

First Journeys to Samarkand; Reflections on The Undergraduate Dissertation Experience

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ABSTRAK Kertas ini membincangkan pengalaman menyiapkan disertasi prasiswazah dalam Pengajian Pendidikan dari perspektif pelajar dan penyelia. Penyelidikan yang dilaporkan dalam kertas ini telah dijalankan oleh dua orang siswazah Kolej Homerton, Cambridge dan penyelia kedua-dua siswazah berkenaan pada tahun akhir disertasi.

Perbincangan merangkumi proses disertasi, iaitu dari pemilihan topik disertasi hingga ke peringkat penyerahannya, yang juga meliputi alasan mengapa pelajar membuat pemilihan berkenaan, jangkaan terhadap perkara yang berbangkit di antara pelajar dan penyelia, hal yang berkaitan dengan kekecewaan dan hasil daripada pengalaman tersebut. Fungsi disertasi dalam pendidikan profesyen guru di Kolej Homerton juga dijelaskan; terutama tentang kemungkinan peranan disertasi untuk menggalakkan fikiran kritis bagi jangka panjang.

Beberapa kejadian indah yang menarik perhatian dan kegembiraan lahir bersama isu-isu lain dalam pengalaman menyediakan disertasi yang dikumpul berdasarkan perspektif pelajar dan penyelia.

Introduction

The title of this paper is borrowed from an analogy drawn in a recent book by Sara Delamont (Delamont 1993). She suggests that doing educational research is like going on a demanding and exhilarating journey of discovery and uses references from JE Flecker's poem *the Golden Journey to Samarkand* (1922) to press this analogy throughout the book.

As a metaphor for two undergraduates and a novice adviser setting out on final year dissertations this notion of journeying seemed wholly appropriate! Not least because our journeys were first-time journeys into broadly educational issues and this made them, at least for us, rather special. We were the pilgrims traveling 'for lust of knowing'; we aspired to our own 'tales, marvelous tales of ships and stars and isles'; and like Flecker's merchants, we found ourselves gathering (and awash at times with) our own versions of 'spikenard/Mastic and terebinth'; when the time came to leave 'the dim-moon city of delight' we did so with reasonable grace; and finally when others would perhaps have had the sense to stop, we started again. But differently. Hence this paper.

Background

Under the regulations governing the Education Tripos of the University of Cambridge, BEd and BA candidates for one of the papers in Education Studies may elect - with the approval of the Faculty - to offer

instead a dissertation of between 8000 and 10000 words. Over the past few years this has been a popular option with final year BEd students based at Homerton College; and in 1993-94 thirty-nine out of 160 chose to undertake dissertations.

Expectations concerning the nature of the work to be undertaken is clearly flagged in the main briefing notes for candidates, it reads:

"Candidates and their supervisors are reminded that this is a dissertation for a first degree and not a piece of original work appropriate to a higher degree. Whilst an element of originality has value, and while reference may appropriately be made to small-scale inquiries, original research is not required. A candidate will be expected to show good knowledge of the relevant sources and ability to use them with discrimination, to give full reference, to exercise a sound and independent judgment, to structure his (sic) work logically, and to express himself with clarity and precision."¹

From this it would seem clear that the exercise is intended to be one of critical scholarship framed by personal interest. And indeed this is so. But what might easily be overlooked in so clinical a statement of expectation is the level of imagination, dedication and pure hard work that is actually involved in undertaking the option. Doing a dissertation proves by and large to be an unprecedented challenge and often in wholly unexpected ways.

This is important for at least two reasons. First, it helps to explain something of the range and variety of work offered under the option. And second it brings to the fore what is perhaps the most potentially problematic aspect of the dissertation option - that of the emergent relationship between the candidates and their supervisor.

Diversity of Approach

The scope and variety of the dissertations offered by Homerton students is striking. A measure of this may perhaps be gauged from the diversity of topics traditionally offered.

For example, some of the topics offered in 1993-94 covered professional issues from fairly traditional historical, psychological, philosophical and sociological perspectives:

- Secondary Schoolgirls' Curricula 1900-23,
- Culture, Classroom and National Curriculum,
- Rational Autonomy, and
- The Psychology of Children's Drawings: What information do they reveal to the teacher?

But there is also a considerable amount of work of an inter-disciplinary nature which draws from the candidates' own interests and strengths in highly imaginative ways. This was illustrated in the following 1993-94 titles:

- 19th. Century childhood - a sociological perspective
- How the deaf learn to communicate, and
- The teaching of English in elementary schools 1810 - 1921.

Moreover, this diversity of interest and focus is matched by an equally diverse range of research methodologies. These ranged from 'hard' quantitative to very subtly executed qualitative work centred upon genuinely inspired fieldwork and grounded in close attention to the details of setting and participants. To use 1993-94 titles once more as examples, it could be seen that *Choosing books for children: an exploration of the philosophical implications* was very much in the vein of the learned treatment, while *Children's attitudes towards other ethnic groups; a psychological perspective* was an eclectic mix of analysis and explication, and *Pre-school provision in the London Borough of Sutton* was a robust, policy-oriented study which could be said to have stretched the notion of a small scale inquiry to its fullest but was nevertheless a model of what might be achieved in a dissertation of this type.

Even from this brief consideration of topics recently offered and of the variety of basic research methods that characterised these topics, it is clear that diversity is one of the hallmarks of the Homerton dissertation.

But such diversity makes considerable demands on all parties to the process: those undertaking the work, those supervising it, and those responsible in the end for its evaluation. This raises some issues about the dissertation process; not only in terms of its procedures, the problematic and potentially problematic aspects of its demands on all parties but also, and more fundamentally perhaps, in terms of its value as a formative and, in some deep sense, educational experience for the candidates.

The Research Context

In spite of the number of Homerton students taking the dissertation option in recent years, little attention so far has been directed at the nature and detail of that experience. This is unfortunate in our view.

Homerton courses are of a demanding character. And these demands have without doubt intensified with ever-widening National Curriculum requirements and successive ideologically inspired 'reform' of teacher education. Bolton (1994) describes government action on teacher education as policy whose general drift is clearly "to break up the more or less monolithic pattern of initial teacher training (ITT) and to decouple it from higher education" (1994: 25). Homerton with a tradition stretching back more than a century of involvement in the professional preparation of teachers is understandably unwilling to be decoupled in this fashion. This tradition is evident in the standards expected of students in their professional as well as their academic studies and is clearly tangible in the demands made on students' time and application.

There is inevitably much to be done and less than enough time to do it. Course follows scheduled course at an unrelenting pace; measured out in lectures, seminars, essays and other assignments, related supervision and examinations. But while opportunities exist to discuss ongoing work with appropriately placed members of staff through a Supervision system (common to all Cambridge courses), there is seldom the opportunity to take an interest as far as either student or tutor would like because the exam/submission date draws in all too quickly. So, for many the final year dissertation offers the first real opportunity to see from inception to completion through sustained effort over several months, a relatively substantial piece-of personal work - a Homerton undergraduate dissertation.

The Purposes and Nature of The Research

The central purpose of the research reported below was to come to a deeper and richer understanding of what it was to do an undergraduate dissertation. This meant critically interrogating the experience in an effort to uncover not only its more surface manifestations but also something of the deeper significance of the experiences and the learning involved in doing the dissertation.

Our main research asset was felt to lie in our joint and singular experiences as candidates and adviser: having lived the process as participants from each side of the arrangement, we were particularly well placed to subject it to critical consideration. Much of the necessary articulation of issues was seen potentially to exist in a narrative of our experiences. In a real sense, the research comprised a rendering as narrative of the dissertation experience *as we individually had perceived it*, and the close analysis of that narrative in singular and comparative forms.

The first stage in this process was therefore to come to some understanding of what the dissertation experience had meant to each of us individually. This was achieved in two ways.

The more immediate and low key entree was a series of casual conversation struck up in idle moments between the completion of final examinations and the end of our time together at Cambridge. The dissertation reports had been submitted, the last of the examination papers dispatched and a long summer was in prospect. When the idea of collaborating in some sort of formal evaluation of the experience that had brought us briefly together was floated, it seemed little more than a logical conclusion to a period of often intense, sometimes frustrating but never dull interaction. Our initial (and very informal) discussions raised issues and aspects of the experience which surprised us not just in terms of the taken-for-granted assumptions that we found we had been operating under, but also for the degree of divergence that characterised these.

From these discussions a formative agenda emerged. We found that we shared a curiosity about the expectations that we had individually brought with us to the dissertation process, and about the 'highs' and 'lows' of the experience as it had unfolded. We wondered how various positions, actions and intentions that we had flagged at various times had been read by the other. And most of all we wondered what we each, in our own way, had taken from the overall experience.

One possible way of drawing-out our positions on these and related questions was to be interviewed individually about our experiences and to have those interviews taped. This was seen to have several advantages. By using a skilled and neutral interviewer - i.e. someone with a sound understanding of the supervision process and a facility for 'life-story' research but no direct connection with any of us or the dissertations - we would be able to talk in an unthreatened way about the process from inception to submission (and beyond).² In addition the tapes would provide a highly personalised record of the dissertation experience for the others to reflect on and against which to set their own perceptions and experience. In a real sense these tapes would offer a singularly authentic narrative while allowing access to each participating voice.

The neutrality of the interviewer was extended to include the framing of the interviews. Our brief was only that we were interested in interrogating the notion of the undergraduate dissertation process and that we wanted to be probed about the experience we had just been through. Apart from this, the interviewer was given a free hand.

The result went beyond our expectations.

We were interviewed "blind" of each other and without any preceding sight of the schedule of questions. In addition we undertook not to compare notes until all three interviews were completed. The interviews themselves left very little unexplored and treated nothing as sacred. We found ourselves drawn on a broad raft of questions; factors framing the various choices we made as adviser and students, expectations met, expectations un-met, moments of crisis, resolutions of these, unexpected problems, unexpected payoffs and so on.

The narrative which these interviews generated helped crystallise and sharpen our perceptions of each other's experience. It also confirmed the essentially eclectic, highly fraught and strangely solitary nature of the experience.

The second stage was to ask a logically sequent question: Was this an experience shared by others who likewise took the dissertation option? In order to determine whether and to what degree this might be so, we planned and carried out a survey of the 1993-94 Homerton dissertation cohort.³ By now our formative agenda had firmed up considerably, so the areas covered included:

- background factors influencing the decision to take a dissertation option, such as (for example) opinions on the amount and quality of the information made available to those considering a dissertation, and previous experience of undertaking extended coursework assignments;
- the nature and detail of the academic supervision arrangements that candidates experienced, as evidenced for example in the degree of choice which the candidate had about these arrangements (including any input into the assignation of individual advisers);
- the interpersonal relations that candidates developed with their advisers, especially as these might have impacted on the academic work as it progressed; and
- the valuation that candidates came to place on the dissertation experience in terms of the process; the product (that is the final report) and most significantly perhaps the less overt benefits that they felt they had gained. So for example this would include the research training involved; however elementary that might have seemed.

The third stage - which has fed most directly into this present paper - comprised our attempts to extend the early narratives in order to embrace some of the more salient issues that emerged from a close reading of the survey returns. These included the sometimes wide variation in the supervisory arrangements relating to contact time and feedback that characterised different candidates dissertation experience. This stage also involved informal soundings of the experiences of others who had acted as advisers to dissertation students of the cohort.⁴

In brief, our purpose in undertaking the small-scale investigation on which this paper draws was twofold: First, to attempt to construe our feelings about the necessary equity of a process characterised by such

diversity. In the belief that the experience should be not only in some rough sense equitable for all candidates but wholly and transparently so, we asked why in a small number of instances it did not appear to be so. And second, to identify and celebrate some of the rewarding aspects of the dissertation experience, which we felt and which the survey confirmed to be the demonstrable reality for most candidates.

The Format of This Paper

In this paper our reflection on the experience of completing an undergraduate dissertation is offered under three headings which say more about convenience of analysis perhaps than about the reality of doing a dissertation: beginnings, middles and endings. The first - beginnings - is concerned with the reasons that students undertook dissertations, their expectations and their early experiences of the process. It is also concerned with the adviser's perspectives on this stage of the work and seeks to illuminate from the advisers' perspective some of the concerns that may colour decisions taken in relation to briefing and early supervision arrangements.

The second main heading - middles - is concerned with the unfolding dissertation experience, especially the academic and affective aspects of the emergent relationship, and in particular the role that the adviser can come to play in ensuring continuance and perseverance with the dissertation when moments of despondency arise.

The third main heading - endings - is concerned with the advanced stages of work on the dissertation as student and adviser establish a pattern of work covering 'writing-up'. It considers the particular difficulties that arise as student and adviser work against a looming deadline to finish the dissertation report, and to do so to a standard that reflects the work that has gone into the project.

These are now addressed in turn.

Perspectives on Undergraduate Dissertation: A Discussion of Some Emergent Issues

(a) Beginnings

The Students' Perspective

The students' perspective at the outset of a dissertation can best be understood in the light of two overarching questions:

Why do students take the dissertation option?

What characterises their early experience of the dissertation?

Both of the student collaborators on this paper undertook the dissertation for a different reason and each had different expectations of what would be involved in the work. One saw it primarily as a better option given an individual learning preference for long-term attention to a problem and a personal aversion to examinations. The other saw it more in terms of lessening the final year workload; knowing from friends that the fourth year workload was intense, made the fourth year dissertation option seem attractive.

Having received a good grade from a main subject dissertation in third year was also a significant factor in the decision.

Similar views characterised many of the survey responses.

The most common response in the questionnaires was along the lines of "not good at exams". Specific answers ranged from "unconfident" to "useless". Although there was a little ambiguity, it was clear in the great majority of cases that "not good" related to grades. There were however strong indications that this reflected not only candidates' perception of their possible results but also perceptions of ability in sit-down exams as opposed to coursework (or dissertations). It was interesting to see how in almost every instance coursework and dissertation were conflated; the defining differences arguably only began to emerge later in the experience.

Avoiding the pressure of fourth year examination stress was also a very frequent response. This seemed to stem from two related concerns; the desire for fewer exams to sit during finals (thus taking pressure off other simultaneous studies) and the lessening of exam-created stress.

However, several respondents also commented positively on the opportunity offered by the dissertation to facilitate both depth and interest in an unprecedented way. Some reflected these views in their comments about taught alternatives lacking sufficient opportunity for such things but others were more explicit. For instance, one wrote about the need for intellectual challenge appropriate to the later stages of a four-year spell in higher education. Another articulated a clear vision of the justice offered by a dissertation as opposed to a formal set-piece examination. These students chose to do a dissertation at least partly because they felt that a piece of ongoing work would more reasonably and more accurately represent their true abilities.

Regarding the students' early experience of the dissertation process, several points benefit from closer consideration: the impact of the formal talk on those electing to take a dissertation option, the differences that emerged in the ways students draw up the important formal proposal, and the expectation - however tacit or tentative - that they held about how their working relationship with the adviser might develop.

The end of third year address was known to dissuade many students from doing a dissertation. Indeed the negative portrayal of likely experience, was likely to be overcome in two ways: potential candidates holding very strong feelings about doing a dissertation or not attend the meeting at all. Again because they were sure of their actions, many candidates went ahead with the next step anyway.

This next step was to draw up and submit for approval a dissertation proposal. Most candidates followed 'official' procedure and did this independently. (With this arrangement it is easy to see how 'mistakes' could be made and what is put on paper is not what the individual quite wants to follow through.) Other candidates, however, did approach a 'preferred' lecturer. For one candidate this was not to float the idea of doing a dissertation at all but led to a discussion of possible topic areas and help with structuring the actual proposal. In another case the approach was highly calculated to involve from the out-set a certain lecturer because of wanting to out-compete other students for limited places and ensuring they had someone they could collaborate with successfully.

Once their proposal was accepted, candidates must have had certain expectations. But the survey suggested that understandings of the work ahead seemed to vary enormously; as did the degree of urgency with which candidates begun their work. Some candidates covered extensive ground in the summer

whereas others did not. Perceptions of the role of the supervisor also clearly existed. These included the amount of attention to be received and likely response to work submitted for 'supervision', for examples. But these expectations were neither consistent nor predictable. Finally, though some level of thought clearly characterised the candidates' understandings of the likely interaction between them and their advisers - interpersonal as well as professional, for many this aspect of the experience remained an unknown territory. Many had little real knowledge of their advisers. For some indeed they were nothing more than a name. On the other hand, a few candidates already had some understanding of their adviser's 'supervision' style, most often from a supervisory relationship on a third-year course and so this was more predictable.

So far the process has been discussed but content in the broad sense of selecting a topic was the other major aspect of the beginning stages. Interest in a particular area was the most common response received in questionnaires to how students choose their topic. Some added that this interest was not covered by the equivalent taught course. Themes and topics were found to follow a more complicated pattern and seemed so individualistic that they were not commented upon further. Confidence was a major part of topic selection. It may have been one felt as strongest during the third year course but this may have been the result of pure interest. It should perhaps be noted that topic selection was not helped at all by the end of third year address. This was expected as the topics varied so widely. Subject area selection appeared consequently to be a highly individual thing and very much student initiated.

The Adviser's Perspective

A multitude of concerns characterises the interest of the adviser in the early stages of the dissertation. Many of these relate to the candidates' academic readiness to undertake the proposed work. Have they come up with a feasible topic? How mature are their understandings of the salient issues to be explored? Does early discussion of the topic offer evidence of a reasonable depth of preliminary reading, and so on. Other concerns centre on initially less tangible but no less important issues to do with what may be termed a candidate's dispositional readiness to undertake a dissertation. Have they any grasp of the order of skills that the work will demand or indeed of the perseverance necessary to see through an extended piece of work of this nature? Do they have adequate understanding of the skills of extensive literature survey: the tracing of relevant materials, the close analysis, the note-taking, the indexing and cross indexing, the synthesis, the counterpointing and so on? Will they cope sufficiently well with the demands of small-scale enquiry (if such research should be necessary); its design, implementation and analysis? And with its interactive aspects; the negotiation of access, the ethics of reporting research? But most importantly perhaps, what about their ability to bring it all together, to synthesize the thought, the reading and - where appropriate - the small-enquiry into a coherent final produce; the dissertation report itself?

One cut-off employed by Hometon to lessen these worries is to set an end of year three 'good grade' requirement in order to control access to the dissertation option. This is not wholly satisfactory but is in any event something of a moveable obstacle provided a good cause can be advanced for allowing a student with a relatively weak grade to proceed to the dissertation. Individual cases can be made; a point of which prospective advisers if not potential candidates are aware.

Another 'barrier' is that of formal sanction of the dissertation proposal. Again however, this is more an exercise in sharpening intention (through a request for review and resubmission of a proposal) than an exercise in exclusion. Drawing up the proposal gives the potential candidate an opportunity to flag interests; redrafting often helps add a touch of pragmatism to the project.

But the main barrier is, ironically, the formal end of year three address to the student cohort on the dissertation option. A judiciously realistic presentation of the dissertation option. A judiciously realistic presentation of the dissertation experience which emphasizes the reality of long hours and unpredictable outcome probably serves, somewhat unwittingly, as the deciding factor for many 'wavers' even before they set out on a dissertation. Faced with the demands of the journey, they decide not to voyage.

For those not easily dissuaded, perceptions of readiness are then collected in several ways.

Early documentation - especially the Formal Proposal - allows some useful insights into these areas of potential concern. This is however necessarily minimalist as candidates at an early stage of a dissertation project cannot really be expected to articulate all that they need to know to see the dissertation through. Evidencing for oneself as adviser the candidates' readiness for the dissertation then comes down to other means. These can centre upon a close study of the proposal by the prospective adviser, followed by a searching interview with the prospective candidate. From this can come the careful redirection of an initial proposal into a more feasible and tractable form. And this of course can prove something of a defining moment for the future relationship of adviser and candidate, in that it can come to shape the future tenor of the work.

When redirecting sections or indeed all of a preliminary dissertation proposal, the adviser may call on previous experiences of the candidates' work - particularly work offered in the third year or on colleagues considered opinions of the individual candidates. Either way a tentative and somewhat subjective profile can be constructed along with expectations of the working relationship that may be entailed. In a sense the adviser may begin to construct the candidates expected trajectory through the work and the mode of working. Likewise, aspects of the proposal may be mentally recast in a way more to the adviser's liking. When taken together these expectations form an agenda with which the candidate initially may be confronted.

But two remaining aspects of beginning the dissertation process are easily overlooked. First, the adviser's necessary self-rogação "Can I work with her and do I want to?" The affirmation must arguably be reasonably certain if the process is to have any serious chance of success. And second, the fundamental question "What will the experience do for them as teachers in training and as individuals in the course of a university education?" This last concern may remain largely unspoken: it is nevertheless a guiding consideration in how the adviser/candidate relationship develops from that point.

(b) Middles

The Students' Perspective

The middle stage of the work - by which is meant the stage where the research moves from planning and preparation (such as background reading) to the specific demands of organising into a research frame the materials and ideas so far generated - can be a problematic time from the student point of view. This is in mostly because it overlaps with the final year teaching placement, but also because it is the time when initial enthusiasm can give way to unease due to the realisation that the taught course is no longer an option; it has started and they are not on it.

Teaching placement - whether or not it is a 'good' one, can prove a problem for the dissertation. A 'bad' placement will almost inevitably cause dissertation related work to fall to one side. But even a good

placement can quite severely reduce the amount of time available for developing the dissertation project. The placement itself can be exceedingly absorbing to the point where the Christmas vacation (which follows immediately) needs to be spent mainly on coursework assignments independent of the dissertation.

One obvious casualty can be the small-scale study. Given the contribution that this can make to the quality of the overall experience, this is unfortunate.

Another effect related to this final year teaching placement can be a growing and somewhat debilitating sense of unease about irreplaceable 'dissertation time' being lost. This can be particularly problematic in cases where the candidates come to feel that they have in some way 'let down' their advisers. This can lead to deliberate avoidance of contact with the adviser because of what one candidate described as "a juvenile fear of not having done the work I 'should have' according to what I felt my supervisor's expectations were of me". In another form, these feelings can stem from frustration about the wish to 'get on with' the dissertation but the need instead to concentrate on the demands of the teaching placement. Later these frustrations may surface as reservations about not having begun the dissertation in time, not being able to bring helpful organising concepts to bear early enough and so on. In the words of one candidate: "I never really managed to achieve a sense of direction until the very late stages (time wise) of the dissertation".

However, once the teaching placement and the Christmas vacation are over, more wholehearted attention can be directed at the dissertation. From the student perspective one of the most cataclysmic possibilities at that point is that something will go so badly wrong that work on the dissertation comes to a complete halt. One possible source of such difficulties is the personal life of the candidate. Another is the increasingly demanding academic aspect of the dissertation itself, perhaps made even more acute by feelings of short-comings about work in the previous term.

So, for example, the breaking up of a relationship can seriously hamper a candidate's enthusiasm for work in general, and especially for the largely self-regulated work demanded by a dissertation. Or the (not unusual) feeling of falling short in relation to the requirement of the dissertation can result in what another candidate described as an academic "no-progress period", a period of self doubt that can be worrying enough for the candidate to consider withdrawing from the dissertation option while there is still time to do so.

Each of these in different ways brings out the importance of the adviser at this stage of the dissertation experience.

Arguably, the adviser needs to adopt a supportive, steadying role in regard to each but to display a different demeanour as necessary. In a case such as that of a personal crisis, there is perhaps much to be said for being easy to contact and offering a non-pressurising 'listening service', in the hope that the student will recover perspective given the time and support to do so. In the case of loss of academic confidence, the need is for an adviser who can enthuse the student and restore that confidence, or as one candidate put it "initiate a discussion that gains momentum and changes their mind". Such enthusing interventions may be needed more than once, of course.

In either a personal or academic intervention however, great care must be taken to ensure that the intervention is more help than hindrance; that the intervention puts the student 'back on track' rather than on a new advisers-determined track. In short, dependency needed to be guarded against; that was seen to do no one any favours.

Consequently, the ability of the adviser to weigh carefully how and when to intervene was one of the qualities most appreciated by candidates; a point that came through very clearly in the survey returns. The importance of certain other supervisory qualities also came through. These included the (much appreciated) ability to direct students to readings and to access relevant publications that were too recent to be available through the college library or otherwise difficult to locate; being a discussion partner with thorough knowledge of the topic area, and being prepared and capable to work *as a partner* rather than as a director or whatever; indicating alternative ways forward and possible avenues to follow up next; providing useful feedback; motivating and confidence giving.

In sum; from the students' perspective the crucial nature of the adviser's role in the final stages of the dissertation process went far beyond 'problem solving' in cases like those mentioned above. Students had strongly held expectations about their 'normal' requirements from a supervisor: supervisors needed to be motivational, they needed to be useful and relevant to the stage of the work, and they needed to be framed as exploring possibilities rather than insisting on certain directions. The adviser's role was, then, not about giving a great deal of directive input, or about being in the critical words of one candidate "too prescriptive". It was much more to do with being the type of adviser the student needed at the time and allowing the student a maximal degree of independence and freedom.

Our research suggests that the great majority felt their 'normal' supervision experience matched their requirements and was either 'invaluable' or 'very helpful'. It also suggests that most people felt their supervisors had shaped their work in 'a small way' rather than 'a lot' (or 'none'); thus ownership would seem to have remained with the candidates.

In certain cases - particularly where the candidates had chosen their own adviser - problems that might otherwise have severely damaged a candidate's self-confidence (to the likely detriment to their work) were defused or lessened through an approach to the adviser. A relationship of trust facilitated such approaches. The importance of such approachability is worth stressing. Again, this may relate to the question of the adviser being what that student needed at that point. In this regard, it may say a lot to note that more than nine out of every ten candidates expressed satisfaction with the interpersonal relationship that developed between them and their advisers. Indeed, for many, this was one of the most satisfactory aspects of the whole experience.

The Adviser's Perspective

For most candidates, work in earnest (i.e. on their dissertation project) does not begin until after their Autumn teaching placement. So while some start may have been made between the preliminary meeting at which the potential topic is discussed and the end of that teaching placement, on for example a literature search or reading - into a basic research strategy for a small-scale enquiry, the reality for most advisers is that they rarely if ever see their students during that term. Most advisers and students do not in fact meet again until the first of the formal dissertation supervisions in the early Spring.

Where advisers and students have agreed a timetable at their preliminary meeting (towards the end of the third year), much can go 'wrong' during that time. Small-scale enquiries that seemed both necessary and relatively unproblematic in the rush to beat the deadline for dissertation topics in early May can fold in on themselves as students fight to get the best from a particularly challenging placement in September through December; the immediate demands of a placement reasonably take precedence. Or the literature search that was supposed to proceed in parallel with the teaching placement can be relegated to later

attention and then attenuated or even abandoned in the weeks following the placement (and running through the Christmas holiday).

An important aspect of the adviser's role at this mid-stage of the dissertation can therefore centre on returning the student to a schedule of work and a timetable that offers a reasonable chance of completion, given the time remaining, or indeed placing them on such a timetable for the first time. Two forces in particular would tend to push the adviser in that direction: First, a genuine desire to assist the candidate come to terms with the reality of not having attained the targets as originally envisaged, by putting it all in some kind of perspective and getting dissertation work underway once more. And second to avert the very real possibility that the candidate loses self-belief to the point that they withdraw from the dissertation option. This latter point is particularly significant given the timing against which the decision needs to be set; just as the run-in to Final examinations is beginning. Obviously, a loss of confidence at that stage could have severe consequences in the examinations to follow.

But in all of this something of a syllogism is raised.

Radical action may be necessary in order to reconstitute the dissertation project in a tractable form but the candidate - by the very fact that they are inexperienced in these things - may seem largely incapable of such action. It can fall to the adviser therefore to take the lead in the redirection of the work. However, this could involve the adviser in unwarranted levels of intervention into the substance and direction of the dissertation so much so that the candidate may lose a large measure of ownership of the work in progress and with this perhaps the will to see it through. And while in itself this would hold obvious dissatisfaction, it would additionally contravene both the spirit and the letter of University Regulations governing the authorship of dissertation work. On the issue of authorship these state categorically that the dissertation must be a candidate's own work and a written declaration to the effect is required on the first page of the dissertation.⁵

How these conflicting demands are reconciled is of course a question to which each adviser must find his/her own answer. The probity of the dissertation system rests on advisers doing so, as does any hope that the supervisory relationship will retain an appropriate professionalism and that the dissertation experience will remain an essentially empowering one for the candidate.

Several points in relation to this claim may be drawn from the work on tutorship in higher education of Rapport et al (1989). They rehearse the commonly held assumption that

"...a dyadic relation combining formal instruction and interpersonal support within a framework that is both demanding and caring enhances the learning process";

and then continue to suggest

"...the significance of the relationship stems from its duality: the coexistence of intimacy, care and personal commitment on the one hand, and commitment to specific academic goals on the other" (1989: 15-16).

These observations usefully bring to the fore what is perhaps the defining characteristic of the adviser/student relationship in the context of the Homerton undergraduate dissertation experience. The relationship is by its nature dyadic and, possibly because of a strong institutional culture of collaborative support and nurture, many advisers seek to fill the dual role of academic mentor and affective guardian.

The middle stage of dissertation work is arguably the time when the adviser will be called on to exercise one or perhaps both of these functions. The instructional aspect may centre on the reconstruction of a project that is not on-track in some academic sense; perhaps through partial collapse or overly ambitious initial framing. A significant onus lies on the adviser to carry off any such interventions without damaging the self-esteem of the candidate. The affective aspect may hinge upon any one of a multitude of personal and emotional problems caused or aggravated by the rising pressures emanating from the approaching Final examinations. In either context, the benefits of judicious and appropriate interventions by the adviser can easily be seen. The challenge is to match the requirements involved.

It must be said however that formal training in both academic and supportive intervention is marked by absence rather than prevalence. So, what is interesting is not perhaps that this ambitious duality is attempted but rather that it would seem in the main to succeed.

(c) Endings

The Students' Perspective

A sense of purpose and of progression under pressure characterised much of the student experience at the final stage of the work.

Supervisors were seen often; both formally and informally. A lot of work went into drafting and redrafting between each meeting and so there was a lot to discuss at each supervision. As such the run up to the submission date was hectic and all absorbing, especially if the deadline seemed only just likely to be met. This inevitably meant that other interests - including main subject examination preparation - were put 'on hold'.

Much of the work centred upon editing down or editing out. This meant chapter redrafts, looking at them as units and attempting to tighten the coherence of argument and continuity. Planning necessary rewriting could be straightforward when supervisions focused on specific detail of the necessary revisions; but actually doing the work inevitably took longer than anticipated. Another characteristic of this stage was the ease in which attention to the detail of the thing - such as getting the dissertation into a presentable and consistent lay out, word-smithing and checking page references and so on - were very time-consuming. This probably reflected inexperience of students in this type of work but was certainly more problematic than it needed to have been for some students.

A deep sense of personal mission also characterised much of the student perspective on this stage of the work. The product handed in *had* to be the best that it could be made. But this was often tinged with frustration especially where the report had all the *content* wanted but was not word-smithed as much as the candidate would have liked because the submission deadline was imminent. In a way the deadline, after a year's work, seemed a rather artificial thing. For many this meant that the element of enjoyment diminished as the day for submission drew in, to the point where it was sheer self-discipline

and a fear of handing in a sub-standard piece of work which kept them going.

But despite the intense pressure of the later stages of the work, most candidates reported experienced strong feelings of pride in their work; particularly as it was about to be handed in. One candidate spoke with considerable personal satisfaction about the pleasure of knowing what had been given to the project - the personal investment in the process, the hard work, the interest - and the pride of knowing that the result was his/her *own* work; the length and depth of it. The dissertation became in a sense a part of the writers themselves. When finally handed in, a great sense of relief was felt and there was a feeling that one could get on with the rest of the degree.

Reflections upon the totality of the dissertation experience were diverse, ranging from the fundamental to the minute in scale but almost all expressed with great personal concern.

One interesting area was that of the tenor of supervisors. Criticisms were of confidence being knocked, lack of encouragement being given and for inexperience in handling students and a lack of relevant topic area knowledge. Though very unfortunate for those involved these cases were infrequent. Interestingly, it became apparent from the survey returns that several of those who did a main subject dissertation in their third year felt that their previous experience actually gave them a false sense of security and therefore complacency. These, in turn, seemed to have contributed to general attitudes towards the dissertation which may have been unhelpful. But this was perhaps as much a comment on the tenor of the supervisions that they had received as on their previous experiences. A good supervisor should arguably be able to identify and counter this malaise before it does too much damage to the candidate's prospects.

The most significant area of reservation regarding the undergraduate dissertation experience was that it demanded more time than the candidate could really afford to allocate. The time required to secure a reasonable grade was seemed in retrospect far greater than comparable subjects being done simultaneously. Also, time lost to teaching placement did not appear to be taken into consideration by examiners. In simple terms the work load was immense.

Despite these reservations most students agreed that doing a dissertation was worthwhile; the positive outweighed the negative in almost every way; and in most cases to a very considerable degree.

One confirming set of comments by candidates emphasized the professionalising value of the experience which was seen as being of direct relevance to teaching today. For those with a more theorised frame in their dissertation, the opportunity to take issues of broad professional interest to greater depth than would otherwise be possible was valued for the knowledge gained. For those who did dissertations with a strong classroom focus, their professional training was also enhanced in a significant way. Dissertation related research could offer them the rare opportunity of true observation, that is, observation of a practising teacher at work in a busy classroom. In this, critical reflection was possible on *and in* the working world of the teacher.

The Adviser's Perspective

In the final stages of the work the adviser's focus is almost synonymous with that of the students; the bringing to completion of the work, the construction and submission (on time) of the report.

In the majority of instances this focus has strategic as well as practical facets.

On the practical side much of the work undertaken by the adviser at this stage relates to the management of the student workload. This may include guiding the student through one of their most difficult decisions; the decision to stop 'researching' and start writing. It will almost certainly include framing the timetable for the writing up of the report, which means negotiating with the student a pattern of meetings and outlining the nature of those meetings in terms of the expectations involved.

The balancing between the strategic and the practical aspects of the adviser's role in the completion stage also changes subtly as the stage progresses. Once the run-in timeframe is in place and the expectations as to the contributions of each to the smooth completion of the project are established, the adviser's attention turns more directly to the editorial aspect of the role. While in some ways this is the most straightforward aspect of the stage - centering upon reading work in progress, critiquing the developing argument and guiding candidates through problems of presentation and style - it is in others that the supervisor may find most difficult.

Hockey (1994) has argued that academic boundary maintenance is essential to the probity of the research process for higher degree. By academic boundary maintenance Hockey means clear initial definition and ongoing adherence to a shared understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of demands made on the supervisor.

A similar demarcation is necessary within the final stages of the undergraduate dissertation for two pre-eminent reasons: First, clear understandings of what constitutes legitimate 'help' and an unswerving willingness to abide by these are necessary if the dissertation is to satisfy the University requirements for satisfactory completion. Anything less is of grave disservice to both the letter of the regulations and the spirit within which they are intended. Commentaries, margin notes, oral feedback and so on are therefore necessarily *suggestions* rather than directions. This must be accepted by both adviser and student. Once accepted by both parties, this understanding is likely to ensure that academic boundaries are much less likely to be breached.

Second, the final stages of the undergraduate dissertation experience are necessarily a time of uncertainty for the candidate. Even previous experience of writing extended essay does not totally prepare one for the demands of constructing a sustained and coherent report on the scale of a dissertation. This sense of the unprecedented demand is of course a largely positive thing and a critical part of the adviser's function is arguably to capitalise on the possibilities of the challenge involved. But this does not take from the fact that the write-up stage is viewed by the student as much for its possibilities of failure as for its possibilities of success. Clear, decisive boundary maintenance underwritten by an unwavering commitment to the validity of the students leading the process, is possibly the most effective way of de-escalating this very understandable (an potentially debilitating) anxiety. It follows then that academic boundary maintenance is not only an important part of the adviser's role at this stage of the work, but also an invaluable one in framing the students' experience.

Related to this move into the editorial function is of course a related shift in the affective guardian role. In part this is a product of naturally evolving control of the dissertation topic that the student experiences. But in part it is also perhaps a reflection of a growing intersubjectivity that adviser and student increasingly experience, an intersubjectivity based in the main on mutual insight into the nature and implications of the ongoing research but also related to the deepening interpersonal aspect of the working relationship.

However, persuading the student that they are ready to assume the lead in the write-up process can be problematic. Some are reluctant to believe this, perhaps because they may not see themselves as capable of making the 'right' decisions, or they might, because of previous negative experience of supervision, lack courage in themselves.

Arguably, the adviser has to instil and nurture this confidence as the writing-up progresses. And a principal part of this is contingent on allowing an informed criticality to emerge in and through the student's control of the process. In a way this is to close the compact that is tacit in the initial undertaking to supervise the student's work. The challenge to do so relates in some respects to that initial question "What will the experience do for them as teachers in training and as individuals in the course of a university education?" The adviser is in a sense acknowledging the growing professionalism - however nascent - of the student, feels in a way part of it, and demonstrating this by accepting the voice that is emerging.

Completion of the report in a full and appropriate way is a necessary and central part of this. It is not however all of the challenge: the balance of the challenge is inherent in completing the report in a way that leaves the candidate with an understanding of the potential of research as a tool for personal professional development, and an appetite for further work. And in this too the adviser was seen to have a crucial role to play.

Commentary

Lortie (1975) described the teaching styles of beginning teachers as individualistic and largely self-crafted. As first journeys into educational research, the undergraduate dissertation experiences considered in this paper seemed remarkably similar. We believe that this is because the dissertation experience is characterised to a very considerably degree - just as with early teaching experiences - by personal predisposition.

The importance within the dissertation experience of such personal predisposition emerged in several ways, but most noticeably in terms of approach to the research challenge and in a quite impressive adherence among candidates to notions of justice inherent in the dissertation option.

Individual candidates assembled basic research practices consistent with their understandings of their research questions and in a way that reflected - more perhaps than they may have appreciated - their individual personality. So for example, one candidate admitted rather ruefully to underestimating the standard of work expected, of "not connecting with tripos level expectations". But another began extensive fieldwork in the late summer and worked on the dissertation throughout the academic year. The latter noted that the dissertation took a great deal of time - far more than a full paper would have - but acknowledged having probably done "a lot more than was needed". Both however expressed a sense of satisfaction about the overall process because it allowed them to work as they chose; one described this as "working in a way that you are comfortable with yourself".

(Similar claims may of course be made for the style of supervision constructed by a novice adviser. The defining difference between adviser and student being perhaps that the adviser has a personal research history on which to draw.)

But perhaps the key expression of personal predisposition within the dissertation experience was a keen and broadly shared belief in the possibilities of dissertation as a more 'just' assessment method; a belief that seemed to overarch students' decisions to undertake undergraduate dissertations at Homerton, and their willingness to work determinedly towards the completion of a dissertation project. This came through explicitly in many of the survey returns but also ran as a perceivable undercurrent far more widely. Students, it seemed, cared greatly and in a deeply personal way about their work and wanted to be judged in what seemed a commensurate fashion.

The challenge represented by undergraduate dissertation seemed to us to go a considerable way towards meeting the intellectual needs of a good number of students. The dissertation option was valued and appreciated in particular for returns perceived in the nature of personal benefits; a chance to develop a long-held professional interest, an opportunity to focus in depth on a specific topic, having an element of control over a significant section of the final year work-load and a very real possibility of shaping the outcomes of the work, and so on.

Moreover, while the skills necessary to complete a dissertation were seen to be different and in many ways more demanding than those required to take set-piece Tripos papers, they were also seen by candidates as highly relevant to their emergent professionalism. Implicitly and explicitly qualities such as application, scholarship and criticality were evident in and celebrated by the dissertations. In the main the experience itself seemed to confirm these opinions although several candidates expressed reservations about the scale of work involved or the unhelpful official briefing and documentation, the overall perception of the dissertation experience was extremely positive. In the small number of instances where strong reservations were held about the experience, these tended to be directed against under-supportive advisers and unsatisfactory outcomes.

Personal predisposition is of course not the whole story. There is also the possible impact by the adviser's 'supervision' on the dissertation at all stages of the work and in different ways. The significance of the 'supervision' process within teacher education at Cambridge and particularly with regard to the undergraduate dissertation is perhaps worth noting here.

A tradition of academic excellence demands much and brooks little if any compromise in its maintaining mechanisms. Part of the mechanism by which excellence is pursued at Cambridge centres upon small-group tutorial and individual supervision when appropriate. At the heart of these practices - which are still widespread - is a specific notion of intellectual engagement; presenting and defending ideas, considering argument. This is seen as an integral part of a fully rounded higher education.

But fostering such an engagement is not in any actuarial sense 'cost effective'. The supervision tradition is nonetheless retained as an integral aspect of undergraduate dissertation at Homerton College. Like supervision for other tripos work, it is of course difficult to justify solely in cost terms. Offering students the option of doing an undergraduate dissertation appears therefore to be a significant statement of commitment to a professionalisation process that goes well beyond the requirements of rudimentary teacher training. Arguably, a dissertation option represents an unequivocal investment in the professional standing of the future teacher.

But in what precisely does such an investment consist? In the light of what we have learnt from the dissertation experience and the insight that we have derived through the critical reflection which has generated this paper, we would offer three postulates:

- Undergraduate dissertation fosters a vision of the teacher that celebrates notions of extended professionalism (Stenhouse 1975), including the legitimate claims of the teacher to professional development through systematic, collaborative-study. That is; undergraduate dissertation seems likely to foster long-term criticality.
- Undergraduate dissertation goes some way towards providing the future teacher with a basic research epistemology. This could serve as a resource from which to develop an understanding of more elaborated research methodologies and - more importantly - against which to set and evaluate research evidence with which they come into contact as teachers.
- Undergraduate dissertation has intrinsic value for the sense of personal pride-in-work that it can give to the candidate. Pride in the learning that characterised the process, in the hard work that has been involved, and in the perceived quality of the finished piece; all of which become a part of the candidates and of his/her life-story.

In conclusion, it seems to us that undergraduate dissertation is in many ways about crafting an individualised research style, however embryonic. It is about coming to an understanding of the potential of research as a way into classroom life, and the capabilities of teachers to turn these understandings to good effect as vehicles for professional self-development. Most fundamentally, however, undergraduate dissertation is a formative and integral aspect of any good higher education experience.

It is probably no coincidence therefore that each of the student collaborators on this paper has expressed an intention to do further research; in one case by employing action research principles in the classroom setting, and in the other by undertaking policy-focused work for a higher degree. Nor is it a coincidence that each was willing to undertake the considerable demands of putting together this paper.

An adviser hopes for nothing less when setting out for Samarkand.

Our stated purpose in undertaking the small-scale investigation on which this paper draws was twofold: First, to attempt to construe our feelings about the necessary equity of a process characterised by such diversity. It remains our belief that the experience should be equitable for all candidates; and wholly and transparently so. We asked why in a small number of instances it did not appear to be and were able to answer this question principally in terms of shortcomings in supervision practices relating to diminishing rather than encouraging confidence, not offering encouragement (academic and/or moral) when it was badly needed and lacking understanding of the unexpected demands placed on some students during the dissertation process. But failings on the part of some candidates were also important; of these underestimation of the scale of the undertaking and subsequent collapse seemed the most significant, though an unwillingness among a few candidates to embrace the opportunity for self-directed work was also seen as problematic.

We also set out to identify and celebrate some of the rewarding aspects of the dissertation experience. Among these we note three especially: The challenge represented by undergraduate dissertation goes a considerable way towards meeting the intellectual needs of final year students. And towards the close of their time in higher education student-teachers are ready for and entitled to such a challenge. Dissertation can produce a sense of considerable personal achievement. Such sense of pride-in-work and enhanced professional confidence is, undoubtedly the demonstrable reality for most dissertation candidates.

And finally the indications are strong that undergraduate dissertation can catalyse and help foster criticality. Faced with a professional future in an increasingly demanding (and increasingly politicised) service oriented society, teachers with a strong sense of professional probity and a keen awareness of their roles in regard to that society would seem to be something worth encouraging.

Notes:

- ¹ Para 2, p 2. Notes of Guidance for candidates intending to offer a dissertation under Regulation 7, Section II, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, December 1993.
- ² In this regard, we would like to acknowledge the unstinting assistance given to our project by Phil Gardner, University of Cambridge Department of Education (CUDE), and the technical support provided by the Leverhulme Oral History Project team which is also based at CUDE.
- ³ Of the thirty-nine candidates who completed a final year dissertation, twenty-three responded to the survey, which represented a response rate just short of 60%.
- ⁴ Our original intention had been that a round of formal investigation would follow. Unfortunately pressures of work have not allowed this to be completed in time for this present paper.
- ⁵ Para 4 (b) p 3, Op.cit.

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