

Legitimizing Alternative Collaborative Methods to the Traditional Comparative History  
of Ideas Thesis Requirement

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Summer 2005

## Introduction

In the Comparative History of Ideas program, the absolute conclusion of a student's undergraduate academic career is characterized by the thesis project. This project is traditionally centered around a large research based paper. It is the result of the student's entire career of classes, projects, and individual interests. The first line from the *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* reads, "Writing a thesis can be characterized as the ultimate self-regulating learning task. Consequently, it is often a source of great anxiety for many students of higher-education" (Sachs 2002). It is without a doubt the most anxiety driven, stressful project that an undergraduate has to complete. The question then lingers, why is this project characterized by such stress and anxiety? What are the goals of students in relation to their thesis? Further, what are the components of the thesis? And which component(s) drive this stress and then finally what is an effective and legitimate alternative to this project?

There are some problems occurring in the CHID thesis, and these problems can be identified and rectified though a legitimate alternative to the traditional thesis, known as the "Video Project." I will explore all of the above questions and then offer an alternative method which will be utilized in a working class, fall of 2005.

Finally, I should note that my notion of a "thesis" is grounded in my understanding of the thesis requirement in the CHID department. Thus, the idea of a "thesis," when mentioned throughout this paper should be viewed in the framework of

the CHID thesis.

### **Why is this Important?**

These issues surround my life and the lives of those working close with me. The success of students' academic lives depends on their available resources. Those resources need to address some of the obvious issues that are facing the undergraduate thesis. This thesis is meant to be a resource, a proposal for an alternative method, which, in theory, may help alleviate some of the stress and increase the success of undergraduates.

### **What are the Issues?**

As I start out, I should mention that there are larger structural issues within the Comparative History of Ideas or "CHID" program that contribute to some of the anxieties and stress. This paper is not a cure-all for these structural issues, but rather a suggestion to increase the value and success of this thesis project as we know it now.

The first "issue" is the emphasis placed on community projects within the classroom. As any CHID 110 student knows, the "Utopia Project" is a key example. In this project students are required to create a "Utopian World" based on the concepts and methodologies working in groups of 3-4 people. Students have the support of each other, breaking the project into smaller more manageable pieces. The student's product

is then a result of a collaborative effort, rather than an individual project.

In CHID 390, students are required to do one “group” presentation for an assigned week's reading. Again, the work is collaborative with the support of each other, the Peer Facilitators and the Professor. Also, daily, students are required to work together tackling larger concepts and ideas in this seminar style course.

Collaboration and group work are very effective ways to engage students into their material. It is very successful, in so far as the amount the student learns, and the amount of work that is produced. However, the thesis project, traditionally, is not a “group project.” It is extremely individual from the research that is done, to finding an advisor, and creating a unique piece of work as an addition to the academic community. Being involved in many group projects, students may not be fully prepared to tackle their personal thesis project

The second structural issue is the lack of emphasis the thesis has in CHID. The idea is that a student should have a working idea, have an advisor, and have done minimal research before entering CHID 491, the thesis seminar. Besides bringing it up briefly during my initial advising time during my junior year, the thesis was only discussed in the optional two-credit “new-major focus group.” Even then, there was minimal time, and not much progress was made.

The thesis is obviously an integral part of the CHID degree. I believe this is true because the thesis acts as a ground where all of the ideas and interpretations from this “interdisciplinary” degree can nest. It personalizes the student’s undergraduate experience and hopefully represents something meaningful and/or useful to their future.

The structural issues in this program create an atmosphere which is not favorable for the student's success in completing the thesis on time, before graduation. In my assessment, the thesis is important and needs to stay, however some slight changes can be made to improve the process, as we know it, and ultimately improve the undergraduate's academic career.

### **The CHID Thesis**

Recently, I became in contact with the Director of the CHID department, John Toews. I had asked him what the purpose of the thesis as a graduation requirement. The thesis was not always a requirement, for much of the department's existence the thesis was only required for those in the honor's program. I was curious what he thought the students should get out of the process of creating a thesis, and consequently why this thesis is imposed now. This was his response:

“When Jim Clowes and I decided to expand the senior thesis requirement from Honors Students to all CHID majors in the mid 1990s, we had a number of motives. The first was our belief that every student should conclude their undergraduate studies with some major independent project that would display both the skills they had learned and express the wisdom (or at least part of it) that they had gained. We thought, partly based on our own experiences and our experiences with CHID Honors students, that finishing one's undergraduate

career with a major accomplishment of this kind was important for personal intellectual growth and also motivated reflection about the significance and purpose of those 4 years in college. We also thought it was important that EVERY CHID student- not just Honors students- should be given the chance to go through this experience.” (2005).

This response is very important in painting the picture of what the motives of the faculty and program are. I was then intrigued to see what some of the motives or goals the students are interested in accomplishing from their CHID thesis.

### **What are the goals of students?**

Accomplishing personal goals is a component of the individual thesis. Each student has set this project aside in order to complete a part of their academia that was otherwise not satisfied. Common goals of the thesis are “satisfying” a personal interest either provoked by a class, or outside project. Also, the practicality of having a larger original piece of work to present as a writing sample for graduate level classes is important for some. However, I think the pride of “knowing” a particular argument, and becoming an expert on one particular sliver of information is something that undergraduates are not typically associated with. The thesis then becomes a representation and source of pride, confidence, and intelligence.

The purpose of the thesis is often put into question. Traditionally the thesis is

thought to serve many purposes. In *A Case for an Alternative Format for the Thesis/Dissertation* written by Jerry Thomas, Jack Nelson, and Richard Magill, they write,

“A thesis/dissertation has several purposes, the major one being the contribution of new knowledge with scientific merit (APA, 1959; Berelson, 1960; Porter & Wolf 1975). A purpose typically cited in university bulletins is that it provides evidence of competency in planning, conducting, and reporting research. In terms of program objectives, the study is a valuable learning experience in that the thesis/dissertation is a functional exercise in executing the steps in the scientific method of problem solving” (1986).

Obviously, the thesis is a very important aspect of the undergraduate’s (and according to this journal, the graduate’s) academic career. The importance of the thesis lies in the experience of the student. The goals of the student should ultimately be grounded in their intellectual development and learning experiences. Now that it has been discussed why students do the thesis, it is logical to move on to what this “thesis” really is.

## What is a Thesis?

To be able to analyze what the components of an “ideal” thesis are, I will first break down the general components commonly associated with the undergraduate thesis, and then add a few of my own, resulting from observation. The thesis is described generally in many similar ways. From his instructional book on the thesis writing process, *Title Guide to the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: a Handbook for Students and Faculty*, James E. Mauch describes the thesis in a very popularly understood manner. Mauch writes,

“The [thesis] should build on a synthesis of all earlier courses, readings, and professional experience that the candidate brings to the task. It is the major opportunity in the scholastic career in which all past experiences can be brought together in a creative independent work of the student’s design. The synthesis is not accomplished without help, but is essentially an independent exercise; as such, it is an opportunity for personal, academic, and professional integration unequalled elsewhere in higher education” (2003).

The aspects which should be particularly recognized are his focus on the individual nature of the project versus a community nature. Also the idea of bringing all “past experiences” synthesized into the project and finally the creation of a creative project, individual only to that student.

These three main components of the thesis project are brought up again and again in further readings. In John Sach's article, *A path model for students' attitude to writing a thesis*, he describes a model of learning which the traditional thesis project attempts to encompass, adopted from Jeroen K. Vermunt. Vermunt's ideas of what he has named 'RHQL' (Regulation of High-Quality Learning). This psychology journal offers an interesting view of the internal processes shaped by the thesis

In theory the thesis process and completion emphasizes this process. Sachs writes,

"Vermunt (1998) list four components for RHQL: (i) cognitive processing activities, which include 'looking for relations among the parts of the subject matter', 'thinking of examples' and 'selecting main points'; (ii) metacognitive regulation activities, which include 'planning a learning process' and 'monitoring learning process'; (iii) mental models, which include 'conceptions of the learning objects' and 'conceptions of oneself as a learner'; (iv) learning orientations, which include 'personal goals', intentions' 'motives', 'expectations' and 'attitudes'" (2002).

The thesis components, in many other words, relate to these four points. The first, "cognitive processing," includes initial research, placing connections between the research and one's project and reducing that information into something practical and useful for the project. The second, "metacognitive regulation activities," would be the

underlying self-regulation process. The idea being the individual must create a schedule of completion and complete their own learning goals in relation to the thesis process. Third “mental models,” correlates with having a deep understanding of ones research; i.e. “knowing” what you are talking about. Finally, “learning orientations” relates to the process of discovering individual learning styles, and how one sees their expectations to unfurl, in order to accomplish their individual thesis goals.

### **What is the “Spirit” of the Thesis?**

After doing research, both academically and informally with students and faculty, I have created a list encapsulating what the nature, components and “spirit” of the thesis is. Thus, a thesis encompasses the following components:

1. Individualism
2. Critical Thinking
3. Independence
4. Creating a Complex Argument Based on Academic and Informed Evidence
5. Creating Methodologies
6. Creating Evidence of a Successful, Coherent Project; of Both Length and Quality
7. Culmination of Undergraduate Experiences, Research, and/or Personal

Interests

#### 8. Capstone Project Representing a Successful Academic Career

Having outlined these eight concepts, it is possible to discuss them further in order to analyze their relationship to a traditional paper and later, to a non-traditional project.

First, “Individualism” in relationship to a traditional and personal thesis project is the aspect that attributes pride and shows, partially, the ability of the student to produce legitimate and individual work. This project is meant to be a unique reflection of the undergrad’s university experience.

“Critical thinking” or the ability to analyze issues through many different lenses and knowing there can be many different areas to research a single topic through, is a skill shown only by academically developed students. Grappling with intense, in-depth concepts and ideas critically shows a commitment by the student as well as a sense of character and maturity.

“Independence” is important for two different reasons. First, the ability to work independently, do research, complete their thesis on a self-assigned schedule, find an advisor, pick one’s topic, etc. requires immense amounts of independence. Secondly, the ability to think independently is very important. The thesis is a unique project; it should not be drastically similar to other works. The student must use independence, with both scholarly research and their final product.

“Creating a Complex Argument Based on Academic and Informed Evidence,”

relates to the idea of being independent. As of now, CHID does not require that the final CHID thesis be of traditional academic nature. However, I believe that if the student wishes to aspire to higher levels of education then the thesis should have academic qualities. I say this because in many higher levels of education, academic writing is not only encouraged, it is required. So the thesis can be looked at as preparation for the next step in the student's academic career.

Again, the thesis has to be an individual piece of work. However, this work must be in the category of academic and be supported by evidence. Evidence can be a mixture of academic and informal (polls, interviews, etc.), however with any evidence, checking the source's authority and validity is of utmost importance.

“Creating Methodologies” means creating ways of knowing. In the undergraduate experience, students are informed of many different authors offering different methodologies to support and elevate an argument or question. It is important that students learn from those models in order to create their own idea of how the issue will be discussed, under which methodological “rules” it will follow and finally how it will conclude.

“Creating Evidence of a Successful and Coherent Project; of Both Length and Quality” is simple in the fact that the finished project must represent both time and also quality of thought. The project should show the effort of an entire undergraduate experience and thought-process, or at least a substantial amount of time. The quality of work should be equally substantial. Clarity and coherency of the argument and a clear well stated and supported thesis statement needs to be standard in a traditional thesis

project.

The thesis, as mentioned many times prior must be a, “Culmination of Undergraduate Experiences, Research, and Interests.” A student may find an interesting project, class, reading, or organization has sparked their interests into something meaningful and personally worthwhile. This must then result in more intense academic work, transforming this “spark” into a complete research project.

Finally, the thesis should be a, “Capstone Project Representing a Successful Academic Career.” This should be something a student is proud of. This component or “spirit” of the thesis is a representation of a pivotal part in a student’s and adult’s life. From here, this “capstone” can represent everything accomplished in the University, or a bridge between what is now and what is to come academically. Ideally, the thesis as a “capstone” would represent an end to one personal and important journey and the beginning of another.

### **Alternative Methods**

These components work together easily in a traditional paper, however, as I have noted, traditional papers aren’t always ideal for certain individuals. When a project is less interesting to a student, it is not fully encapsulating the essence of the thesis. In a 1986 *Quest* journal Jerry R. Thomas, Jack K. Nelson, and Richard A. Magill write,

“To be of value, an alternative format for theses/dissertations must overcome the

limitations of the traditional format for reporting, yet maintain the concept of a complete research paper” (1986).

In this article titled, *A Case for an Alternative Format for the Thesis/Dissertation*, these authors propose an alternative format for reporting the thesis/dissertation.

They propose using alternative methods to overcome the problems associated with more traditional methods of producing theses and dissertations. However, I am proposing that although some benefits may be found to correct the CHID structural issues related to the thesis, these alternative methods should be examined as only a legitimate substitution, using different learning processes.

### **Video/Documentary as an Alternative Method**

As of now, there is an infinite number of possible “alternative methods” depending on the individual student, departmental requirements, and the logistics of the project. An alternative method, as I describe it, is one which does not fit within the definition of a traditional method. The main component of the thesis does not necessarily have to be a large scale paper. The project could be an art project, such as a sculpture, painting, or community mural; it could be a song, a play, a musical, or a dance. The point being, the thesis does not have to fit nicely within the realm of a paper. As of now, CHID allows the students to choose between a traditional paper, and a “non-traditional” option, ranging from plays, art projects, sculpture, video, music, etc. CHID

embraces the ideas of non-traditional work, and also community work, which is why this proposal is possible. Later, I will discuss why this is true and how it is possible.

The proposed method that I wish to discuss is using film, documentation, or a “video project” as a ground of creating one’s thesis. Video is particularly intriguing because both of its focus on technology and teamwork or community.

In her article, *Lessons Learned from the National Video Diversity Project*, Mary Childers discusses a project held by college undergraduates, titled the “National Education and Video Documentary Project.” This project focused on college students and diversity in the campus community. They put video cameras in the hands of undergraduates to record and document personal stories, enabling these students to tell their own, individual stories about diversity. Childer’s quotes, “The video diaries become tools not only for self-expression, but also for community-building” (1997).

Video can be thought of as an alternative method of articulacy or as Childers puts it “self-expression.” The idea now is to harness the positive aspects of video documentary and create a class based around them.

### **The Video Project Class**

In fall of 2005, a replacement for the established CHID 491 (thesis course) will take place. This class is the result of the issues I have mentioned above and conversation between members of the CHID faculty. John Toews commented on the direction which the thesis is headed,

“Since [the CHID thesis became a requirement] a number of issues have come up that have led to some reconsideration not of the requirement itself, but of the way in which we formulated it. Way too many students are not finishing their projects in time for that final year commencement ceremony and many find the 5 credit version just doesn't provide the scope for a substantial, satisfying senior project. So we are starting to experiment with group projects ( Like the Video project next year or something on the model of the International Studies "Task Forces") and plan to abandon the 5 credit version altogether” (2005).

This idea of progress and fluidity created a doorway where the video project can occur. While students make videos every year, the video project's innovation comes from the idea of a collaborative student thesis. There is only one project and the creation process, as well as the finished project, counts as the individual student's thesis.

I should note, that as of present, the CHID 491 class offers a group atmosphere where each student is encouraged to work with others on their own individual project. CHID designed this class in order to tackle some of the issues I have identified. However, while the community aspect is present, there is the issue of where the student takes her or his own project after the quarter is over. There is a tendency for students to “drop off” after the quarter is over and not to finish their work.

This class will be over the course of three quarters, each quarter teaching the

students a separate concept in relation to video documentation. Some of these topics may include, technical issues relating to shooting, such as light, sound, and centering the subject, shooting on site, and editing a final cut. The actual product of the class will be a professional quality video and in order to earn credit for the thesis, each student will have to produce an individual project, which I will talk about later.

This video project is projected to ground its documentation in the Seattle based “College Access Project” or “CAP.” As the College of Education at the University of Washington describes it, “The College Access Project, a non profit organization which serves to increase post-secondary educational opportunities for 1st generation college bound, under-represented populations, and low income students of all ages” (2005). CAP is a program which teaches grade school aged, minority students and their families about the possibility of college in the form of a ten-week seminar/course. CAP opens up dialog between parents and children about school, homework, and the student’s future education. This dialog may not have occurred without the proper tools CAP has provided for these families. CAP educates on financial options as well as teaching parents’ the process of taking their children through college. The Video Project is set to capture this curriculum on film, and follow the progress through each graduating class and individual families. Meeting student’s and program goals of the thesis as well as the access that CAP has granted the Video Team; the project can be juxtaposed into a legitimate thesis for the students.

## The Video and its Relationship with the Components and Essence of the Thesis

I have already outlined the basic elements of what a thesis should encompass. Those being: (i) individualism, (ii) critical thinking, (iii) independence, (iv) creating a complex argument based on academic and informed evidence, (v) creating methodologies, (vi) creating evidence of a successful, coherent project of both length and quality, (vii) culmination of undergraduate experiences, research, and interests, and finally the thesis should be a (viii) capstone project representing a successful academic career. Keeping these components in mind, one may observe how easily an alternative method such as the Video Project (as it is becoming known) can relate to a traditional thesis project, legitimizing the replacement of the traditional paper thesis with the collaborative Video Project.

The first and third components, I will return to in a later portion of this paper. Beginning then with the second, critical thinking is a component that is highly involved when creating any kind of documentary. From Childer's article, *Lessons Learned from the National Video Diversity Project*, one of the instructors involved, Elizabeth Lozano quoted, "It is important to critically examine...truisms of our daily rhetoric-- such as equality, tolerance, fairness, diversity, democracy, or plurality. Each one of those concepts is heavily loaded with taken-for-granted assumptions" (1995).

Like the “National Video Diversity Project,” the CAP Video Project will be critically examining the issues associated with some of the underrepresented minority families such as ideas of “Affirmative Actions”, equality, ethical dilemmas with filming and editing, resource availability, racism, and forgiveness. Using such terms and ideas in a video documentation, the students must be aware of the implications and use serious consideration when dealing with those loaded concepts. If students are successful with using the concepts in a critical manner and that is reflected in the final cut of the documentary, then that would imply their deep consideration of their personal norms and a reflection on the student’s individual and collective truths.

Easily the students should be able to create a complex argument based on academic and informed evidence, the next component of a thesis. For instance, there could be some consideration of whether or not the CAP project is successful in assisting parents and their children. This can be supported by research of similar programs and evaluating their results, and perhaps also by examining the methodologies CAP employs to achieve the program goals. There are so many angles and arguments or interpretations this video could use, and each can easily be supported by statistical and academic evidence.

The video process is its own methodology or way of knowing. The thesis as the result of a video will be a combination of observations, structural choices, and factual outside research. By documenting the CAP classrooms, and families, the video will adhere to the similar methodologies of an anthropological documentary. These methodologies include, unbiased filming, getting to know the subject on a personal

level, a truthful representation of the subject and taking consideration of who the video “is really for.” The methodologies of filming arise without reluctance, identification of these methodologies and continually adhering to them is a more of a useful challenge the students will encounter.

Without a doubt, the students collectively will create evidence of a successful, coherent project of both length and quality. This documentary of the CAP program will be of professional quality based on the high-quality equipment the students will be using to record, edit, and produce. Also, there are so many angles to take and there is a large amount of footage to be recorded that this video will be of a substantial length.

Finally, this video will represent the many years of intellectual sophistication the students have acquired and will also represent a love for video documentation creating the perfect capstone for their undergraduate academic career.

### **Components Which Exceed the Originally Stated Essence of the Thesis**

This class, similar to many CHID courses, is very central in communal learning. The Video Project is a collaborative project centered around group work and community. The faculty members, students, and CAP participants and representatives all work interconnected in a supportive fashion. This is not a negative aspect of the program; it is extremely beneficial to the student’s success and individual academic development.

There are many scholarly articles and evidence promoting the usage of collaborative or “community” work. In the fall 1995 v7, no1 issue of the *Journal of Technology Education*, the article “Collaborative Learning Enhances Critical Thinking” author Anuradha A. Gokhale states the following,

“Proponents of collaborative learning claim that the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking. According to Johnson and Johnson (1986), there is persuasive evidence that cooperative teams achieve at higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work quietly as individuals. The shared learning gives students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers (Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991)” (1995).

Collaborative work increases the student’s ability to think critically by creating the ability to utilize more resources (other students, faculty, etc.). This advantage brought Gokhale to another important benefit from the community aspect.

In a grander, more practical sense, community group work can be seen as very valuable. In terms of job-skills, which a college education is aiming to satisfy, collective team-work is very valuable. Gokhale quotes, “The advances in technology and changes in the organizational infrastructure put an increased emphasis on teamwork within the workforce. Workers need to be able to think creatively, solve problems, and make

decisions as a team” (1995). Skills such as critical thinking, creativity, decision making, and problem solving, are all benefits from working in a group. Working towards a common final goal, such as a professional quality video, the Video Project adds a very significant element to the student’s thesis experience. ; One which cannot be created in the traditional model.

### **The Addition of the “Individual” Component**

Due to the community nature of this class, with emphasis on group work and the final project being collaborative, there is a lack of two important thesis components. These components, as referred to earlier, are “individualism” and “independence.” However, with the proper provisions in the course requirements, this project can satisfy all the basic components of what I believe should be in a traditional thesis, and then some.

By adding an assignment to be completed individually by the students, in addition to the already existing final video, students can develop independent and individual thought. There are many forms this assignment can take. In the National Video Diversity Project, students were required to do two separate videos. One was the final project, and the other was a personal reflective diary aimed to gauge and extract critical thought from the students about their topic “diversity.” The diary was one aspect of the project that allowed individual thoughts and ideas which perhaps did not make it into the final collaborative video.

The videos were shared in class and they were the topic of most in-class discussion. They were also a way for teachers to gauge a student's activity and participation in the subject, as well as the understanding of course topics. According to Childer's findings, this aspect was an invaluable counter-part to the project as a whole,

“The video work only partially reflects what students achieved in these classes. Many have testified that they benefited significantly from two opportunities that are more rare than they should be in college: they got to explain something about themselves to other students by creating and sharing personal video diaries, and they got to work intensively with other students on a final group video project” (1997).

A personal diary is an excellent idea for satisfying the student's need for individual thought and exploration. However, it does not need to be in a video form. It would be just as effective, or more so, for the students to complete a weekly memoir in writing form. It is very important for this portion of the thesis to be written more formally than a typical journal or diary because its purpose is to allow students too personally and critically reflect on substantially challenging issues badgering the main video, and also to demonstrate the student's understanding of the course material. However the individual component takes form, it should be an outlet for the individual to reflect and record personal issues with the project and then be able to introduce them into group discussion for possible reconciliation.

## **Conclusion**

The CHID thesis is an extremely vital component to the undergraduate experience. It is very stressful to many students and consequently it is the only requirement that is not completed to prevent graduation. There is a way to prevent this from happening, and also to increase the success and graduation rate of these CHID students without eliminating the thesis. By preparing students in advance to the idea of the thesis and also by offering alternatives to those students who will benefit from those methods, it is possible that this problem can be rectified. In the tradition and spirit of the Comparative History of Ideas program, as John Toews explains, “like so much in CHID, the senior thesis requirement is a work in progress” (2005).

It should be accepted then, that any alternative method that fulfills the intellectual components of a traditional thesis, such as the “Video Project,” be regarded as a legitimate substitute to the traditional CHID thesis.

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