Transcript: 'Augmenting' your thesis

The video is available to watch on ELE, or on Microsoft Stream (click here for a direct link).

At the risk of stating the obvious, a PhD thesis is a long document. Whatever discipline you're in, it will likely span several hundred pages, and will have all sorts of overlapping arguments, methodologies, and ideas. Plus, you'll have produced it over a period of several years, and this means that even if you've done everything you can to 'signpost' the way for an examiner - as Michelle Bolduc talked about in the last section - it's still very easy for you to lose sight of the broader picture during the viva itself. To help counteract this, and to prepare for the viva itself, we recommend that you don't just reread your thesis prior to a viva, but 'augment' it.

What does this mean? Well, basically, it means creating a version of your thesis for you to have to hand during the viva that's useful to you (and only you). The examiners will never see it, so you can achieve this in any way you want, but fundamentally you need to make sure that 'your' copy of the thesis is (i) navigable, so that you can find things, and (ii) more specifically, allows you to support the arguments that you will be making based on it.

The first step in doing this is, of course,is to get hold of a print-out of your thesis. This shouldn't really be a final, fancy, celebratory binding, but instead something rather more like this, comb-bound or similar. I think this cost me about £5 in total, but it was really worth it to be able to read it again away from a screen, as several of the examiners we spoke to confirmed.

It's tempting to cover your entire thesis in Post-It notes. As you can see, this thesis (mine) does have a lot of notes sticking out all over the place, but there isn't one on every page, and this is because in the heat of the viva, too many notes will probably be more of a hindrance than a help. We'd suggest a method for marking up - 'augmenting' - your thesis along the following lines:

The first thing to do is to write short summaries of the content of each section of your thesis as you read through it again, and make these clearly accessible along the top of your thesis. This image show how I did this in practice: the part of the sticky note that protrudes from the top of the thesis simply reproduces the title of a given section, while the text inside serves to summarise it. (There's a different colour, by the way, for each chapter.) These 'big-picture' notes were useful when the examiners referred to a specific page in the middle of the viva: it meant that I could look back a few pages from that reference and see very quickly where that particular point that they are discussing 'sat' within the thesis. Prior to the viva, I also 'strung together' these short summaries into paragraphs, which gave me basically a version of my thesis on one page. This was incredibly useful, especially in the minutes before the viva, and I took this with me, as something

that no-one but me would ever need to see.

Once you've got the broad strokes of your thesis marked up, it's time to get specific. I used a colour-coded highlighting system to mark up specific points that might be touched on in the viva: yellow for important points, or things that I might want to raise myself; red for potential 'weak points' that I think might need defending, or shoring up; and green for typos. I then marked the most important ones with a Post-It note out to the side of the thesis, in that same colour. Here's an example of what I called a red note, meaning something that needed justifying or explaining: specifically, I realised that the examiners might end up asking why I'd introduced another text here, during already quite a long introduction to a section. The note simply says 'this is a long intro, but it has to be', and goes to explain why. (You can also see the Post-Its out to the side of this thesis - that's just an example of some of the ones I used for that kind of annotation.). Here's another example of a red annotation: I'd come across another article in the period after submitting my thesis, and wanted to remind myself to include this in any any explanation of the point that I was asked to make.

The yellow annotations were where I allowed myself to get a little bit excited. This was where I felt that something was really important, to the extent that I wanted to be able to quote it back at the examiners myself, under the right circumstances, and use it to develop an argument. My external examiner had coined a specific term - the 'French of England' - and I wanted to emphasise how useful that term was with some specific phrasing that would allow me not to get too hung up on it. Without that specific phrasing, I'd doubltless have ended up forgetting it in the middle of the viva itself. I was also prepared for questions on the links between my chapters, and highlighted one example of this, just to give myself something else to fall back on.

You'll notice that there aren't any green Post-Its here, apart this the one point where I ... erm ... ran out of yellow ones at the end. The reason for this is that the typos were far too numerous, and had I marked every one with a Post-It, the thesis would quickly have become un-navigable, and as I was suggesting at the start, this is not what we want to happen. Instead, I collated them onto a separate sheet, which (as luck would have it) I was able to provide to the examiners at the end of the viva. Just to show you that we all make slip-ups like this, though, I did want to show a brief selection of some of my more egregious slips at the keyboard that somehow made it through to the viva.