligning with *institutional, personal and learning* dimensions, and understood through theories of liminality (Keefer, 2015), conceptual threshold crossings (McKenna, 2017; Wisker, 2008), academic capital (Bourdieu, 1996) and needs (Maslow, 1943).

Space, presence and place (Maslow) (Institutional and personal dimensions)

A recurring theme in our narratives concerned space – both physical and virtual. Joining vivas remotely had both benefits and disadvantages. Regarding benefits, both Joseph and Gina commented about the comfort of the home environment for the candidate. For example, ‘The candidate [I was examining] was comfortable in her own room’ (Gina), while Joseph commented: ‘Being at home made it more comfortable I was able to feel . . . I guess it gave me a home advantage . . .’ Rachel also told of an external examiner joining from her home, her dog sitting on her knee, its ears visible online, offering informality to the otherwise formal occasion.

Regarding challenges, Joseph worried about family members overhearing and how this would impact his momentum, and noted the difficulty of interpersonal communication online. He said: ‘you don’t get that emotional warmth necessarily over the screen.’ Ludovic discussed the ability to easily ‘read a room’ in a traditional face-to-face viva, helping to get a better sense of participants’ reactions. However, in contrast, Gina said: ‘It did feel a lot more formal than a face-to-face viva because of that setup’, and: ‘A viva is pressurised in a small room or round a table anyway because it’s formal but I think it’s particularly pressurised if you’re on your own staring at the screen.’ Considering backdrops to online interactions, we thought the home background helped with informality; Ludovic said that having institutional backdrops would lose that more relaxed feeling – with a more clinical corporate feel.

Worry/anxiety about technology (Institutional and personal dimensions)

Even within well-established online doctoral programmes, the theme of ‘worry’ emerged for candidates, examiners and conveners. The primary worry centred on technical issues and, in one case, that examiners could consider any technical issues as lack of the candidate’s competency. Likewise, Gina expressed concern technical issues would reflect badly on her as examiner, e.g. if she needs to reboot midway: ‘they’ve been waiting for you, and it feels as though you are a bit inept although it’s actually the system that is undependable’.

University IT staff have a crucial role to reduce technical worries. Joseph described how before his viva an administrator met him online to talk through the process and check his connection was working before he entered the main call with the examiners. Additionally, all three of those with experience of examining commented on the importance of tech support being on call to help reduce anxiety for all parties. Ludovic noted in one examination an IT member was on the call during the viva but with their camera off: ‘I thought that was quite reassuring to have someone from IT there in case anything should go wrong, or you know the internet connection should break and we should lose the candidate’.

Due to nerves, Joseph noticed small delays online more than in a normal virtual conversation: 'When you speak or when you respond to a question, there's a little bit of a delay before they respond to the end of you speaking. And for a while at the start of the viva that felt like they weren't necessarily responding well to my responses, if that makes sense, because there was this little gap and there was just this sort of nagging like, oh, God, that didn't go down well, because there was a gap. And then then you have to sort of remind yourself that that's just the way it is online'.

Academic capital (Bourdieu) (Learning dimension) and threshold crossing

The online viva is an opportunity for examiners to verify if sufficient academic capital (Bourdieu, 1996) has been acquired by the candidate to award the doctorate degree. In this context, such capital includes contribution to knowledge, development of research skills, and doctorateness. The viva's purpose may be misunderstood, as it is more than a test or confirmation of the quality of the student's research and writing. Our narratives showed that the viva plays a unique role, one sometimes forgotten, in welcoming candidates to the academic community/fold, provided they offer sufficient evidence of having attained the required academic capital. The viva may provide the first fully-fledged academic arena for students, whose work is examined by external academics with no relationship whatsoever with them. It became apparent that from an examiner's perspective, the viva plays a crucial role in verifying the candidate's capacity to articulate and defend choices made, depth of knowledge and contribution to the field. The examiners felt that being online did not appear to impact our ability to judge if candidates had the requisite academic capital.

The quality of the thesis itself sets the tone for the viva, as Rachel commented, 'if the thesis is of a very high quality, with examiners recommending acceptance as is or with minor corrections, then the viva tends to be a collegial and celebratory conversation, often focusing on mastery of the topic, contribution of the research and discussion about publishing and career options'. The viva's role becomes crucial in cases where the thesis is of a 'substandard quality, with some examiners thinking it should fail'. In this scenario, 'the viva becomes a very high stakes discussion, with the candidate needing to defend their work and try to convince the examiners it should pass'. Here, the viva becomes a platform for the candidate to demonstrate they have acquired the required academic capital, through an oral defence. Ludovic concurred, recalling the examining panel agreed before the viva that the final result would be decided after the candidate had defended their work, as there were different opinions as to whether the thesis should pass with major or minor corrections. From an examiner's perspective, it is important that candidates can articulate their work confidently, demonstrating 'ownership of their decision-making processes', and making a 'case for their contributions to knowledge' (Gina). Crucial to academic work, this enables candidates to demonstrate they can argue their case based on a clear rationale and decision-making process considering multiple alternatives, before selecting the path chosen and presented in the thesis. Our narratives indicated a specific point within the viva when examiners 'were satisfied . . . our questions answered and we all began to relax more and discuss the work more as equals' emphasising the end of a period of liminality, and the crossing of a conceptual threshold (McKenna, 2017; Wisker, 2008) through the candidate's demonstration of having acquired the academic capital

required for the award. This ‘notable point’ marks a watershed in the unfolding of the viva, and is unique to every viva, based on the candidate’s work, presentation, university requirements and examiners’ expectations. Gina established that:

“There is a moment also in a viva when you can feel that the examiners are treating the candidate as a competent doctor in their collegial manner, and the discussion becomes more collegial and they feel like equals. That can happen roundabout the middle and onwards but it should happen and at that point you know they’re ‘home and dry’”.

Joseph commented the ‘hour went really quick’ emphasising ‘the conversation flowed really well’, indicating that the examiners were happy the candidate had demonstrated mastery of the required attributes for the award. This was further reinforced, in the candidate’s mind, by the fact that the lead examiner was giving him advice on what aspects of the thesis to focus on at future publication stage

Higher duty of care online (Learning, institutional and personal dimensions)

The convenor and the examiners have a duty of care both for ensuring candidates feel comfortable during the online viva, and that it is as academically rigorous and demanding as a face-to-face viva. From a candidate’s perspective, examiners should establish that sense of ‘rapport’, because as Joseph mentioned: ‘I was worried, with it being online, that that would be an issue [articulating the correct response], particularly more than if it had been face-to-face, because I don’t think you get that sort of rapport, you don’t get that emotional warmth necessarily over the screen’. It is also important that candidates feel they didn’t get ‘an easy ride’, especially when a viva goes well and only lasts an hour. Joseph reflected whether ‘the grilling or the questioning wasn’t as in-depth as maybe it would have been had it not been online’. Upon sharing these thoughts with peers, it was clear other online vivas had lasted much longer, perhaps indicating that the examiners had to check for a longer period of time whether sufficient academic capital had been acquired and evidenced. Joseph concluded he did not feel like he had ‘lost any of the highs or the lows’ and ‘highs’ were not diminished by the viva being conducted online.

From an examiner’s perspective, all three noted that support for candidates was of utmost importance since ‘fundamentally I want to support the candidate, and really want a collegial constructive conversation’ (Rachel), while Ludovic emphasised ‘we really wanted to make sure . . . we’d given the student a chance to properly defend some of her choices’. To enable an interactive environment, Gina ensured they stopped a couple of times during the viva to ask the candidate if they were getting tired or needed a break, because it is ‘very intensive staring at the zoom screen and you’re on your own as a candidate because you’re not actually in the room’. Awareness of the candidate’s potential isolation was acutely understood by all involved and the challenge was to recreate ‘physical cues of hospitality’ (Gina), to get the conversation flow going (Ludovic, Joseph), ‘rather than a Q&A type approach’ (Rachel). Overall, measures put in place by examiners to recreate a collegial and interactive environment during the online viva did not appear to prevent deep ‘probing’ (Rachel, Gina, Ludovic) and ‘deep interrogation’ (Ludovic). Indeed, Joseph thought that examiners of an online viva should just simply reinforce to the candidate that ‘the questioning within the viva won’t be any different because of the format’.

For a doctoral student to fulfil their potential, they need to successfully navigate the liminal space of the viva. To achieve this navigation for an online viva there are basic preconditions which need to be in place – e.g. a stable internet connection, a working device with a webcam, a quiet environment in which to log into the video call – before the student can begin to engage with the performative part of the exam. Thus, it is important to pay attention to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, as if base needs are not addressed, it is unlikely a student will be able to perform satisfactorily in the viva to demonstrate the required doctorateness. The basic bottom level needs are necessary to ensure a sense of personal security.

The third level of Maslow's hierarchy relates to needs of love and belonging, a person's psychological need for interpersonal relationships. For the online viva student, the ability to build a rapport with examiners through a video service is different from an in-person viva. It may be harder for the student to 'read' their examiners reception to answers and pick up on their body language. Without this, the student may feel increasingly nervous, unable to grow confidence as the viva progresses. As it progresses, and the student successfully answers examiners' queries, they gain confidence and a mutual sense of respect emerges organically from reciprocal exchanges. This equates with the fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy – namely esteem – informally acknowledging the candidate has sufficiently demonstrated having acquired the necessary academic capital.

Limitations

Our research uses the perspectives of four participants in their various roles. The role difference is a strength as we can capture a range of perspectives, and our rich narratives allow an in-depth analysis. However, our experiences are limited to online vivas in the UK and New Zealand, which tend to follow a similar approach.

Conclusion

During 2020 onwards, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the viva went online internationally. Our work, using autoethnographic narratives of our experiences undertaking online vivas, is situated in established literature and anecdotal or blog literature of doctoral examination and vivas, seen as liminal moments, conceptual threshold crossings, and confirmations of academic capital. Its unique contribution focuses specifically on the online doctoral viva, the default position latterly due to the pandemic, which restricted all travel.

We found that the online viva offered a comfortable, but perhaps challenging space. If joining from home, this gave a sense of informality and more comfort, although using corporate backdrops could erase this advantage. However, an online room was more challenging for participants to get the emotional warmth emerging in face-to-face settings. In the viva, personal issues of stress and anxiety, both about quality of the work and performance, and the dependability and effectiveness of the technology, were revealed. In terms of academic capital, we found the online format of the viva did not diminish the ability of examiners to determine if candidates were meeting expected levels of 'doctorateness'. Finally, duty-of-care is particularly important during a pandemic, when candidates can be more anxious (Corbera et al., 2020).

We recommend:

- *Institutions*: Ensure there is dependable IT support for candidates, conveners and examiners. Provide training for candidates and examiners to become familiar with the online environment and reassure them the examination process is not compromised by being online. Communicate early with candidates, conveners and examiners with regard to the format of the viva, which should be indicated in the institution's regulations.
- *Conveners and examiners*: Embrace the informality of a virtual room and do not use corporate backdrops. Pay particular attention to candidate wellbeing, taking regular breaks to help mitigate Zoom fatigue. Do not lower expectations of the candidate because of the online format, and make this clear to the candidate. Be aware of the candidate's potential feeling of isolation and attempt to recreate physical cues of hospitality.
- *Candidates*: Ensure you seek IT support in advance of the viva and try to ensure your immediate environment during the viva is as stress-free as possible and insulated from any disruption, even of a familiar nature. Expect a small technological delay in responses to your answers. Avoid being nonplussed by a lack of direct eye contact, and other physical cues of hospitality. Focus on substance, and on articulating the rationale(s) for your research choices and your contribution(s) to the field to demonstrate mastery of the required attributes for the award.

Be prepared for an abrupt end to your viva, and in advance plan for what you will do after the viva to focus on any corrections and celebrate your achievement.

Our study offers new insights into ways in which doctoral candidates are supported to engage positively and successfully with the viva experience (organisational, institutional), so that their complex conceptual work can be expressed and appreciated (conceptual, intellectual), while taking account of issues reported relating to stress and anxiety (personal). This work offers multiple insiders' insight into viva more broadly and the online viva in particular.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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