Zen of Linguistics

Maximize your chances.

wisdom of Tony Kroch

Thursday, March 25 notes taken by Sophia Malamud

1 Think strategically

Don't just do your daily agenda, but think: why am I doing this, what else could I be doing instead.

You are graduate students in linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania.

1.1 strategic studenthood

Let's start with thinking strategically about being a student.
You're now as free to learn new things, as you will ever be. It gets progressively worse from here, since there will be more things you'll be responsible for, less time for learning, and you get dumber as you get older.

Develop intellectual capital, get the resources, the knowledge etc. on which your professional life will draw.

Learn hard things NOW.

"I don't recommend age if you want to learn new things"
Examples:
Alexander Williams learned Chinese - extremely useful.
Math - learn all sorts, as many as possible, they're all very useful. There is no such thing as technical knowledge that's useless!
Learn unix, emacs, perl
There's no room in the field for people who don't know that - don't take people like me or Ellen Prince as an example, because the field was different, and it was possible to achieve a lot of progress and success without technical knowledge of this sort. It's changed since.

1.2 strategic linguistics

Think strategically about the field.
Try to figure out: what has become more or less important over the last five years?

Examples:
"Autonomy of Linguistics" was Sausseur's thesis that linguistics should be studied independently of psychology, 'cause psych sucked then.
Now the methodology and theory in psychology is fast catching up - so connection between language and thought is becoming an area of more fruitful study. This doesn't mean that we all should become psycholinguists, but we should keep this broader picture in mind.
Semantics has been becoming increasingly important - most of all, because semantics was lousy before. The trend might mean that people may stop buying the ideas about uninterpreted syntax. This again does not mean we all should go study semantics, but the broader picture should be kept in mind.

1.3 Penn strategically

Figure out a way of hooking up your interests with the resources at Penn.
A recognisably Penn dissertation is advisable.
If you do something Penn is bad at, you're likely to be not so good at it either, and you'll certainly have a hard time convincing people that you're good at something noone at Penn knows about.

2 Have a broad and generous outlook

Competitiveness is not the way to get ahead "by stepping on others"
Cooperation between competitors makes them happier and more effective.

Students at Penn (and people in linguistics) have always cooperated to a large extent.
Learn from each other; teach each other! In short, be cooperative.
The best way for **me** to do better is for **us** to do better.

Same at departmental level, at subfield level

- Think of ways of collaborating with other departments
- Look for opportunities for collaboration with other fields

3 Don't let your ego get in the way of your thought process

Being a researcher, our resource is our minds.
Society makes a big deal of being smart.
This generates big emotional problems for academics.
When you don't deal with it successfully, it leads to intellectual paralysis: "what if it makes me look bad"

Read Richard P. Feynman → "What one fool can do, another fool can do" (a quote about calculus)

Don't scold yourself for your weaknesses.
Think about the work, be interested in the work, and don't let your ego get in the way.

Try spending an hour a day thinking about the material, and not about yourself.

A few minutes of concentrated thought can do wonders.