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ROWLEY, J. and SLACK, Frances <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6638-798X>>

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What is the future for Undergraduate Dissertations?

Dr Jennifer Rowley, University of Wales, Bangor

Dr Frances Slack, Sheffield Hallam University

Contact: j.e.rowley@bangor.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article argues that the changing nature of the dissertation experience, and its associated supervision calls for more detailed attention to the development of dissertation supervisors. Dissertations have always played a major role in student learning. The following themes constitute the kernel of the article: the role of the dissertation in the student's learning experience, managing the link between theory and practice, digitization of information resources, research methodologies and design, and finally, the implications for the role of the supervisor. It is suggested that without an awareness of the changing nature of the dissertation experience, and a more proactive approach to supervisor development, there may be serious degradation of the dissertation experience and outcomes.

Keywords: Dissertation supervision; undergraduates; research supervision

Introduction

Each year tens of thousands of students complete undergraduate dissertations in business, management, information systems, and other vocational disciplines, and thousands of supervisors are engaged to assist them to achieve a successful outcome. Twenty years ago the dissertation was regarded as the component of undergraduate studies that offered students the opportunity to demonstrate their 'honours worthiness'. In courses in which much of the assessment was by examination, the dissertation was a relatively unique opportunity for independent learning and knowledge acquisition. In addition, the dissertation was designed to prepare students for postgraduate study. This article argues that the role and nature of undergraduate dissertations has gradually, and largely invisibly changed in recent years, and seeks to explore these changes and the implications for dissertation supervision and the role of the supervisor. It is suggested that without an

awareness of the changing nature of the dissertation experience, and a more proactive approach to supervisor development, there may be serious degradation of the dissertation experience and outcomes

Despite its significance, both in terms of student learning, and in terms of staff workload, there is very little literature on undergraduate dissertation supervision, and what there is does not examine either the total supervision experience or comment on the development of supervisors. Some of the work is relatively old, and may have limited relevance to today's environment (Gatrell, 1991, Cook, 1980). Other articles focus on specific aspects of dissertation processes such as assessment (Clewes and Len, 2000, Pepper et al, 2001, De Vries, 1999) or the development of learning skills (James, 1998). An earlier article from one of the authors of this article offers advice on undergraduate supervision (Rowley, 2000). In contrast there is a growing literature on postgraduate and research student supervision that offers insights, and approaches to understanding the supervision experience, relationships and indicators for success (Woolhouse, 2002, Phillips and Pugh, 2000, Styles and Radloff, 2001, Delamot et al, 1997, Denicolo and Pope, 1994, Johnson et al, 2000, Lee and Williams, 1999, Rowley and Slack, 1998). In addition, there is considerable focus on the training of research supervisors (Brew and Pesta, 2004, Pearson and Brew, 2002)

Unfortunately, only limited lessons can be translated from research on postgraduate supervision to the undergraduate processes because as compared with postgraduate supervision, the undergraduate supervision process is much more truncated. Typically, the supervisor may supervise eight or ten students, and meet each one for, say, four meetings of around one hour. The challenge is, through these brief encounters, to become acquainted with the students learning needs and style, and to rapidly formulate targeted interventions that facilitate the dissertation process, and help to progress such diverse activities as formulating objectives, undertaking a literature review, research design and data collection, data analysis, and drawing conclusions and formulating recommendations. In addition, students need support in understanding how they arrive at a dissertation in which they

have scope to demonstrate what are to them elusive concepts such as evaluation, analysis, synthesis, originality, creativity and coherence.

This article explores four aspects of the changing nature of undergraduate dissertations. The first section, on the role of the dissertation in the students learning experience, argues that the curriculum context of dissertations has changed. The second section, explores the changing nature of the link between theory and practice, and the third section identifies some of the consequences of the digitization of information resources. Another change arises from the wider range of research methodologies currently adopted by students. A final section on the consequences of these changes for the role of supervisors serves to conclude the article.

The Role of the Dissertation in the Students Learning Experience.

The role of dissertations in the student's learning experience is changing, but they continue to make a significant contribution to students final honours classification, and therefore continue to have a central significance in the in the learning process associated with undergraduate study. In earlier times, when examinations were a dominant mode of assessment in most undergraduate courses, the dissertation was a relatively novel opportunity to experience a different type of assessment. Now, with course work much more widely used to assess both knowledge and skills, the dissertation should build on writing, referencing and other information skills that the student has developed earlier in their studies. In addition, many courses seek to develop independence in student learning throughout the course, rather than offering the dissertation as a unique opportunity for independent learning. The dissertation therefore provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate learning skills that they should have acquired throughout their study, rather, than being as it was in the past, a new departure in which different skills are acquired. In the sense that the design of curricula of which the dissertation is a part have changed, so the role of the dissertation has changed.

Another change lies in the composition and learning styles of the student body. With widening participation offering opportunities for higher education to students with a wider range of earlier educational experience and attainment, support in dissertation supervision may need to be more diverse. For example, a dyslexic student may find it more difficult to undertake any or all of: searching for relevant literature, reading and scanning considerable chunks of complex text, organizing ideas in a literature review, structuring the dissertation, and/or writing English sentences. Most universities will have specialist learning support services to assist students, but the supervisor also has a role. Another factor that influences the student engagement with the dissertation process is the fact that many students are working and studying simultaneously. Unlike other components of their study, unless the dissertation process is structured with assessed milestones, there is scope to 'leave the dissertation to the last minute'. With no deadline looming in the immediate future, some students are inclined to accord low priority to a dissertation. Part time students often have a surprising level of commitment to achievement in the dissertation process, and may view the dissertation as an opportunity to undertake a work based project that might have some value to their employer. Nevertheless, they are also subject to the pressures of balancing work, study and personal commitments, and often need special support in this process, if they are to complete to deadlines.

All of these factors are likely to mean that students need assistance with structuring the dissertation process at two levels. First they need assistance with planning their work, and estimating how much time they need to allow for each stage. Next, they are likely to need assistance with structuring their dissertation. A list of the main sections to be included in a dissertation is a start, but beyond that students need assistance in understanding how to apply this structure to their research. The two words 'literature review' frequently leave students floundering, even if they have looked at other examples of a literature review or written extended essays. If they have conducted interviews they may find it difficult to decide how to write up their notes of the interviews, and are likely to need assistance in differentiating between

describing the results and discussing the results or findings, and drawing conclusions.

Students also need protecting and support in structuring their activities and learning. The supervisor needs to be sure that when the student starts their study, a successful outcome can be achieved. The supervisor has traveled this road before; the student has not, and does not know where the road leads. The difficulty for the supervisor is that each student is different, with different abilities and levels of motivation. One student will report regularly on progress and take advice, whilst as the year unfolds it becomes apparent that others are relying solely on the content of one supervision session. One student may have a sophisticated concept of the nature of a literature search, whilst another may think that a search on Google, a few web sites, and the odd text book will yield a balanced and sufficient picture of the earlier knowledge in a subject. The challenge for the supervisor is to target interventions and adapt these on the basis of signals about the individual student's learning processes.

Managing the Link between Theory and Practice

A relatively significant shift that emerges from a melee of the factors identified above is the increased centrality of the relationship between theory and practice in the dissertation process. This relationship has become more privileged with the increasing popularity of professional courses.

In most of the social sciences, empirically based dissertations have always involved a small research project in which the student is encouraged to collect data from 'the real world', to analyze it, and interpret it in a way that is informed by theory, but the dynamic between theory and practice is under continual evolution. In knowledge creation, theory is continually refined by the analysis of practice. Understanding of concepts is enhanced, relationships between variables are established, and models are proposed and refined.

In an undergraduate dissertation it is a little unrealistic to expect that knowledge creation that contributes to new theory will be a common

occurrence. It is more likely that a student can be expected to use theory as a lens for better understanding the practical situation under analysis. In this process they should advance their understanding of the theory, with its concepts and models, and the practice situation. This may promote their capacity to analyze evidence, in pursuit of enhanced evidence based practice. Originality may rest in the student's application of theory in a unique and possibly topical context. For example, an exploration branding of a football celebrity (Branding Beckham) may offer unique and topical arena for the exploration of the concept of brand. A recent dissertation on motivation and job satisfaction in an NHS trust hospital, offered a new context for exploring theories of motivation. A historical analysis of the building of the Carlisle to Settle railway provided an unusual arena in which to undertake a documentary study of the concepts of corporate social responsibility. Maybe this is sufficient for an undergraduate dissertation. But, we should never forget serendipity and that originality can not be planned. The study of motivation in the NHS trust hospital generated some interesting data on motivation and satisfaction at different stages in the relationship with the employer; this may form the basis for the development of new perspectives in the theory of motivation.

Not all students have sufficient work or life experience or networks to be able to locate a sufficiently rich context in which to conduct the research for their dissertation. Initial proposals focused on the marketing of football clubs, staff motivation in supermarkets, web sites with linked databases for football clubs or music groups, and communication and working practices in call centres recur rather too frequently. Students need a supervisor who shares their enthusiasm for the original context or issue that has provoked the proposal, but also the skill to demonstrate to students how to interweave theory and practice to create a viable dissertation. Some supervisors may be reluctant to supervise dissertations that do not align with their own research interests. This mismatch between student experience and horizons, theoretical perspectives and models, and staff research interests can present a further source of tension.

Digitisation of Information Sources

Dissertations are a context in which many students need to develop their literature searching skills. Since earlier assignments they have often relied heavily on textbooks, the opportunity to access and evaluate the increasing plethora of digital information resources poses a new challenge for students and their supervisors. Students need guidance in differentiating between web search engines (such as Google) and bibliographic searching, with their respective outputs. They do not find it straightforward to differentiate between sources of data (such as company web pages), and academic and theoretical journal articles which provide the models, theories, concepts and frameworks that they can use to structure their research and analysis. Students need assistance in stitching the different stages in this search and document location process together. First, the student needs to be directed to the library web page, and to a suitable portal or abstracting and indexing services (such as Emerald). Next, the student needs to conduct a search within that service, examine the references, and save or print a list of relevant items. These references, possibly with abstracts (another potential source of confusion for students) then need to be used to locate the full text of the article. Often this means a revisit to the library web page to examine the catalogue of electronic journals; this may yield some full text copies of articles; others may need to be ordered in hard copy by Interlibrary loan. This process is far from instant or obvious.

Students may also benefit from support in formulating search strategies. They tend to be inveterate browsers, and often have difficulty using the correct terms in a search. For example, a student may formulate a research question in terms such as: What is the impact of using famous people to promote products in television advertising? If they then search on 'Famous people', little will be retrieved. An intervention from the supervisor to direct them to the term 'celebrity endorsement' will have a significant effect on the likelihood of a successful search.

Digitization of information offers readier access to a wider range of sources but demand more sophisticated skills in their location, evaluation and use.

Research Methodologies and Design

Many social science disciplines have a strong quantitative research tradition. Students often associate the word 'research' with questionnaires. Whilst a questionnaire based survey can yield some useful data, and an opportunity to demonstrate quantitative analysis skills, researchers in many social science disciplines increasingly acknowledge that research design needs to consider the most appropriate methodology for the investigation; this also applies to undergraduate research. Part time students, or full time students in employment, may benefit from, and be in a position to conduct case study based research, action research, or a limited ethnographic study. In addition, many have the opportunity to conduct interviews. All of these qualitative approaches to investigation can be very powerful in supporting the learning approaches that will be relevant to students when they move into employment. On the other hand, encouraging students to consider and seek to apply a wider range of methodologies raises a number of other issues, including:

- students need to confront and accommodate dynamic and contested knowledge
- students need the opportunity to become acquainted with a wide range of research methodologies, to the extent that they can begin to make choices about which approach will be suitable for their dissertation research
- the supervisor needs to be able to support students who may be adopting a range of different methodologies. This support needs to embrace research design and data collection, but also the rather different approaches to data analysis inherent in many qualitative approaches.

Conclusion: Preparing supervisors

New lecturers are often allocated undergraduate dissertation or project supervision as part of their workload and with little guidance as to the process, and their role in that process. In addition, although experienced supervisors are likely to discuss the grading of dissertations during moderation or double marking they rarely share the experience of dissertation supervision. Dissertation supervision sessions, because of their one-to-one nature are rarely observed by QAA auditors, or are subject to peer review. In addition, the process whereby students are allocated to tutors may have an impact on the student experience. In some cases, students can choose their supervisor, whereas in others they may be allocated to a supervisor. Allocation is likely to be on the basis of the topic that the student has chosen, and it is generally felt to be helpful if this aligns with the tutors research or other special expertise. In practice, however, supervisors quite often find themselves supervising students working with topics in relation to which they can not offer specialist expertise. So what is the role of the dissertation supervisor?

There are a number of roles that a supervisor might potentially adopt. These include:

- provider of subject expertise, and ready access to the literature of the subject
- provider of access to research contexts (e.g. organizations)
- mentor, to support reflection on the process
- director or project management to take the student through the steps in the process in a logical order, and to a time scale
- advisor on research methodologies, both in relation to their selection, and appropriateness and in relation to specific design issues
- signpost or teacher assisting with access to the literature.
- editor, supporting structuring and writing of the dissertation.

This article has highlighted four areas in which the dissertation process is changing. These may have the following consequences for the role of the supervisor:

1. with a more diverse student body, and the changing role of the dissertation in the curriculum, the supervisor may need to adapt all aspects of their intervention so that it is tailored to individual students. More specifically, the balance between the roles identified above may vary between one student and the next.
2. the changing link between theory and practice will impact on the role of provider of research contexts.
3. in the role of supporting access to the literature, digital information resources present a number of new challenges, that require tutors to acquaint themselves with developments in this arena, before they can effectively support students.
4. in the role of advisor on research methodologies, the supervisor may be called upon to offer support with a wider range of different research methodologies; this will also have consequences for project management, and reflection of the research process.

The overriding conclusion from the factors discussed above as affecting the nature of the dissertation process, is that research supervision, even at undergraduate level needs to be a learning process for both the supervisor and the student. The supervisor needs to be continually learning about the student learning process, as well as developing their own subject knowledge, networks for access, ability to navigate electronic sources, and repertoire of research methodologies.

Undergraduate dissertation supervision is a highly demanding task, in which the supervisor plays a pivotal role in supporting students towards realizing their potential. This article has directed a spotlight onto some of the changes in the nature of the undergraduate dissertation process. It suggests that although on one hand, students may bring a greater experience of assessed coursework to their dissertation study than previously, the increased diversity of the student body, the need to integrate theory and practice, to accommodate a wider range of methodological options, and master accessing digital information resources, conspire to make the process more hazardous. Successful supervision requires supervisor development and a

sharing a practice that extends beyond moderation and assessment. Are institutions, departments and individual supervisors taking their responsibilities to undergraduate dissertation students seriously? How is the student experience being monitored and evaluated? Are supervisors developing their expertise in the use of digital information resources, and sharing this expertise with students? How are supervisors supporting students in their attempts to integrate theory and practice? Are supervisors open to different research paradigms and designs, and continually developing their understanding of and competence with both qualitative and quantitative approaches? Is the dissertation an appropriate vehicle for learning for all students? Without appropriate attention to such questions the learning experience and quality management processes associated with dissertations are in doubt.

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