

# Doctoral Colloquia – The Student Experience

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## ABSTRACT

*Doctoral Colloquia are organised regularly by academic associations to provide doctoral students with feedback on their research. This paper discusses one such colloquium held recently in Sydney under the auspices of the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC). It provides the results of a survey held after the colloquium which highlights the effective use of various techniques to engage students and ensure they had positive outcomes from the experience. The colloquium used a variety of techniques which lead to the positive outcomes; these included a form of speed-dating to discuss research ideas and one-on-one sessions with faculty from an expert panel. This paper will discuss these techniques. It also provides the results of the survey and concludes with recommendations for other academics involved in organising doctoral colloquia.*

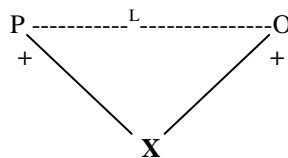
## INTRODUCTION

This paper shares the knowledge and experiences we gained through the organisation of the Doctoral Colloquium for the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC), which was hosted by the University of Western Sydney in 2008. Doctoral Colloquia are important components of many universities, yet we could not find any publications and research providing us with any guidance as how to organise an effective and successful colloquium. Our goal was to design a hands-on and interactive doctoral colloquium which was not only interesting and relevant but also would provide participating doctoral students with maximum learning outcomes. We further endeavoured to create the beginning of a long-lasting research community that would offer networking opportunities in the future. So we decided to review the literature on interpersonal relationships as a means of providing guidance on the design of the colloquium.

In this first section we discuss the concepts of interpersonal dynamics that we felt would inform our design decisions. This is followed by an outline our specific objectives and how we addressed these in the planning and implementation stages. The final part will present the feedback received from doctoral students, faculty and assisting staff.

## BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Our first objective was to create a research community for the two days of the colloquium. In terms of conceptualizing the nature of this community we went back to Fritz Heider (1958). Among other things Heider offers a simple notation for capturing interpersonal relations and social groups. We can denote a person with the letter 'p' and another person as 'o'. The third element is denoted with 'x' and represents some impersonal entity that forms a common ground for both people i.e. p and o. This common ground may be an event of some sort (e.g. economic conditions) a friend in common etc. These three elements form a system of interdependent relationships, such as those below.



This is an example of a ‘balanced’ relationship. That is, p and o like each other (an ‘L’ relation) and there is a positive sentiment they both carry towards ‘X’. In this case X may represent the doctoral colloquium, a research project or whatever. And this is a simple representation of what we were trying to achieve in the colloquium. That is, an overlapping field of balanced p-o-x relationships. Of course other relationships are possible and Heider et al have discussed these at length. But for our purposes these are side issues, because we simply aim for this balanced configuration as our goal for the doctoral colloquium.

The question, of course, is how do we structure the colloquium to achieve this ideal configuration for the duration of the event? The first problem we must tackle is to understand the dynamic of getting acquainted and whether this can be managed. Again there is an extensive literature on this subject, which can be traced back to Newcomb (1961). Of critical importance is, not surprisingly, the initial contact between two people. As numerous studies have demonstrated initial communication is relatively superficial, often searching for common ground, until elements of trust and psychological similarity emerge. Then relationships may evolve to ‘deeper’ levels. Reisman (1951) described this as the ‘taste exchange process.’ People use current events, products, personal histories etc., that is, what is known as ‘small talk’, to ascertain whether there is any point in pursuing the relationship to a more intimate level. This is why a friend in common provides a cementing force to a novel, personal encounter. It establishes, by a process of psychological logic, that the chance of further mutually satisfying interactions is increased. For example, Niki and Jana meet and after the usual small talk they search to find a friend in common. If they discover they both know and like Margita both Niki and Jana will assume they have a common pool of interests and emotions. (Berscheid & Walster, 1969). Of course, dynamics like this take time. As the doctoral colloquium took place over two days we sought a mechanism to shortcut this acquaintance process. This mechanism was Facebook (discussed later). Facebook had the additional benefit of displaying the photos of (almost) all the colloquium participants. The reason that this was important is the prominent role that visual perception of the face plays in priming the desire for personal interaction. See, for example, Miller, Perlman and Brehm (2006).

To further accelerate the process of interaction we threw the participants quickly into one to one interactions of an intense nature. On the first evening of the colloquium we had a ‘speed dating’ event which allowed participants to translate the Facebook priming into social interaction events. This is discussed later as are the other mechanisms to maintain personal interaction that we introduced.

Of course, there is a serious scholarly purpose to the colloquium. In line with other meetings of this nature a common agenda of presentations formed part of the two days. As a result of preliminary research (described later) it became apparent that doctoral candidates wanted ‘knowledge how.’ The distinction between ‘knowledge of’ and ‘knowledge how’ was originally explored by Ryle (1971). While this distinction between ‘of’ and ‘how’ is disputed, particularly by philosophers, the conventional meanings gravitate around knowing that something exists (‘of’) and knowing how to operate on that knowledge, perform a relevant task etc (‘how’). Universities have been criticized for stressing the former at the expense of the latter. In distilling the comments of previous doctoral colloquium participants it became clear that one of their main objectives in attending the doctoral colloquium was a greater understanding of how to operate on the vast literature they had absorbed and written about. We reflected on bringing a greater sense of ‘howness’ into the colloquium for some time before coming up with the mechanisms that are detailed below.

## **BEFORE AND AFTER RESEARCH: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND SURVEYS**

The authors have attended doctoral colloquiums before, either as doctoral students and/or faculty. We first collected our own experiences in a brainstorming session and also tried to locate any publications on DC organisation. We then collected further information through a focus group discussion and informal interviews with various doctoral students at other universities in Sydney. We learnt that students held high expectations regarding the learning outcomes and feedback they would receive. They felt it was important that they received valuable feedback regarding their research, which would provide them with direction and solutions. They also preferred interactive sessions and wanted to get to know their peers. It seemed that the colloquium was also to be kept to a reasonable number of participants to achieve these outcomes – our program allowed forty-two active participants.

We administered a short informal survey at the end of the DC to measure its effectiveness. The survey included the following questions:

1. How did you find the group presentations?
2. How did you find the one-on-one questions?
3. How did you find the activities (Research Networking Activity and Workshops)?
4. How did you find the DC overall?
5. How did you find the social activities (Dinner, Speed Dating, etc.)?
6. If you have been to any other DC, how did this DC compare?
7. Any other comments you would like to share?

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

This section describes the aspects we considered and the individual program modules including their objectives and achievements as well as some initial feedback.

### **Group Formation**

We accepted students who presented their research in the DC to ensure attendance and participation as well as manageable group sizes (3 groups x 14 students = 42 attendees). Students were allocated to groups with respect to their stage of research (early, middle and late).

### **Choice of Faculty**

Once we had gone through all applications and sent out acceptances, we grouped topic areas and contacted faculty who matched the research areas. This task was crucial to the success of the DC, as doctoral students had specific problems and questions and therefore were expecting constructive and specific solutions.

### **Facebook**

A Facebook group was created about 6 months before the DC in order to create a research community amongst the research students. It provided opportunities for students to get to know and connect with each other, learn about research interests as well as receive information and links for accommodation and organised events. It now provides a platform for students to look back at the event (pictures have been posted) and maintain relationships.

### **Research Speed Dating**

The DC started off with a cocktail function on a Friday night, which included a research ‘speed dating’. The participants, equipped with material about their research and programs, were then seated as couples at small tables. Each conversation lasted 6 minutes and everyone had to find a new conversation partner afterwards. During the speed dating, attendees had the opportunity to get to know each other and their respective research areas. Students used the time to decide which group presentation topics to attend on the next day (Saturday). This session served as an excellent ice-breaker for students, which was evident next morning and especially during the presentations in which students actively engaged.

### **Group Presentations**

As discussed, the presentations were divided into three categories: early, middle and late stage of research. Each presenter had 20 minutes to outline and discuss their research. While this structure seemed to work quite well for students at early stage, we discovered that students of the 2<sup>nd</sup> (middle) and 3<sup>rd</sup> (late) group would have liked to be organised into consumer behaviour and business-to-business tracks. These participants also wanted to pick topics and sessions in a conference style; in other words pick & choose presentations according to their interest.

### **Workshops and company presentations**

Students showed a preference for interactive and engaging sessions and didn't respond enthusiastically to presentations lacking interactive elements. We invited an online research company to present their services and how they could assist students' data collection process. While interesting it tended to lack the focus required for doctoral students; we learnt that research companies need particular briefings and have to develop an understanding for research students' needs. We proposed another three workshops and presentations, which were integrated into the two days for variations. The topics covered included:

1. The journey of a PhD. This presentation talked about all the stages doctoral students go through and also provided advice how to survive the process.
2. How to overcome procrastination? This hands-on workshop was interactive and engaged all students throughout the activity.
3. How to publish journal articles. This presentation provided advice on publishing various parts of a doctoral thesis.

### **One-on-One Sessions**

The 45-minute, one-on-one sessions, were the highlight of the DC. The feedback for the one-on-one sessions was overwhelmingly positive from both students and faculty members. The success was due to the well-matched student topics and faculty. As this part of the colloquium was the most anticipated one, it meant that attendance dropped off afterwards. Students really needed time to digest and reflect on this session as well as to complete their notes. It is therefore recommended to put these sessions last and also to provide space and time for reflection.

### **Activities**

Activities are a great way to build research relationships and a network. Students were asked to form groups and explore the possibility to cooperate for a research publication (conference paper, working paper or journal article). Even if students found out that they would not be likely to produce such outcome, they valued the time to build closer relationships and a network with students for future research activities.

### **Catering**

We chose an establishment with an internal architecture that invited participants to move around and mingle with each other. The catering also played an important part in the overall satisfaction of participants and was positively commented on by everyone. The dinner was also used to form friendships and to consider future research opportunities.

### **Conference Venue**

Venue also played an important part. We learnt that it was critical to keep everyone close to a certain area and to have all activities, presentation in close proximity in order to maintain the group format. It also helps to choose fun venues to provide a relaxed and stimulating atmosphere.

## **ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS**

The submission date for the doctoral colloquium papers was set 3.5 months before the colloquium date, which turned out to be very tight. All papers had to be evaluated and categorised and suitable faculty had to be identified and invited. Academics are often tied up months in advance and may not be available for a weekend at such short notice. Our program required a large effort and input on their part and convincing arguments and networking had to be brought forward to ensure their attendance. We further had to deal with last minute cancellations on both sides, doctoral students and faculty. We had anticipated these changes and had invited an additional four academics, which covered the inevitable cancellations. On the student end, we had a waiting list due

to the restricted number of places, and thus could easily maintain our planned numbers.

## **OVERALL FINDINGS**

A short questionnaire was administered to get reactions to the event plus we talked to the participants for some more informal responses. The limited data (22 responses) showed that the DC was very well received. Further informal discussions also confirmed that the DC was very successful and met its objectives.

The majority enjoyed the group presentations (78% agreed) and found them interesting (77%) as well as educational (82%). They also found the feedback given (82%) very useful (three to four faculty members per group). However they did prefer the presentations to be grouped around particular topics. The one-one-sessions were the most successful module of the DC – the participants overwhelmingly enjoyed (95%) and benefited from these sessions, as they had the opportunity to discuss their specific questions during their 45 minutes with an assigned faculty member in their research area. They felt that they were well matched (100%) and received constructive feedback (100%) – most students spent at least an extra hour summarising and digesting their individual sessions.

The workshop activities were well received (68%) as it gave students the opportunity to network and exchange each others research interests. Doctoral students often feel isolated during their research and a research network helps not just to discuss research related questions. They were enthusiastic about the hands-on and interactive workshops but did not show great interest in the traditional PowerPoint presentation. The students expected maximum learning outcomes, which include activities that are highly tailored to their needs – this was evident in the presentation given by the online research company, which lacked the focus on the special needs of doctoral students.

The social activities contributed greatly to the overall atmosphere and communication between participants. Especially the dinner on Saturday night, which was attended by most doctoral students and faculty facilitated networking, the research activity as well as the one-on-one sessions on Sunday. Students found them interesting (82%) and enjoyable (86%).

Overall, the participants had a great experience (90%) and valued the information (91%) and feedback they received (95%). Students who had attended a doctoral colloquium before, felt that this DC was better (46%) or about the same (39%) when compared to the previous ones.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

While the doctoral colloquium went well and the main objectives met, there is the challenge putting together a program that suits and pleases everyone. This challenge is due to the participants' different stages of their doctorates that imply different levels of knowledge, needs and expectations. Depending on the number of participants (students and academics) parallel workshops and activities catering for these differences may be scheduled.

The most crucial element for success was indeed that matching of the participants and the faculty members. The doctoral students arrived with high hopes and some even expected miracles. We were fortunate enough to invite many academics not only with excellent knowledge and expertise but also a passion to support students. The mutual appreciation and understanding made all the difference and was the deciding factor between failure and success.

Depending on student numbers the group presentation can be long and arduous. Even though we offered flexibility with respect to the presentation format, the participants opted for traditional PowerPoint presentations, which tested the concentration of both students and academics. It would be advisable to provide guidelines for different presentation styles and encourage diversity to make these sessions more interesting and maintain participants' attention.

We considered many possibilities but also had to consider financial constraints, e.g. venue hire, organisational staff support, video and audio expenses, social activities and catering as well as materials. Hence, we sourced organisational staff support and video and audio equipment through our university. We realised that apart from the staff provided by the conference centre we would have benefited from a student volunteer in every presentation room to take care of any technical and other matters.

In general, students nowadays are networkers and appreciate the use of technology; hence the creation of a facebook group was well received and serves as a future networking tool.

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