Independent learning and the dissertation proposal: A case study of Masters' student experiences

Background and introduction

Independent learning is perceived as central to university study in the UK (Higher Education Academy 2014). This involves learners taking responsibility for their own learning as an aim of study (Moore 1973; Boud 1988). This journey to independence is personal in that students' responses to the requirement for more independent learning can be impacted by diverse prior learning experiences and may vary with individual tasks (Boud 1988). It is to be expected that this process will include moments of uncertainty; Silén (2001, cited in Silén and Uhlin 2008) theorises a dialectical relationship of 'chaos' and 'cosmos' through which points of frustration and confusion work alongside points at which learners are able to use and construct knowledge. Nonetheless, expecting 'too much' independence at the wrong point can leave the learner feeling unsupported and prevent learning from occurring (Boud 1988, Silén and Uhlin 2008, Spiro, Henderson and Clifford 2012). The challenge, then, is in recognising when this 'chaos' is productive, and when it can work actively against independent learning.

This paper explores the Masters' dissertation proposal as a transition to more independent learning. It considers a stage in which students are working independently on proposals before a supervisor is allocated. There has been very little prior research into dissertation proposal writing, outside of small-scale qualitative studies (Franken 2012, Salter-Dvorak 2014). This research broadens the discussion, by reporting on the views of a large cohort of Masters' students in a UK Business School, and by combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Previous studies on the experience of Masters' dissertation writing more generally have tended to focus on domestic students with considerable professional experience in the area of their Masters' courses, and who are working with the support of a supervisor (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin 2008, Drennan and Clarke 2009). By contrast, this research focuses on a group of predominantly international students, the

majority of whom do not have significant work experience in their field. The experiences of Masters' students during this 'pre-supervision' stage will therefore offer important insights into student transitions to independent learning.

Methodology

The paper draws on questionnaire and focus group data. Questionnaires were circulated to students before their deadline for submitting the dissertation proposal, with 338 completed questionnaires received. Two semi-structured focus groups were held after initial analysis of the questionnaire to further explore students' experience of independent learning. Chi-square tests (Opie 2013) were used to analyze quantitative data. Qualitative data from both the questionnaire and the focus groups were analysed using NVivo software to ensure that the data was analysed in a rigorous and transparent manner (Creswell 2013).

Findings

This research suggests that working on the dissertation proposal was not primarily a positive experience for Masters' students, with only 24.5% of respondents agreeing they were enjoying the process compared to 36.1% who disagreed. This was associated with feelings of confusion over topic selection in particular. Selecting a dissertation topic was perceived as the most challenging aspect, with only one in five having decided on their dissertation topic two to three weeks before the deadline. While nearly 80% of respondents had prior experience of writing a dissertation, many students indicated that this was the first time in which they had been required to select their own topic, and to justify it in relation to prior research. Open comments indicated that many students were engaged in activities consistent with the independent study required, such as researching literature in order to refine possible topics. However, other students referred to the challenges of 'getting started' on topic choice. A desire for more support with topic selection, with finding literature and data, and with research methods, was expressed by many participants. Few students had approached academic staff for advice,

and those who did tended to seek out feedback on ideas they were developing rather than ask for advice on getting started on the independent learning process involved in the proposal.

These findings suggest that formulating a dissertation proposal was widely viewed as challenging and, for many, represented a considerable transition to more independent learning. For some students, the 'chaos' brought about by these new challenges existed alongside a productive 'cosmos' (Silén 2001, cited in Silén and Uhlin 2008) as they created new research projects. For others, however, the difficulties in 'getting started' appeared to be hampering progress. This was compounded by uncertainty about how to get help with independent learning.

Implications

The findings of this research suggest some areas in which further support could be developed to enhance Masters' student experiences of formulating dissertation proposals. The difficulties reported by many students in 'getting started' suggest that early interventions would be helpful. It would be beneficial to develop activities offering further practice opportunities in tasks required by the proposal. These 'scaffolding' activities might include, for example, a task designed to practice identifying possible topic areas from the existing research literature. These activities could be incorporated within existing courses that students undertake and would offer greater opportunities to support the transition to independent learning.

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