Innovative pedagogies series: Supporting undergraduate students on the journey to become autonomous learners

Supervising the Social Science dissertation

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Contents

Innovating in final year projects

I have developed different strategies to support and guide final year undergraduate learners engaged with the dissertation process. Over the past 15 years, I have collated the questions, concerns and practical issues that students come across when completing their Social Science-based dissertation or final year project. I have also engaged with academic staff to help develop supervision approaches through staff development programmes. In my own practice, I have found that many undergraduate learners in higher education (HE) are not always fully prepared for this form of demanding final year assessment. The research my colleagues and I completed (Todd *et al*. 2004) suggest that those students who do not take advantage of the supervision offered by their tutors often find it difficult to maintain the momentum required for this assessment and are apt to make fundamental errors in the way they approach their work. Supervisors do have a very important role to play in the dissertation process and students value the supervisor's encouragement, guidance, and reassurances that they are proceeding in the right direction, without taking control of the dissertation and telling them what to do.

I have developed approaches that have proved to be successful in providing support and guidance to help learners in the journey towards a successful completion of the final year project. My approach is student-centered but I do not provide a set of definitive answers to constructing a perfect dissertation; instead, I recognise that there are many ways in which the 'journey' through the process can be completed.

How this practice evolved

For many Social Science undergraduate students, a significant part of their final-year study at college or university will focus on an independent learning project. These independent learning projects are often seen to be the culmination of an undergraduate programme, offering the learner an opportunity to work independently and submit an extended, in-depth, piece of work. The dissertation demands a great deal from the undergraduate learner (synthesizing theory, selecting and applying methodology, conducting research and analyzing data, etc.) but is seen to be a highly valuable assessment tool for promoting autonomous learning.

Yet, despite its apparent distinction as a form of final year assessment, the undergraduate dissertation process varies greatly according to the specific discipline or subject area in which it is situated and the varied institutional or academic departmental requirements. Furthermore, the terminology used to describe this form of assessment, both in the UK and elsewhere, differs, including: 'senior essays', 'independent learning project', or 'dissertation', 'extended essay', or 'final year project'. For consistency, I use the term dissertation in this paper. However, although there is much diversity in terminology and format, as colleagues and I have noted elsewhere (Todd *et al.* 2004), this type of assessment appears to share some key characteristics:

1. the learner will determine the focus and direction of the work;
2. the work is carried out on an individual basis – although usually with some tutor support and direction provided;
3. there is typically a substantial research component to the project, requiring the collection of primary and/or the analysis of existing/secondary data;
4. the learner will have a more prolonged engagement with the chosen subject than is the case with standard coursework assignments such as essays or reports, with the work consequently expected to be more 'in depth'.

This in-depth piece of work that the students undertake on their degree, involving a focused element of self-directed learning, does not always come naturally to undergraduate students and they can require high levels of support in order to be successful. In this respect, the dissertation is relatively unique within the UK undergraduate curriculum in that it gives students a free choice of what they can study. There is little doubt, in my view, of the fundamental benefit of this type of assessment for students in terms of their own learning and the employability-related attributes it can develop.

Nonetheless, it is also the case that the free topic choice, although often challenging for the student, can also be disconcerting for academic staff who are supervising the dissertation – they may find they are supervising dissertations on a subject that they know little about. This does not sit well with the notion of supervisor/academic as a 'specialist', and it requires confidence on the part of the supervisor to accept and show these limitations.

In this paper, I want to explore the nature of the undergraduate Social Science dissertation and how, specifically, academic supervisors respond with their own learning and teaching practice. I have experience in teaching at all higher education levels in the Social Sciences and in supervising many undergraduate students undertaking their dissertations. Therefore, the notes that follow are informed by my own practice as a dissertation supervisor.

In addition, the notes here are informed by research and evidence. Working with colleagues, I have researched the experiences and perceptions of final-year social science students on a dissertation module in the UK and in Hong Kong (Todd *et al.* 2004). I have also researched the staff experience of supervising final-year students (Todd *et al*. 2006). Based on this empirical research, I worked with two colleagues to produce a student study guide on the Social Science dissertation (Smith, Todd and Waldman 2009) along with an online resource to support students (ww.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk). I draw upon this work and consequently a research and evidence base is used to advise these notes.

I should be clear from the start that this paper does not aim to provide a set of definitive answers for academic staff that are new to supervising undergraduate dissertations. Instead, I recognise there are many ways in which the journey through the process can be completed and how academic staff may wish to supervise the dissertations allocated to them. The reflections and observations I make in this paper draw on the experiences of a number of dissertation supervisors I have interviewed, academic research into the student and staff experiences of study and supervision, and examples of good practice. My anticipation is that some of these observations will help those who are new to supervising dissertations and help shape their own approaches and pedagogic practice.

How this practice is situated theoretically

Learner autonomy

I have long been interested in the meaning of 'learner autonomy' in higher education and notions of 'independent learning'. The terms are used often in HE discourse and frequently inter-changeably. A brief review of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) subject benchmark statements, for example, identifies that the ability to 'work independently' is clearly seen to be an important learning outcome of undergraduate study in a wide range of higher education subject areas. The undergraduate dissertation appears specifically designed to allow learners to be much more involved in making decisions about the choice of subject matter, learning methods, control over which aspects may be focused upon, pace, sequence and content of their study – which are some of the key characteristics of independent learning (Ramsden 1992).

However, it is also recognised in the literature that independent learning requires a considerable amount of preparation of both learners and teaching staff before any significant degree of autonomous learning can be successfully implemented (Hurd 1999). Independence does not involve a 'hands-off' approach – the challenge

in the undergraduate dissertation supervision process is to provide sufficient support to cultivate learner autonomy while, at the same time, recognising that many students may not be fully prepared for this form of study. My own experience has shown that, and this seems to be supported in the literature. If a learners engagement with the dissertation is to be successful, institutional and departmental polices need to be developed, and then articulated, to underpin and support a philosophy of growing independence in learning (Hughes 2002).

There is a growing recognition in the higher education learning and teaching literature that even well-supported autonomy involves what Silen (2003) has called a dialectical movement between "*chaos*" and "*cosmos*" – that is, movement on the students' part between an emotionally unsettling experience of intellectual confusion and moments of insight and order. Silen notes that students:

> **are afraid that they will not learn either enough or the right things … In due time, they discover that they are capable of making their own decisions, which results in a sense of comfort and pride in their own capability**. *(Silen 2003, p. 4)*

Land identify these states of liminality as occurring when students encounter "threshold concepts" that challenge a learners understanding. These threshold concepts appear especially difficult for a learner, but once they are understood they appear to shift the learner's personal knowledge irrevocably. Threshold concepts can mark a qualitative shift in understanding (Meyer and Land 2003a, 2003b). The dissertation at undergraduate level can be a significant challenge for learners. However, I argue that a key component to the learner's journey of discovery and understanding is the role that the academic supervisor can play.

Supervising the undergraduate dissertation

Many university departments offer their students a personal supervisor and individual supervisory sessions throughout the duration of the project. However, just as completing a dissertation is a difficult task for an undergraduate student, supervising the process can also be demanding for the academic:

> **this process [preparing the dissertation] is arduous, problematic and time consuming for both students and supervisor assigned (or chosen) to accompany the student on the journey**
> *(McMichael 1993, p. 15).*

I have found in my own research (Todd *et al.* 2006) that there are similarities between the student experience of undertaking the dissertation, and the staff experience of supervising it. The staff are also often coping with challenges that a truly independent piece of work can bring; they too will face the feelings of 'chaos' and 'cosmos'; they can be put under pressure: "they often have a large number of projects to supervise as well as their normal teaching, administration and research commitments" and many may not have any supervisory experience (McMichael 1993, p. 15). In my own experience, the job of the undergraduate dissertation supervisor can be highly exciting and challenging but can also be made all the more difficult by the lack of guidance produced for them by the departments in which they work.

Most literature relating to dissertation supervisor is aimed at Masters and doctoral-level students. There is a wide range of guidebooks for students embarking on postgraduate research that offer advice on supervision. Salmon (1992), for example, aims to give students a better idea of the kinds of support to be expected during their PhD through the use of the voices of ten doctoral students. The book fills a gap: "the relationship between students and supervisor is at the heart of doctorial work, yet little is known about it" (Salmon 1992, p. 17).

More specific research into supervision at Masters and doctoral level has also been conducted. Hockey's (1994) research, based on interviews with 60 postgraduate supervisors, shows that the supervisor's role is perceived to have both an intellectual and a counseling dimension and that their task is to establish boundaries which will work for individual students. In a similar vein, Delamont *et al.* (1998) talk of the problems faced by supervisors in finding the balance between dominating a student's research and neglecting it.

A reinvestigation of power models in supervisory relationships is offered by Bartlett and Mercer (2000), where they suggest that creative strategies can shape new forms of relationship. McWilliam *et al.* (2002) – describing a more managerial account of supervision – highlight how the increasingly diverse student body is leading universities to consistently manage doctoral programmes in order to optimise productivity and minimise risk, and this is producing new relational identities for both supervisors and students.

The initial experiences of new supervisors are not overlooked in the literature. The perceptions of newcomers to postgraduate supervision in Australia and Sri Lanka are examined by McMichael (1993). The research participants highlighted that their supervisory role required the following skills: research knowledge, project management and the ability to communication with people. She found that new supervisors experienced a number of concerns about their ability to supervise, including academic expertise, appropriate standards and institutional climates. One way of overcoming these uncertainties is to produce clear guidelines for both staff and students (McMichael 1993, p. 26).

Having clear guidelines can protect both student and supervisor when supervision does not go well. Hockey (1996) takes this one step further by suggesting that a 'written contract' between supervisor and student should be drawn up so that both parties are clear about their responsibilities and expectations. In a small-scale project with Masters students, Woolhouse (2002) investigates the initial expectations of supervision by the tutor and students. The study found a range of differences and similarities between expectations, which led to the implementation of a number of developments in the supervisory process. However, what the project showed most clearly was the benefit of researching one's own practice and then sharing the findings with others (Woodhouse 2002, p. 143).

Other research has shown that supervisors are not confident in their ability to supervise. Uncertainties relating to the practice of supervision were noted by Snowball *et al.* (1993), where the three authors all began their first supervision without any formal training except "the experience, positive or negative, of supervision from our own first or higher degrees" (Snowball *et al.* 1993, p. 1234). None of the tutors interviewed in my own research had received formal training on how to approach the undergraduate dissertations. A number had undergone training as PhD supervisors, and regarded this as some practicality in relation to the degree-level dissertation. As discussed elsewhere (Todd *et al.* 2004), a logical technical response to this situation would be to impose more structure on the learning process for dissertations – for example, through setting a larger number of formal interim objectives to be achieved – and/or to give the supervisors more of a directional role.

In summary, it seems, that new supervisors value discussion around experiences and expectations of undergraduate supervision. Although, by its nature, dissertation supervision will vary enormously from student to student, course to course, there are, in my experience, likely to be common challenges, concerns and coping strategies. The next section of the paper goes on to offer some practical advice and tips that others might take to adopt or adapt within their own pedagogic practice.

How others might adapt or adopt this practice

As I have already suggested, the introduction of any new approach to learning, such as the final year dissertation, can be an unsettling experience for students and they will inevitably be challenged by undertaking such a piece of independent study. In order to help student's progress through this challenging task, most university departments will allocate students to a personal supervisor and individual supervision sessions throughout the duration of the project.

The role of the supervisor

Although there are many ways to supervise a dissertation, there are some general observations that can be assumed about the supervision process and the relationship between the student and the supervisor. The supervisor should:

1. offer guidance as the best possible way of formulating and carrying out a successful project, based on your experience and aptitude for the role;
2. provide a 'lifeline' and serve as a calming influence when the student's dissertation appears too vast to comprehend and to undertake successfully;
3. be prepared to adopt a variety of roles throughout the dissertation process. At times you will appear to be at the centre of what the students are doing, guiding and advising the student. At other times, you will be in the background – there to 'catch' the student if needed;
4. discuss general ideas with the students in the early dissertation meetings;
5. help to make the dissertation more manageable for the students and realistic in its scale and scope;
6. help the students sharpen the focus;
7. help with designing a concise research question;
8. point out what should be avoided.

Establish agreement on roles and responsibilities

A starting point for my first meeting with a dissertation student is always to clarify what the student can expect from me as a supervisor in terms of levels of support. This is vital when the learner starts the dissertation module and when they start working with you on their dissertation. Do remember that it may not be particularly easy for a student to forge an instant relationship with you as a supervisor, for example, if you have never taught the student or if you are busy teaching across a range of courses in different locations. Crucially, you need to be clear with the student you supervise about the arrangements for dissertation supervision.

Be prepared to tolerate change

My own experience identifies the importance of being able to tolerate change. The supervisor interviewees in my study spoke of the changing nature of their roles throughout the dissertation process: supervisors were offering quite substantial support to students at the beginning when students are finding their research foci, getting to grips with methodologies and collecting their data; and moving away as the student felt more comfortable in their new role as an autonomous learner. This is a general pattern for students, but the level and type of support will vary from student to student. The supervisor needs, I would propose, to be sensitive to these differences between individuals, and how they approach their work.

Help the student to identify and define a research question

It is often the case that when a supervisor first meets the student, they are presented with ambitious proposals and ideas for an undergraduate dissertation resembling the kind of work expected at postgraduate level which are not practicable at undergraduate level. They would require the kind of time commitment most students do not have. One of the first things, therefore, that a dissertation supervisor will want to do is work with the student to establish the limits of the project. Once these limits have been identified, the process of planning and producing dissertation becomes for less daunting.

It is important to be clear with the student that it is not the supervisor's responsibility to provide the student with a research question, but to listen to what the student has to say and to help the student devise a suitable research question. The responsibility for the final dissertation is in the hands of the student, and the supervisor is not going to point them in the direction of all the answers, even if that were possible. The task for the supervisor here, then, is to develop the capacity to stand back and allow the student to make errors necessary in order to progress, and to resist the temptation to try and fix problems. This is potentially very

frustrating for new supervisors. As a dissertation supervisor, you will clearly be influenced by your own experience and expertise, but you should always listen to the student's ideas and suggest some ways to make it possible for them to fulfil their aims.

The supervisor can and should play a key role in providing guidance on source of literature and data. Students have noted (Todd *et al.* 2006) that they value the following:

> reading lists with specific references;
> feedback on the suitability of references they have found;
> references to general texts that can serve as a starting point to the project.

As a supervisor, you can have a particularly important role in the early stages of the student's dissertation, when the student is formulating an idea and is looking for some guidance on the possible shape and form of the dissertation. Rudestam and Newton (2001) suggest that the challenge of selecting a dissertation topic is always made simpler with the help of a supervisor who has knowledge of the student's area of interest and who can help to narrow the focus of the dissertation. As most undergraduate students will have had little experience of formulating their own research questions up to this point, supervisors can help govern the scope of the dissertation and make it more manageable.

What else should you be doing as a supervisor?

On a practical level, students may want to utilise the support of the supervisor in order to discuss and fully understand the main assessment requirements of the dissertation in terms of:

> what the title of the dissertation is and if it matches what the students has actually done;
> presentation (how it looks);
> organisation (chapters, headed sections, etc.);
> length (not too long or too short);
> list of contents;
> use of abstract;
> references list.

As already noted, the way you approach dissertation supervision can take very different forms. This generally relates to whether a supervisor insists upon regular meetings with their students or if they operate on a more informal basis that allows students to ask for support when they consider it necessary. The majority of students in my own research had, throughout the course of their dissertation, engaged in some kind of formal arrangement with their supervisor. The majority of students saw the benefits of this, particularly the help they received in setting tasks and deadlines that served to provide additional motivation for students and the implementation of a structure throughout the dissertation process that allowed students to manage their workload more effectively.

As already noted, it is important that the dissertation student and the supervisor are both clear about each other's roles in the process. The dissertation tutor will need to strike the right balance and recognise that a final year undergraduate student should be expected to be operating as an autonomous learner, but with the appropriate level of support and guidance. This means that the supervisor should be encouraging the learner to:

> take increasing responsibility for their own learning;
> plan a work schedule for themselves and manage their time effectively, using interim deadlines as appropriate;
> devise their own research question(s);
> employ research skills they have developed during their degree to date;
> negotiate and agree a work plan with the dissertation supervisor;

> pursue their work with the zeal and enthusiasm of a person who is thinking their way through the issues and problems that they consider to be important;
> be clear about what arrangements are in place for meeting with the supervisor;
> ensure that there is an agenda/draft chapter to discuss at each meeting;
> be punctual for pre-arranged meetings;
> reach an agreement with their supervisor on the remit and outcomes of each meeting.

There are a number of ways in which supervision takes place. The most common is a series of one-to-one meetings with the dissertation student. But this is not the only way of arranging supervision.

> it is sometime useful to have **supervision meetings in a group**. This can allow the supervisor to provide some general advice on a range of issues, particularly at the early stages of the process, and there is something to be said for witnessing and responding to the problems raised by other people's work;
> Supervisors might also **use email to support their students**. This can be particularly useful when the students want to address specific questions. However, dissertation supervisors should make it clear to the students the limitations of email discussion and that email can be an overwhelming method of communication. Again, this is part of the discussion that should take place between supervisors and student at the early stage of the process. Email is particularly useful to ask specific questions about references or methodology. Email can be used by students to send draft chapters to the supervisor and to deal with similar issues between supervision sessions. There are, however, limitations to using this method. If students want to discuss ideas and work towards a solution, it is often better to encourage the student to meet with the supervisors.

Providing feedback on chapters

An important role for the supervisor consists of the feedback provided to the student. The approach to feedback will vary from institution to institution, but it is often the case that supervisor will provide at least some feedback on the work produced by students in the run up to final submission. Students place a high value upon the advice they receive on structuring their work. The following methods seem particularly useful:

> provision of published sources on structuring dissertations;
> feedback on the ideas held by the student;
> examples of dissertations on similar themes;
> advice on the possible structure of each chapter.

Feedback offered by supervisors on draft versions of work is particularly valuable in providing clarity and direction to the project. Similarly, supervisors' knowledge of the subject and ability to direct students to relevant references is seen as especially helpful, as is their ability to encourage students to think differently – and more creatively – about the subject matter.

Students in our study claimed that they preferred a combination of written and verbal feedback. Written feedback on drafts is useful to provide detailed responses to the students work, although this is often made more real and useful if accompanied by a discussion between the student and the supervisor. Written feedback can sometimes appear a little blunt and critical, and this feedback can often feel more constructive if it is explained in a one-to-one meeting between the student and supervisor. Students have said that they expect the following from the feedback they expect: "positive comments, criticisms, areas for development" (Todd *et al.* 2004).

In my own research, tutors talked about their experiences of supervising undergraduate dissertation students. Many described the dissertation as a 'journey', seeing their role as facilitating that 'journey' and making their students' plans achievable, rather than directing the student to take a particular route. One lecturer said: "I think my role is essentially to try and help make their project realisable, rather than impose

something on them" (Todd *et al*. 2006, p. 166). Remember, this is the students project. You, as the supervisor, are there to guide, not to tell the student exactly what to do!

Other forms of support

The dissertation supervisor clearly performs a vital role in supporting the student to completing a successful dissertation. But there are other forms of support that the supervisor could help the students successfully navigate their way through the dissertation journey and who may also be able to reduce the student's sense of isolation if they are experiencing this. The supervisor may help the student by identifying a list of contacts and networks they could access. Below are a few examples that I have used in the past:

> **library staff** have a wealth of expertise in research approaches and can direct students to useful databases and reference material. In many institutions, the library staff will offer specific workshops and/or one-to-one support for students undertaking dissertation research. Most institutions now provide comprehensive guidance on a wide range of study-skills support. These can be available through libraries or other central support units or within faculties and departments;

> it is common for supervisors to be assigned students who choose a topic that is not within their own areas of specialism. This does not have to impact on the quality of the support you provide the students, but the supervisor may wish to direct the student to **other academic staff in the department** for ideas on the topic. This is about knowing the demands on other colleagues and their willingness to help with your dissertation student;

> **administrative staff are the backbone in institution** and will often be the best people to consult if a student has a practical questions about deadlines, requirements for binding dissertations etc. As a supervisor, you should be aware of the teams to direct your dissertation students towards for such advice and guidance;

> **dissertation-writing groups** are often developed to support graduate students with writing their dissertations, but they can also be useful for undergraduate studies. Such groups might meet regularly but are informal in nature. As a supervisor, your department may have a procedure for the establishment of such groups or you could help the students set one up;

> in addition to the support offered by the supervisor, there are many online social networking sites, **information and discussion groups** where students may find access to help and information from others.

Changing supervisors

Once a student has been allocated to a supervisor, it is not normally possible to change this arrangement. On rare occasions, however, a student may find that she/he cannot work with the allocated supervisor. In the first instance, the student should try to discuss the difficulties with the supervisor and attempt to resolve these through some agreed action plan. If, after this, it becomes evident that the relationship has broken down irrevocably, the student should contact directly the Dissertation Tutor or whoever is responsible for the module to discuss other possible arrangements. It is important to sort out such difficulties as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Good supervision of the undergraduate dissertation is challenging. In order for it to work, the dissertation supervisor has to be ready and willing to tolerate uncertainty. Although it is possible to regulate this uncertainty, by structuring tutorial sessions and by providing printed or online guidance, it is never going to be eliminated altogether. The nature of independent study means that you, as a supervisor, never know what is coming next. I would argue that is one of the biggest positive outcomes of this type of assessment. Although challenging and chaotic at times, supervising undergraduate dissertations can be one of the most

rewarding parts of academic work. The ability to see students enthused and engaged in their learning is very rewarding.

The challenge, then, is guiding students through their dissertation journey. It means having the confidence and the understanding of individual students to offer the right amount and type of guidance at the time the individual needs it. It requires flexibility and the ability to pass control to the leaner – the real culmination of any degree programme. Just as the dissertation process is not easy for students, it is not easy for those who are supervising; but perhaps that is the challenge and opportunity. In my view, the benefits significantly outweigh the potential problems.

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