Attention Doctoral Students: This Video Is for You!

Description

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Jenna Hartel

How can doctoral students make theoretical and conceptual contributions to the literature of Information Science, which is especially competitive at the highest philosophical levels? This question was posed by a participant in the ASIS&T doctoral workshop of the 2021 Annual Meeting, which I attended as a mentor. When I was a doctoral student, the very same trepidation existed alongside a strong desire to make a theoretical mark as soon as possible. I decided to address this worthy topic in a short video, made expressly for our doctoral student community. If you are a supervisor, teacher, or friend of any doctoral student or candidate in Information Science, please send this posting their way.

—How can doctoral students make theoretical and conceptual contributions to the literature of Information Science?—

The video at hand has the apt title, “How Do I Write a Theoretical or Conceptual Paper? Advice for Doctoral Students and Early Career Scholars.” Presently, on my YouTube Channel, INFIDEOS, it has received more than 400 views and is well-liked. A comment from a doctoral student reads, “Very helpful and very beautiful…Thank you!” At a brisk 10-minutes in length, the video places the question in context and delivers a two-fold strategy for success, advising aspiring theorists to: 1) Follow the available instructions, and 2) Analyze successful precedents in our literature. An aquatic theme, with many different kinds of colorful, darting, undulating fish, metaphorically helps doctoral students to swim against strong currents, leap over obstacles, and hopefully make a big splash.
To begin, viewers are reminded that many innovations in our literature come from doctoral students and recently minted PhDs. After all, they naturally possess the fresh perspective of a next generation. Each dissertation already contains a well-developed and original theoretical framework that is prime for dissemination. Since doctoral students are immersed and well-versed in theory, what keeps them from publishing their insights right off? A hypothesis underlying the video is that there is a shortage of training to do so. When it comes to writing, advanced students of the social sciences are taught to produce empirical not theoretical papers. While every doctoral student can sketch, from memory, the outline of an empirical paper, very few could likely delineate a theoretical counterpart. In fact, my own literature review while making this video turned up a superabundance of guides for writing empirical reports versus a dearth of comparable instructions for theoretical or conceptual documents.

As a corrective, the video surveys one of the rare instruction manuals for writing theoretical papers, “Designing Conceptual Articles: Four Approaches” by Elina Jaakkola (2020). I highly recommend that this article be circulated widely in the doctoral student community of Information Science. Though from the management field, it rises above any particular context and outlines four different conceptual paper formats common across the social sciences. Also shown below, there is: Theory synthesis, which entails conceptual integration across multiple theoretical perspectives. Theory adaptation changes the scope or perspective of an existing theory; this is the case when applying theories or concepts from other disciplines. A typology categorizes variants of concepts as distinct types. And a model builds a theoretical framework that predicts relationships between constructs. Models are especially popular in Information Science and we have many famous examples. (See some Information Science models in my Tiny Videos on Wilson’s Nested Model, Information Encountering, Information Grounds, Information Poverty, and Gatekeepers.)
After considering Jaakkola’s approaches, the video pivots to analyze successful philosophical contributions already in the Information Science literature. By doing so, doctoral students can learn the rhetorical strategies and underlying logic of our field’s big ideas, and adapt them to their own purposes. Continuing with the piscene theme are four “deep dives” into landmark papers by Carol Kuhlthau (1989); Reijo Savolainen (1999); Marcia Bates (1999); and Talja, Tuominen, and Savolainen (2005). This part of the video draws from my What Makes This Paper Great? video series, which was featured recently in Information Matters. Each of these highly-cited works is briefly summarized and then matched to Jaakkola’s templates. For example, we see that Kuhlthau’s (1989) paper on the Information Search Process includes elements of theory synthesis, theory adaptation, and model. Viewers learn that at least in Information Science, Jaakkola’s distinct types can be amalgamated. Yet Talja et. al’s (2005) paper comes closer to being a typology. Bates’ (1999) “The Invisible Substrate of Information Science,” proves to be an interesting case study; its organizing element is a metaphor, which was not a device mentioned by Jaakkola yet should be considered as a creative alternative by our doctoral students.
Hopefully, this “How to…” video inspires and guides doctoral students and candidates to generate a theoretical or conceptual contribution. While making the video, I was reminded that it always helps to seek instructions! Also, I learned that philosophical papers have some common forms but to invoke sociologist Howard Becker’s famous statement, “There Is No One Right Way” (Becker & Richards, 2007). A vibrant fighting fish or betta, shown below, ends this video on a bright note. Good luck to all doctoral students and early-career scholars of Information Science; I look forward to your breakthrough philosophical contributions!
References


A Student’s Perspective: How Do I Write a Conceptual Paper?
In coming to the end of my first year of study as a master’s student in Library and Information Science, I’ve been exposed to articles containing both empirical studies and theoretical and conceptual work. Even as someone so new to the field and early in my study, I’ve often wondered why most of the papers I read are empirical reports, when the papers I’ve been most interested and inspired by are those that take a theoretical approach. That said, it seems daunting to contribute on a conceptual level; at what point is someone qualified to contribute conceptually? and how is a theory even determined to be worthy of an entire paper? As mentioned in Dr. Hartel’s video, *How Do I Write a Theoretical or Conceptual Paper?*, most students are extremely familiar with the more defined structure of empirical papers. Working within a structure that is somewhat predefined is helpful and engaging when you are learning and becoming more confident in your research and writing skills. Conceptual papers have a more creative approach to their structure, and it is intimidating to get started on something that seems so undefined, especially with the added challenge of situating an original concept within the context of already established scholarship. However, creativity is what makes well-written and influential conceptual papers in information science interesting and important works for students to learn from, and for professionals and scholars to reassess what they know about their field. I think creativity is what makes conceptual papers so interesting and inspiring, but it is also what makes these papers challenging for students to imagine themselves writing. Since creativity is not always what we’re used to engaging with while writing and doing research, the process of writing a conceptual paper could be an obstacle itself. I agree with Dr. Hartel that doctoral students are in a great place to contribute to the field of information science in a theoretical or conceptual way because they represent the next generation of thinking, but also because conceptual work allows for innovation and exploration of new frontiers.