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Title A study of the experience of Education Masters dissertation students; could different models of working offer further support other than the usual student – tutor dyad?

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A study of the experience of Education Masters dissertation students; could different models of working offer further support other than the usual student – tutor dyad?

In most European countries the final assessment in a master's degree programme is the master's thesis (Meeus, van Looy, and Libotton 2004) or dissertation.

Research supervision has conventionally been conceptualized as an individual activity in the humanities and social sciences, and the literature has to a great extent focused on the supervisor–student dyad (Dysthe, 2006 p 299).

Other studies support this assertion (Anderson, 2007; Kirton, 2011; Pilcher, 2011). This is not just in the UK either for in other countries "...master's students traditionally have one supervisor who guides them through the process of their research in a more or less one-on-one relationship" (Renske A.M. de Kleijn, 2012, p926)

Most of our Education mature students returning to study part time at master's level - are still working full time as school, college and academy teachers. My research question was therefore whether more innovative and creative ways of working on dissertations other than the face to face supervisor–student dyad may be beneficial for such students? It exists in some other disciplines (Egan et al. 2009) and countries other than the UK, and so the question was whether it could also be useful for us.

A social constructionist, I work "assuming both discourse and education to be inherently collaborative meaning-making activities". Thus we create a genuine community (Rymer, 1993) and the students are co learners, what Freire called "teacher–student with student-teachers". With students, in this case, teachers in schools etc., I "collaborate ...engaging them in conversation and acknowledging that our talk shapes our reality as a social group and in turn our pedagogy" (Rymer, 1993).

Working from the above, I started to trial a new way of working. One cohort of students was therefore, by agreement, grouped to see if indeed approaches other than the one to one tutor/ student engagement were helpful. As mentioned above, this was in the light of studies by Dysthe et al (2006) as well as others which suggest they could be.

All our students who recently completed or who are presently engaged with the dissertation stage of our master's programme were invited to contribute to the research, firstly via a questionnaire.

From those that participated, 38 in all, most offered to be interviewed although in practice, when contacted again, not all then offered dates and times to talk further after all. However, nearly twenty were talked to in some depth by phone, Skype or face to face.

Work with this interview group worked within something of a participatory research approach. This was to encourage the students and ex-students, now graduates of the programme, to see the work as shared, working with rather than doing research 'on them'. Through this approach, we "respect" the knowledge that lies within the "community" (Cohen et al, 2011, p 37). It also supported the idea of moving "towards change through empowerment "within an on-going "working relationship" between both researchers and participants (op. cit. p38).

The methodology was case studies using mixed methods (Plowright 2011) with some observation data contributing to that gained from questionnaires and individual and group interviews thus enabling triangulation to be used to offer some reliability and validity. All data were anonymised in line with established UK ethical guidelines and those of my university.

The interviews were 'relatively unstructured, informal conversation-type' (Gillham 2000, p25) focused around three dissertation process based questions. This was important because in some cases we had, as in a previous study (Anderson and Gristy, 2013) "worked together for some time and had already built up a relationship, which meant that to revert to a very formal structure would have seemed inappropriate" (Anderson and Gristy, 2013, p113).

I established an understanding with the participants that 'the defining characteristic [of case study] ... is its focus on just one instance of the thing that is to be investigated' (Denscombe 1998, p15) in this instance, the issue of dissertation working - and we kept discussion to that. By working together in this way, we operated within the intended participatory research approach, generating grounded theory, 'theory that is grounded in the evidence that it turns up' (Gillham 2000, p 25).

After evaluation and analysis – working jointly at this stage with an ex student whose own dissertation had focused on similar aspects of masters working, I plan to propose measures - initially for the teaching practices on our own Education master's programme but then potentially for a wider audience.

Initial results suggest that group and peer working does indeed have some advantages but is by no means the most popular finding from the data. The final paper will be able to offer a detailed exploration of how these other practices may be beneficial or otherwise.

Since the study has focused on the discipline of master's dissertation work with the subject area being of secondary concern, the findings should have application across all practice/ professionally focused part time masters. Literature that underpins the research project to date has been taken from nursing, social work, computing and maths as well as education (in both the UK and other countries) and therefore this study should readily contribute to this larger body of knowledge too.

Literature

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