

## Transcript: Bice Maiguashca on the viva as conversation

### Edward Mills

There was one term that you used there, which I think a lot of people will have heard many, many times, but I think it might be worth spending a moment to unpick, if that's OK. It's the idea of the viva as a conversation, which I think is connected to what you were saying earlier about how depending on the answers you give to certain questions, the the examiners can go down different roads. So when you think of a - presumably a good viva as a good conversation, what do you what do you mean by that? How is it different from, say, an interview, for example?

### Bice Maiguashca

I think 'conversation' or 'dialogue', as a way of describing the thesis as well as the viva, is a helpful way of thinking about the whole process. So let me start by saying that in many respects, a thesis or a PhD is in fact, the product of a conversation: so in the rationale of your thesis, where you explain why you pursued this particular puzzle, you will need to lay out an academic conversation about your topic. It's often called the literature review. So the thesis itself represents a conversation between a group of academics who may agree or disagree with each other, and yourself. In other words, when you write a thesis as a student, you are intervening (or you're seeking to intervene) in a dialogue amongst experts about the subject. When you do your viva, then you have a second type of conversation: you have a conversation with two experts in the field about the conversation you've had in your thesis. So in other words, with your viva, your internal and external are interested not so much in determining whether they agree with your answers or not, but whether they understand how you've come to them, and why you've come to them.

[...]

One of the things that students should keep in mind, as I said earlier, is that a viva is a dialogue. It's a dialogue between three people, sometimes four, depending on whether you have two externals and one internal, or just one external, one internal. And I think students should keep in mind that although it's intimate, and that there are only three of you in a room (or perhaps four), that somehow externals and internals are people, too, and that they may also come to the viva with their own baggage and in fact, may feel a little bit nervous. In other words, it's a performance and the student is performing, but so is the internal and so is the external, especially if there's an internal chair, an internal chair present as well. And so what one wants in the performance of the viva is everyone to listen to each other, to be respectful and polite with each other, and to enjoy it. So one of the things that frustrates me, if you like, is - and I realise it can't be helped - is that if a student is so nervous that they can't engage in that dialogue. In other words, if they haven't prepared and therefore are thrown by questions about what their puzzle is or what their thesis

is, etc., then that conversation can slowly grind to a halt. And that can be frustrating for the student, but also for the internal and external. So, in fact, you want the students to go into the viva not only well-prepared (in other words, they know their thesis well,) but also, hopefully, you want them to go in with some enthusiasm. Remember, the internal and the external are experts in the field, and therefore, you should see the viva as an opportunity to have a good natter with two people in your field who are interested in your project and who may well in the future become referees for jobs. So I think - I realise this is a big ask, because it's normal to be nervous, but I strongly believe that preparing for a viva can actually reduce that problem and help you perform in a relaxed and congenial way in the actual viva.

[...]

I think my advice to students who are going into the viva is that they (to the best of their ability, and I understand it's a nerve-wracking moment), but they must try very hard not to become defensive in the viva. I have been in some vivas where the student has become overly defensive - I realise it's partly because of nerves - and as a result, the conversation has become stilted and in fact, sometimes uncomfortable. So remember, students need to remember that the internal and external, it's part of their job, it's part of their mandate to critically interrogate the piece of work in front of them and to engage you in a robust conversation about its strengths as well as its limits. So while I'm not suggesting you should concede on every point raised by the internal or external critical point, you must defend them, but you must not become defensive. You must acknowledge that there are some limits to it, and you must show an understanding of why those limits arose, but whatever you do, don't go in there defensive, because it'll make your internal and external examiners defensive in return.