

September 29, 2008

Dear Members of the Academic Council,

I am writing to update you on the status of my Practicum, and request a 6-month extension for submission of the final draft. In the past year since the Nepal Residential, I have been working closely with both of my communities, which have made significant progress to be highlighted in my Practicum write-up.

In Detroit, I have worked with Detroit Summer, a non-profit youth organization, using participatory action research to identify and propose solutions to the high rate of drop-outs from Detroit Schools (~40% a year!). The 3+ years of field work on this topic has helped identify evidence for 3 clear opportunities for Detroit Schools to diminish the "Drop-Out Crisis" that currently afflicts them. All 3 point clearly to a void in basic values and support my argument that Education in Human Values (EHV) could address the needs of Detroit's education system.

At the same time, I have been busy leading SAI Youth in our region, who have been trained by SAI officers and started up about a half dozen EHV projects in communities around the Midwest. Having worked with, interviewed, and surveyed SAI Youth who were active participants in these projects, I have found evidence for 3 main ways that working on EHV in the community is helping shift the mental models and build the capacity of SAI Youth (the second part of my RQ). As of June, the school year ended, and the latest round of EHV projects came to a pause for summer. Groups are busy meeting and preparing new plans to start up the next iteration this fall. I have also stepped down from my leadership position with SAI Youth to open up more time for other commitments, and to foster new and emerging leaders in our group.

It is just in the past few months that the community work reached a point where I could compile and analyze the findings, and start drafting my Practicum. In July I took 3 weeks off of work to focus on the Practicum, and spent much of that time in Detroit working with youth to finalize the results. Last month, I shared a rough draft with colleagues from both communities, who responded back recently with some good feedback, and strongly suggested that I restructure the write-up in order to make it more useful and clear to each community. So while the content is more or less in place, it will take a while to re-organize the document, and re-write certain sections as per the needs of my community readers.

In addition to writing about Detroit and SAI Youth, they also agreed that I would need to incorporate a third section, to give a more thorough background on what EHV is and how it works, including research from time spent in Canada, Thailand, and India at EHV Schools. I had initially incorporated this into the rest of the document, weaving it in where I felt it necessary, but they strongly urged that it should stand alone. This will require a whole new section, which I have not yet written.

I sent this draft to Dan and Sheila, who responded that they received it, but have not sent feedback yet. I sent Pierre Marie my Prospectus and a new outline of what the Practicum will look like once I have restructured it. I have not yet heard back from him and am not sure if he has any feedback at this stage. Since he is not yet familiar with my community, I thought it would be easier on him to be introduced to my community via my next draft, after it is more clearly organized.

Initially, when Christie asked if I needed to apply for an extension at the end of August, I told her that I wanted to try and finish on schedule by mid-October. But given the feedback I have since received from my community, and anticipated feedback I hope to soon receive from Future faculty, it will certainly require more time. To rush and submit a more polished version of my existing Practicum research by the October 14 deadline would complete the academic exercise for me, but would not serve my community as well as I'd like. On the other hand, I could easily spend several more years working and learning with my communities in this ongoing process, but this would not be of much academic value.

Instead, I feel that an extension of 6 months would allow enough time to re-draft, fill in the currently-existing gaps, and fine tune my writing, in order to produce a higher-quality and meaningful thesis relatively soon. The processes will continue in my community, but I have drawn a line at the results that we already have so far, and will not be incorporating new community-based research or results into my Practicum hereafter.

The extra time would allow me the opportunity to interview more people, especially EHV practitioners and officers around the USA who I have not yet been able to speak to. Also, I have spent most of my research time so far working directly with the youth in my communities, and feel that my writing could be enhanced by doing more traditional research, incorporating more information from existing literature. I recently learned of a handful of others in the SAI community who have written PhD dissertations on topics related to EHV, but have not had success accessing their work as of yet. Recently, there was also a World Conference on EHV, held in our ashram in India, whose write-ups and takeaways are still being published, and which will certainly be useful to my research.

Given support of Future faculty, I expect that I could feasibly submit a re-structured second draft by the end of October (minus the new section on EHV). Following that, I will pursue further interviews and review literature which will help me write the new section and enhance the existing sections, hopefully submitting another draft by the start of the year. I will then continue to make adjustments and re-draft as needed, according to Future faculty, community colleagues, my two mentors, and youth readers.

I would also like to request that Dan and Sheila be allowed to continue working with me as mentors until the completion of my Practicum. Since I am looking at the potential intersection between two communities, one defined by geographic boundaries and another held together by common spiritual values, my community is very complex, and it took me nearly until the third term to be able to define and articulate it in a way that others would understand. (Each new professor we had required either pages of emails or hours of dialogue to be brought up to speed so that I could proceed with their coursework.) Dan and Sheila were very instrumental in helping me through this process, and it would really help keep things moving forward to receive their valuable input until the end. I am happy to also work with Pierre-Marie, depending on his availability and willingness, but feel strongly that Dan and Sheila's continued involvement will be necessary.

Thank you all for your consideration and continued support. Please let me know if any further information is required.

Sincerely,  
Yamini Bala