

2013

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Recommended Citation

Mottiar, Z (2013) Using online support materials to enhance the student's dissertation experience in Donnelly, R, Dallat, J and Fitzmaurice, M, *Supervising and writing a good undergraduate dissertation*. Betham Publishing, 2013.

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USING ON-LINE SUPPORT MATERIALS TO ENHANCE THE STUDENTS' DISSERTATION EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: This chapter discusses the use of on-line materials to enhance the student's dissertation experience. This project began in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism in 2009 partly as a reaction to the fact that from that September the final years of all honours degree programmes would complete a dissertation. This necessitated a more structured approach to the management of this process and also meant that supervisors would be supervising many more students than heretofore. As part of this new system it was decided to investigate the possibility of developing on-line support materials which would be available to all students in conjunction with the support that their supervisor would provide.

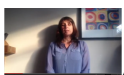
In the current academic year such resources are being made available on a weekly basis. They primarily take the form of video podcasts. These materials have two objectives. Firstly they impart important information which is relevant to the stage in the process at which they should be that week. This includes for example video interviews regarding how to write a questionnaire, a discussion regarding the role of supervisors and how to read critically. But the second objective is equally as important and that is to motivate the students and to keep them on track. For this reason the resource is released every Monday morning with the intention of reminding them of the tasks they need to conduct for their dissertation this week and to motivate them. Examples of materials in this regard include the first video about the challenges of the dissertation and how to overcome them and another video interview with the Counselling service in DIT, relating to getting back on track after first semester exams and how to manage your time and motivate yourself.

This chapter discusses the process by which the resources were developed, presents examples of materials that have been used successfully and engages in an analysis of how the success of such materials can be measured. The experience and views of students are also incorporated in the chapter as a key way of evaluating the tools.

This chapter will be of interest to supervisors and those managing the dissertation process in their own institutions. It provides ideas of how on-line resources can be utilised effectively for this purpose and also makes the resources that have been developed to date available for those who wish to use them. The challenge of changing technology, changing students, changing institutional environments and independent research necessitates supervisors to think beyond traditional ways of engaging with students, not necessarily replacing the personal contact that is an important part of this process but about ways to supplement this contact. This chapter contributes to this thinking by outlining and evaluating the first efforts of doing this in one institution.

Keywords: dissertation, on-line materials, student experience, video podcasts, dissertation experience

INTRODUCTION



Although completing a dissertation is a common element in the final year of an undergraduate degree there has been little research undertaken in this area. Its importance is made clear by Smith who comments (2005, p.337) that it 'holds a revered place within the undergraduate curriculum' and in the eyes of students, educators and employers is 'a, or even *the* defining element of an undergraduate degree'. Todd et al (2006, p.171) suggest that the dissertation is 'relatively unique within the curriculum in that it gives students free choice of what they can study'. While this free choice can be attractive to students the expectation of independent research and learning can also lead to new challenges. This chapter presents a case of study of

efforts that are being undertaken in the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism in Dublin Institute of Technology to enhance the student's experience of the dissertation process. The tools that have developed in this regard are on-line and supplement the usual supervisor supports.

RATIONALE

The School of Hospitality Management and Tourism comprises of approximately 800 students who complete a variety of tourism, hospitality, leisure and event programmes ranging from certificates and short courses up to



Masters programmes. All of the final year undergraduate students undertake a dissertation as part of their studies and this module is treble weighted. In 2011/12 104 students undertook dissertations. The development of on-line materials for these students was primarily in response to a number of identified changes and needs among the stakeholders. Earlier research among students and supervisors (Gorham and Mottiar, 2009) had identified some issues of concern and this combined with a changing institutional environment and the international move towards the development of on-line resources all provided the impetus for these developments.

Students Experience of the Dissertation

Silen (2003, p.4) describes how the autonomy in learning can be both frustrating and stimulating for students and result in feelings of 'chaos' and 'cosmos'. Todd et al (2004) study also notes that a key concern of students was time management and the impact of the dissertation on other course work. In 2009 survey work with the cohort of dissertation students (Gorham and Mottiar, 2009) found that all but one student surveyed identified key new skills that they had developed by completing their dissertation. These included writing skills, research and analytical skills, interviewing and referencing. However interestingly they also mentioned skills such as time management, organizational skills, patience and people skills, all of which are transferable skills which will have a long-term impact on the individual (Gorham and Mottiar, 2009). Their primary concerns revolved around time pressure issues and this reflects the work of Todd et al (2004) as noted above.

When asked to evaluate the experience overall 16 out of the 22 who responded to this question used positive words and statements in their answers with phrases such as 'being proud', having a 'sense of relief and satisfaction' and being 'delighted to be finished' being offered. For those who did not have such good experiences finding the experience 'stressful' and 'hard work' was the most common responses.

It was the positive responses in terms of the experience and the key skills developed which identified the potential for this project. The initial objective was to use previous year's student experiences to aid those who were currently undertaking dissertations. The obvious way to capture this was by video and so these were the earliest videos that were made with students who had completed the dissertation outlining their experience and



giving advice to those who were starting the process. For example: Having identified this possibility of engaging with students at a distance and providing them with support in the form of video the project then mushroomed as new ways of helping those who wanted additional information and those who were stressed by the whole process emerged.

Role of the Supervisor

Rowley and Slack (2004, p.180) acknowledge the importance of the supervisor who plays ‘a pivotal role in supporting students towards realizing their potential’. However they also note the ‘truncated process’ of undergraduate supervision which often involves ‘brief encounters’ at the various stages of the process including identification of research topic, questions and objectives, reviewing the literature, constructing the appropriate research design, data collection and analysis and developing conclusions. While previous research in the School (Gorham and Mottiar, 2009) noted the positive feedback students provided regarding the role of supervisors, the truncated nature of the relationship means that there can be gaps in terms of motivation and support and students may feel it difficult to keep the momentum going in between submission dates. This led the author to deliberate whether supplementary on-line resources may provide an additional layer of support and motivation for dissertation students.

In addition this research had identified that while many staff found the experience of supervising rewarding and beneficial there were some who noted that the experience depended on the ability and commitment of the student. This can be shown in two very different lights with one supervisor noting her positive experience: as ‘I happen to have two excellent students who formulate their own excellent research questions, on their own initiative and make good progress’, while another said that the supervisory role used to be rewarding ‘when students had more ability’. Another supervisor stated that his key concern is that students ‘lack understanding of what is required for a thesis’ and another noted the ‘haphazard approach to compilation of the final document due to lack of time’.

It was hoped that adding new layers of support and information may enhance the students’ ability and enthusiasm and that a consequence of this would be to improve the supervisory experience for staff.

Institutional

In 2009 the decision was taken that all final year honours degree students should undertake a dissertation, this quadrupled the number of dissertations that were going to be completed in the school. It also necessitated changes in terms of streamlining the process more, staff supervising more students and marking more documents and us being even more cognizant of the student experience of this module and the importance that it would play for all fourth years as it is a triple weighted module. This significant change in the environment acted as another catalyst to the project of developing on-line support for dissertation students.

International Trend of Developing On-line Resources


Internationally in third level education there has been a trend towards the development of on-line resources to either supplement or replace more traditional modes of teaching. Continuing advances in technology provide extensive opportunities to develop new on-line resources. While the dissertation students complete a Research Methods module in Semester 1 there is no equivalent module in semester two when they are developing their research tools, conducting their empirical research and analyzing their data and writing up their findings. The objective was to provide them with additional on-line support during this time. The key way in which this has been done to date is in terms of video podcasts, most often comprising of discussions of key relevant issues. Kay and Kletschin (2012, p. 620) state that ‘previous research suggests that video podcasts have a positive impact on student attitudes, behavior, and learning performance’. In terms of pedagogical practices for effective on-line teaching Bailey and Card (2009) identified eight pedagogical practices for effective online teaching including fostering relationships, engagement, communication and organization. However it is noted that often on-line resources are more utilized in terms of constructive pedagogy rather than transformative learning and as Kay and Kletschin (2011) note most teaching using video podcasts involve receptive viewing whereby the students acts as a passive learner. The intention for this project was to capitalize on technological advances and develop a series of video podcasts which would encourage engagement by students in the dissertation process, enhance their experience and provide information and advice that could be watched and listened to at the time most suitable for the student. In so doing, these resources should enhance student’s skills and knowledge and supplement the support provided by supervisors and the Research Methods module undertaken in semester 1.

So student and supervisor experiences, combined with institutional changes and international trends in education created an impetus for the development of on-line support for dissertation students in the School. The section below describes in more detail how this was done and the types of materials that have been developed.

CASE STUDY

There have been a number of stages to the project. In the first instance the plan was to simply video students who would outline their experiences and provide advice to other students who were beginning the process. This was conducted at the end of the academic year 2009 and the videos were placed in Webcourses (the institutional virtual learning environment) for students to access. Stage two began in January 2010 when approximately 5 video discussions were developed and released via webcourses to students in the lead up to the submission of their dissertation. The positive feedback from this activity led to a much more structured approach for the academic year beginning September 2011 when the objective has been to release one video every week during term time for the whole process of the dissertation. This has resulted in the development of 24 videos.

From a technical perspective there are primarily two different categories of videos, one group are those that were filmed with a personal video camera and a tripod and then the better quality ones which were filmed using much more advanced equipment by a professional from DIT's Learning and Teaching Centre. All of the videos

are loaded onto a channel in YouTube  and also onto the HEAnet site. YouTube was selected as it was easily accessible and didn't require much technical expertise, it also had the attraction of showing the number of views and so allows tracking of usage. While all of the videos are stored on YouTube and the HEAnet site, each week a link to a specific video is placed on the front page of webcourses (see figure 1 below). This means that the webcourses module is live and constantly changing and each week students need to log in to see what is new rather than having access to all of the videos at one time. This is a deliberate strategy to increase motivation, interest and usage. As the new video link is put on the front page each week the previous weeks one is stored in a folder so it is still accessible.

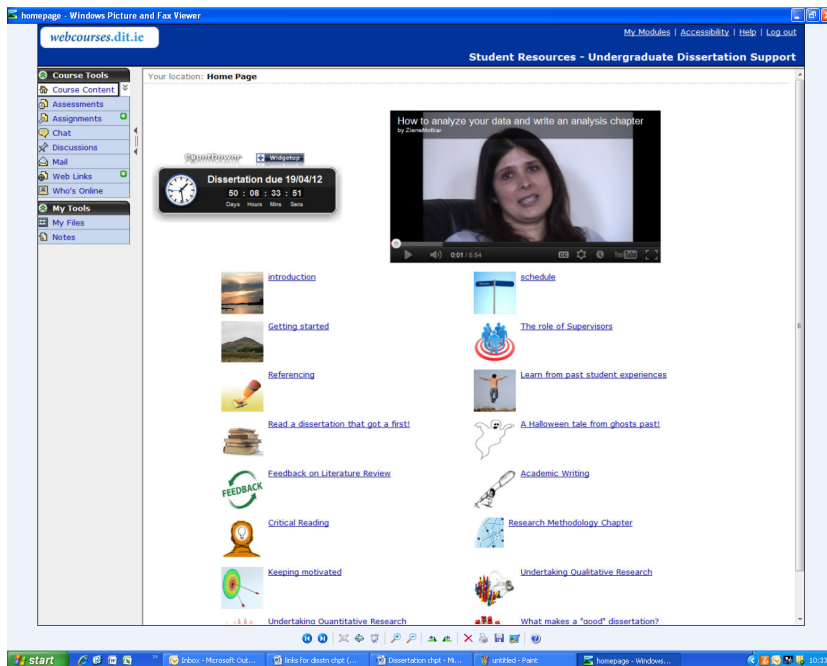


Figure 1: Screenshot of front page of Dissertation module in webcourses

The video for each week pertains to the stage at which they are at that point in time in the process. There were a number of clear objectives in developing these materials. Firstly to attempt to enhance the motivation of dissertation students consistently throughout the process, secondly, to provide additional information and guidance about aspects of the process and thirdly to provide another layer of interaction and support.

Enhancing Motivation

From the students perspective keeping motivated through the eight month process of producing a dissertation can be challenging and we implemented a timetable of submission dates of chapters to supervisors in an attempt to break the process down into more manageable deadlines. This has definitely been successful in terms of regular submissions. To supplement this at particular points in the process motivational and practical guidance regarding motivation has been delivered to help students. This can be exemplified in the following video



which was the first video released to students and attempts to get them focused on the dissertation and motivated to begin. While there are definite quality issues with this video, the feedback from students is good and a number of them in conversation have referred to the imagery of the dissertation as climbing a mountain. This type of video needs more professional support but the plan is to re-shoot it for next year.

After Christmas when students have been away from college and then sit exams they can find it difficult to get re-focused on their dissertation so this video interview was conducted with Catherine Bolger, a DIT student



counselor, and it deals with how to keep motivated and to plan your time. This is a really important video in terms of the suite of videos as it pertains to the issue of keeping motivated and time

management which the literature and our previous research in DIT identified as a key issue of concern for students.

Another period in which students begin to lose motivation is after they have submitted their Literature Reviews and experience has shown that after this submission in October some students can do little or no work on their dissertation until after February. This then creates huge pressure in the final months of the process. The submission of the Literature Review this year was the week before Halloween so an animation was developed with a Halloween theme to send a message about continuing to engage with the dissertation¹. The hope was to

blend humour with a strong message.



Providing Additional Information and Guidance

These students undertake a Research Methodology module in semester one and in this all aspects of completing a dissertation are covered, however many of the tasks such as collecting data, preparing research tools and engaging in analysis they are not actually doing until Semester two. So materials have been developed to aid them at the point at which they are actually involved in that stage of the process. For example this video is a discussion about what is qualitative research, why you would choose this method and provides tips of how to

conduct an interview



. In another short video Dr. Deirdre Quinn, lecturer in Research Methodology,

provide 3 key tips when writing an interview protocol.



There are also equivalent videos for quantitative research. Another example is a discussion between the author and Dr. Roisin Donnelly of the

Learning and Teaching Centre in DIT about writing an abstract for a dissertation



and also regarding

Editing and Fixing the final document.



Particularly popular resources are links to electronic versions of 6 dissertations that have received a first. This provides students with an example of the best documents that have been produced over the last two years and gives them something to aspire to and learn from. Although these dissertations are available in the library having them in webcourses makes them more easily accessible.

There are also a group of videos which deal with more holistic issues in terms of the dissertation. The first panel discussion video developed in 2010 was one in which four experienced supervisors discussed ‘what makes a good dissertation?’ From a project point of view this video was extremely important as the success of this video in particular spurred the idea to develop a whole suite of videos one for each week. The attraction of this video for the viewer or listener seems to be that the discussion is freeflowing and it shows students the sorts of issues which supervisors consider when marking dissertations. It also makes them think holistically about the document and how it will be marked rather than just focusing on practical issues such as what research method

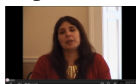
to use and to write a research tool and how to get the document completed



. This discussion

¹ This animation was developed using Xtranormal which can be downloaded for free and was done by the author who has no previous experience with animation.

emphasized the importance of academic writing and so a video discussion on this area was also developed.



Thus this group of videos provide students with practical information and insights for various stages of the process but they also encourage them to think of the piece of work as a whole rather than individual chapters and to analyze their own work.

Providing an Additional Layer of Interaction and Support

These resources have provided an additional layer of interaction and support and this has been particularly aided by the on-line discussion board. If students have questions about general issues to do with the dissertation they are posted on the discussion board and answered here. This is helpful for supervisors as many of the general issues do not have to be addressed by them and also for the students as they have another avenue for enquiries in addition to their supervisors.

The webcourses module also acts as a catalyst for peer support. A current dissertation student said that she finds the resources ‘pretty helpful, it’s good to have somewhere else to look for advice in an area. It seems a good few of us are watching them as they come up in conversation’. So it seems that the videos may be generating conversations among students after they are posted and these conversations could constitute a form of peer support.

HOW CAN THESE ON-LINE SUPPORTS BE EVALUATED?

There are a number of different ways of evaluating the impact of these supports. Firstly in terms of how much they are accessed. This year between mid September and mid May webcourses has been accessed 3,961 times by the 104 students who are completing a dissertation – that is an average of 118 visits per week over this time period. So it is clear that there is traffic in webcourses. In terms of accessing the videos this seems to differ with some videos definitely appearing more popular than others but it must be pointed out that the number of views of the videos does not take account of the fact that some may be multiple views by the same student and accessing the video does not necessarily mean that the student is engaging with the discussion.

A much more important measurement has to be feedback from students. A survey of 76 of the students who submitted dissertations showed that 26% of them logged on to webcourses daily and a further 47% logged on weekly. In 2011 86% of respondents stated that they found the on line resources useful. The 2012 cohort were asked to evaluate the individual units in webcourses and these findings are extremely interesting.

Table 1: Students evaluation of on-line resources

	<i>Percentage who evaluated the materials as excellent or good</i>
Getting started	69
The role of supervisors	63
Learning from past students	68

Read a dissertation that got a first	88
Halloween tips (animation)	33
Feedback on Literature Review	64
Academic Writing	52
Critical Reading	53
Research Methods	64
Qualitative Research	55
Quantitative Research	58
What makes a good dissertation	59
Findings and Analysis	62
Writing an abstract	60
Using your dissertation to sell yourself	42
Editing and Fixing your dissertation	57

The resource that the highest proportion of students (88%) ranked as excellent or good was an extremely static resource in that dissertations that received a first the previous two years are available electronically on the webcourses site. The two resources which less than 50% of students deemed to be good or excellent were the Halloween tips animation and the video interview of a discussion about how the dissertation can be used in interviews, cvs and social media to sell yourself. It is particularly interesting to note that although the animation was the only one of its kind developed as part of this module as the author thought that students might be entertained by this style rather than just the video interviews, this is clearly not the case. This may reflect the fact that while the animation was delivering a message about keeping up the momentum and continuing to work on the dissertation after the Literature Review was completed, that was all it did. While the other videos were imparting more layers of information, advice and discussion. These findings will be used to help make decisions about what resources to update or change for upcoming years and what new resources to develop.

As important as those that are engaging is considering those students who are not. Analysis in January 2012 showed that one student had not accessed webcourses at all and a further nine had accessed the site less than four times. Each of them were mailed and reminded about this resource and it is interesting to note that subsequently two of those who had only visited on a limited basis accessed more frequently after Christmas.

It is intended next year to enhance the feedback mechanism and to hold a few focus groups throughout the year to gain feedback about the resources and the types of issues that students would like covered in the weekly resources. This more regular interaction will help to affect a more immediate response.

FUTURE PLANS

This project is very much work in progress and feedback and suggestions from this years students will be utilized to develop further materials for next year. It is planned to reshoot some of the videos to improve the quality and also to add to the bank of videos by dealing with additional issues such as how to engage in analysis of literature, animated power point presentation with audio critiquing literature reviews to aid with writing skills and a video podcast to help with SPSS analysis of data. It is also planned to add to the stock of resources by introducing a greater variety of style of video as currently most are in the format of video discussions. This is likely to include animation, use of articulate storyline and prezi with audio voiceover.

The focus for next year will also be in terms of methods of delivery and there are plans to make the materials available in a number of different formats. At the moment the most common way students access the videos is

on computer but it is hoped to develop a system whereby in addition to e-mailing the students each week notifying them of new resources via webcourses texts will also be sent thus encouraging access via Smart phone. In addition the option of downloading the video or downloading the sound file will be presented for each video podcast. This will mean that the materials are more accessible and this flexibility will suit students who are more mobile.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented a case study showing how on-line resources and video podcasts in particular can be developed and utilized to provide support for students undertaking dissertations. These are currently being utilized in conjunction with supervisors and face to face contact but it is clear that they could also be the basis upon with distance supervision could also be conducted. Analyzing student's views of the resources shows that students are accessing video materials and find them useful. As discussed this is very much a work in progress and there are considerable plans of how these resources can be further developed.

The key purpose for developing these resources was to provide additional support and to act as a motivational tool for students embarking on a dissertation. Silen (2003) discusses the student experience of a dissertation as being one of 'chaos' or 'cosmos', and it is hoped that projects such as this help the students to remain in a state of cosmos and enhance the experience of conducting their first piece of research while maximizing the resultant benefits.

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