

Dissertation Question Time: supporting the dissertation project through panel discussion

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Abstract

The dissertation is an experiential process analogous with a 'journey' from research question to final submission. It is a journey which is rarely straightforward and a form of assessment that raises a number of pedagogical issues. For the majority of undergraduates, the dissertation is the most substantial and self-directed assessment they will undertake at university. At Brunel University, this is predominantly supported within academic departments by research methods tuition and individual or group supervision. However, as learning developers based in a central department, we find a substantial part of our workload involves supporting students through the research process individually and within small group workshops. Yet we feel a line must be drawn between us providing information and guidance without overlapping into a supervisory relationship nor, indeed, comprising the independent nature of the project. This led us to question the effectiveness of our provision and consider new ways of delivering teaching and support. This case study evaluates the use of a panel discussion workshop, Dissertation Question Time, as a method of support for the dissertation journey. It takes as its focus an analysis of the experiences of two students who attended the workshop and their reflections on how best the challenges of the dissertation journey can be supported. The resulting discussion suggests the role learning developers could potentially have within this.

Keywords: Dissertation, Panel Discussion, Advice Giving, Supervisor

Chaos and cosmos in the dissertation journey

Research into dissertations and autonomous learning suggests that successful independent study provides intellectual rewards and a boost to academic confidence

(Todd et al., 2004; Chan, 2001; Walsh and Vandiver, 2007; Garde-Hansen and Calvert, 2007). However the process of conducting research can also be characterised by feelings of 'chaos' and 'cosmos' where students are both anxious and inspired by the project (Siln, 2003). Whilst students are provided with handbooks and subject specific guidance, and many undertake taught research skills modules or lectures in preparation for the dissertation, for some it can still feel like unfamiliar territory, with students then looking for 'reliable maps' to guide them through (Webster et al., 2000). This is exacerbated because the nature of the undergraduate dissertation also varies widely between institutions and subjects and within academic schools/departments. There is also considerable variation between supervisors' understanding of even common terms like 'analysis' that are currently widely used in the assessment of student dissertations (Webster et al., 2000). Indeed, whilst the supervisor/supervisee relationship plays a crucial part in facilitating this journey this can be problematic, with often little formal training for supervisors in how to effectively support undergraduate research and with many supervisors feeling an equal sense of waves of cosmos and chaos about the research process (Todd et al., 2006; Pearson and Brew, 2002).

Learning development and the dissertation

Students' experiences of cosmos and chaos in the dissertation journey are likely to be felt by a number of parties within a Higher Education Institution – from supervisors to administrative staff. The context for this study is ASK Academic Skills, a centrally based learning development department at Brunel University which provides online and print resources, individual advice and small group workshops to support students' skills development. In the 2010 -11 academic year, 26% of our overall provision was given for dissertation related advice to undergraduates and postgraduates.

It is entirely appropriate that the supervisory relationship and formal training in research methods occurs within academic departments. The individualistic nature of each project makes it difficult for a central service to do so effectively. Rather, our aim is to provide dissertation skills support that **complements** existing provision. Yet the question of how this works in practice is one that we continually reflect upon - are we there as a replacement for ineffective supervisors or just to provide a second opinion and how can we attempt to do this when the range of topic areas presented to us is so broad?

The approach: Dissertation Question Time

Garde-Hansen and Calvert (2007) stress the importance of collaborative methods for supporting undergraduate research as opposed to traditional dissertation supervision, using the case study of a student-led research conference. The authors recommend a number of approaches for developing an undergraduate research culture, including group discussion workshops. Dissertation Question Time was an attempt to create such an informal arena for discussion, while allowing the input of voices from a range of subjects and perspectives. The workshop consisted of a panel of students, academic staff and an academic skills advisor discussing questions from students on any aspect of the dissertation project.

This case study will discuss feedback from students attending the Dissertation Question Time workshop and then reflect on the dissertation journey of two attendees in more detail. Through the analysis of this model it will explore issues relating to the supervisory relationship, the challenges of independent learning and the effectiveness of teaching and advice to support the dissertation journey.

Feedback from Dissertation Question Time

The first Dissertation Question Time ran in February 2010 as part of a week of academic skills workshops. It was also filmed and published on YouTube as a free-standing learning resource (ASK, 2010). Positive feedback from the workshops and videos led to it being repeated as part of a dissertation writing week for taught postgraduates in May 2010. During the workshop, the student attendees submit their question to any member of the panel and the students on the panel are particularly encouraged to lead the discussion. To encourage participation, students were invited to submit questions beforehand and these were distributed to the audience. In both workshops, these prompts led quickly to open discussion. The main themes that arose from the students attending the sessions involved issues over the relationship with the supervisor, confusion over structure/format and time management.

Attendees were sent an online feedback form and respondents were invited to join a focus group to discuss the following themes:

- Does the dissertation process raise questions that are not answered through formal teaching and supervision? What (or who) is most effective as a support for that journey?
- Do students find the Dissertation Question Time format useful and why?

Seventeen students attended the first Dissertation Question Time and 16 the second. Of the 81% who completed a feedback form, 93% rated the workshop as good/useful or excellent/very useful. Comments included:

- 'Great to see the presentation of different opinions'.
- 'A friendly, free discussion'.
- 'Useful to share experiences from students'.

While feedback was positive, students did not expand on how they experienced the dissertation journey or reflect in detail on methods of teaching and support. In order to gather this rich data, two students took part in a semi-structured focus group, discussing their experiences of Dissertation Question Time and their own dissertation writing practice.

Focus group

Both students involved in the discussion had attended the May 2010 workshop and were studying postgraduate courses in Engineering. Neither had completed an undergraduate degree in the UK. Student A was a Home student who returned to study engineering design after over 20 years in industry and selected his dissertation topic based on his previous work experiences. Student B was an International student studying mechanical engineering, who worked as part of a larger research project where the research topic (although not the question itself) was provided.

Both students saw their postgraduate research as having a practical, commercial application and intended to pursue engineering careers, as opposed to further research. Both saw the most challenging part of the research process as formulating and focusing the research question, 'It seems easy...but exactly what I'm supposed to do...that was hard' (Student A), but felt supported enough by their supervisor and colleagues to confidently accomplish further stages of the research alone.

They chose to attend ASK sessions, including Dissertation Question Time for generic advice on structure and format and for useful tips on the research process itself: 'I came to find out how to structure the report...Back home it was just communicating your own thought process, it was not a literature review and everything' (Student B). Neither student knew of specific departmental guidance on the detailed structure of the written report but one student accessed previous dissertations to 'get a flavour of what is required' (Student A) and 'it is up to me only to go and check what is expected of a good report' (Student B). The self-directed nature of the project proved challenging, 'Assignments are one thing but writing a small book about your project is another' (Student B), but again felt that the challenge was one they could cope with. They found the Dissertation Question Time format useful for providing general advice about research: 'The challenge facing everyone is the same...it is useful to see the thought process of others' (Student B) and 'it helped to get us started, otherwise it is like finding a needle in a haystack' (Student A). Although an Engineering student was on the panel, the individualistic nature of the project was raised as an issue 'insights are really useful but if it is not specific to your branch, you do get lost' (Student B) and running a similar format within each subject area/department was felt to be the ideal solution.

Both had very good relationships with their supervisors 'the best point of support is the supervisor' (Student B) which they felt was the key to successful research. This potentially affected their responses to questions on learning from others as they felt able to approach their supervisor for the majority of queries but 'not for small things...there is no point wasting his time with silly questions' (Student A). Student B preferred to work alone 'I'm not a group kind of guy. I work best quietly and alone. It disrupts my thinking', whereas Student A enjoyed group work and often sought informal support and advice from colleagues. Both felt that their research topic was so specific that it was difficult to get useful subject advice from few people apart from their supervisor 'When you move to the dissertation, it is very focused, very specific, it [group work] is harder' (Student A). When they encountered problems with their dissertation both would initially try and solve problems themselves and then depending on the question would approach the supervisor 'if [they] drew a blank' (Student B). They felt that for detailed subject queries, other colleagues could not help. However, they both did seek advice from colleagues about more generic and experiential aspects of the dissertation such as managing time and staying focused: 'I spoke to friends about their experiences...the fact that there isn't enough time and a lot of time to wander off and lose focus' (Student A), and 'I spent a lot

of time getting distracted on a topic. I asked a colleague back home and he helped me to clarify it' (Student B).

Towards the end of the focus group, the students were shown the YouTube video of the first Dissertation Question Time. They were asked how useful they found the advice and also how useful they found the videos as a resource. Both were generally positive about the advice given in the session as a useful way to start research but were less keen on the videos as a standalone resource. They experienced frustration at not being active in the session 'I would like time to criticise the comments and advice. This needs discussion and dialogue' (Student A). This reiterates the importance of being present in the session and the session being a discussion of experience and ideas, rather than a one-way presentation.

Discussion and conclusion

Several key themes emerged from the discussion above and these will be broadly discussed in relation to the identified key questions.

Does the dissertation process raise questions that are not answered through formal teaching and supervision? What (or who) is most effective as a support for that journey?

The main themes that arose from the students attending the sessions were the relationship with the supervisor, confusion over structure/format and time management. While many of these questions can be addressed in a supervisory relationship, the generic nature makes them suitable topics for ASK to provide advice, support and resources for. Informal panel discussion potentially overcomes the remedial attitude towards skills teaching where the experienced tutor is 'helping' or 'fixing' the problem of the student. The fact that the advice in the workshop came mostly from students instigated a more conversational and participatory learning environment, aligned to Garde-Hansen and Calvert's (2007) concept of collaborative methods for teaching undergraduate researchers. However, advice from the staff on the panel was also valued highly and it is difficult to distinguish here whether it is peer advice, or just informal advice, that students found valuable. The session was clearly well received and the informal advice-giving an effective method, but it would be interesting to see the impact of a student-only panel upon

students' feedback from the session to make some more conclusions as to the use of peer learning in this context.

Because the dissertation is seen by many as a highly individual project, it can be difficult to provide advice that students deem specific enough for their learning needs. This issue was apparent in the focus group discussions where Student B felt that although the peer tutor was from the same academic school and subject as them, the specific nature of his research meant he found it hard to relate the answers to his topic area. However, he found the discussion of general research approaches from the panel reassuring and interesting. Therefore the advice was valuable in the way for which the session was intended: support that complements subject specific provision, but makes no attempt to replace it.

Responses from attendee feedback also indicated that students wanted a wider panel of both staff and students, with Student B asking for 'at least one student from each school'.

Do students find the dissertation question time format useful and why?

Positive feedback from those who attended the sessions suggests that this is a useful format for providing advice about the dissertation. The students in attendance had the opportunity to ask questions of their peers and academic staff in a relatively informal setting in line with Topping's (2005) definition of the benefits of peer learning. From the point of view of a central service, it was relatively simple to organise and it is in a format that complements, rather than replicates, the supervisory relationship. It also overcomes a potential challenge of providing generic dissertation workshops centrally that do not always effectively meet the specific learning requirements of variant courses; instead of a 'how to' workshop, this session is led by the students in an open, questioning format.

We consistently look for ways to provide a high quality central service to complement academic programmes. Our preference is to provide a workshop within schools where we can tailor the content more effectively, but the central service, particularly individual advice, remains significant and important. The informal Dissertation Question Time suits the pedagogical style of a research project, in that although it is specific in nature, the experiences of doing a project are shared by the majority of others (time management in particular) and sharing these experiences in the hope that others learn from them is beneficial. Indeed, in 2012 we still run Dissertation Question Time and feedback remains overwhelmingly positive. Although the sample is too small to make definitive pedagogical

conclusions and further exploration with larger groups of students must be pursued, it suggests a positive trend towards this format that has positive implications for supporting undergraduate and postgraduate researchers at Brunel and through central support departments elsewhere.

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