

# The Undergraduate Dissertation: Subject-centred or Student-centred?

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**Abstract:** Our paper is designed to stimulate discussion of the undergraduate research process. We use recent changes in the dissertation process at Coventry Business School as a backdrop for exploring the authors' perceptions of two extreme types of teaching: the subject-centred and the student-centred. We conclude that the subject-centred approach is dominant and it would seem to leave little room for continuing professional development of academics or students. Both authors will offer examples from their own reflective practice.

**Keywords:** Research methods, facilitation, learning environment

## 1. Background

For a number of years the undergraduate dissertation process within Coventry University's Business School has been a wholly individual one in the sense that supervisors were allocated individually to students after completion of a very basic project proposal. A series of ad hoc meetings would follow between the two parties, hopefully resulting in the student engaging with literature and the researched to produce a coherent project.

This process was fraught with difficulty. From the supervisor's perspective, the student was probably unknown. Any understanding of the student's strength and weaknesses possibly picked up from a few brief meetings in pressured moments between teaching, marking and preparation. Hours allocated by timetable managers bore little relation to the time spent with the student if the job was done well.

For the student, their stories indicated that they often felt cast adrift into a process that somehow staff expected them to be able to cope with once they had reached their final year. Some staff were sought after rather than others because they seemed more student-centred and/or had research experience of their own. Therefore, the student experience was increasingly shaped by the allocation of supervisor. The dissertation was squeezed into the ever-increasing deadline demands of the final year. Most left the substantial work until the final term, adding more time pressures into the process. Academic staff found themselves with as many as twenty Honours projects to supervise. Often the

initial stages of project development were similar for many students, with staff repeating much of the advice on, for instance, developing a research question. With a reorganisation of the undergraduate programme in Coventry Business School it was decided to revise this process.

## 2. Changes in the process

As a result of curriculum development Honours students now meet their supervisor in a group setting during the first term and have supporting lectures. This may have initially been driven by a need for efficiency but it has led to research methods moving to a central place in the final year curriculum with formal assessment being made of a literature review and a reflective journal, as well as a mark being awarded for the final project. As Davis states (2003:243-244)

*'The Higher education environment is changing and this is particularly so in the post-1992 higher education institution... increased accountability makes reflective practice something beyond the vision of many.'*

Overlaying the changes in the dissertation process are broader contextual issues that have increased the pressure on academic staff. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that although this 'new' teaching style seems to be accepted by the students, there have been some notable tensions and difficulties amongst staff. Some of those tensions and difficulties will be explored in this paper.

First, as part of a group the student follows a programme with a staff supervisor concentrating on crafting and then presenting a research proposal, then finally an assessed literature review. Secondly, the student goes forward to carry out the research and produce the final document to their respective supervisor who acts as first marker. This is a dramatic change in the process. For staff it is now necessary to devise some form of 'programme' which encompasses supporting individual students in a group setting whilst dealing with all the group dynamics that such teaching involves. For those more comfortable with an authoritative form of delivery this style of facilitative teaching is a challenge. Merely presenting a set of notes on research methods is not sufficient to satisfy students who need to address individual ideas and potential pitfalls based on their respective study skill aptitudes.

### 3. Our context

Our position/context is very broadly postmodernist/social constructionist. Most notably we share an interest in developing our teaching styles to move as far away from students as 'serviceable others' (Sampson 1993) as we can. In his text 'Celebrating the Other' Sampson outlines how:

*'When I construct a you designed to meet my needs and desires, a you that is serviceable for me, I am clearly engaging in a monologue as distinct from a dialogue. Although you and I may converse and interact together, in most respects the you with whom I am interacting has been constructed with me in mind.'* (p. 4).

Building on the work of other authors (Cixous and Clement, Gatens) he goes on to state that 'To know the other on its terms is too menacing. Discard after use'. We believe that there is a monologic that allows academics, for instance, to appropriate the work of undergraduates. Undergraduate research is considered to be (obviously) unoriginal and worthless unless it covers material needed by an academic for their own research (3<sup>rd</sup> ECRM 2004 Keynote Speech). The

process of discarding after use is relatively easy in Higher Education as undergraduate students pass through Universities on a regular three or four yearly cycle.

To aid us in maintaining focus, in this paper we accept unconditionally that undergraduate projects are a valuable part of the development of undergraduate students, and accept without question that the skills of reflective practice are essential to undergraduates and academics alike.

### 4. Implications for the student-teacher relationship

To help us explore some of these issues we began by articulating two extreme types of academic and their approach to teaching: the subject-centred and the student-centred. They are stereotypes and can be criticised as such but we found them to be a useful starting point. Although we recognised that guiding independent student research is very different to teaching large groups of undergraduates [100+] on a structured module, we also recognised that 'the pedagogical impulses of the teacher /supervisor impact on the quality of the experience for the students' (Entwistle 2003). In the following table we began to explore what these approaches implied for the student-teacher relationship and the wider university context.:

**Table 1:** Subject-centred and student-centred teaching

SUBJECT-CENTRED TEACHING	STUDENT-CENTRED TEACHING
Knowledge is transferred from academic to student	Students and staff as facilitators and enablers
Buys into the student need to get a 2:1 as easily as possible	Honours the student experience
This type of teaching is easily measured	Not easily measured using standard questionnaires
If the lecture style is good and easily understood the lecturer will get favourable reviews from the students.	Can cause tensions between lecturers and students as well as lecturers/other lecturers. May not get such good reviews
Implies quite a comfortable easily relationship with students	Image amongst others academics that this is 'mickey mouse', 'easy' and not 'real academic work'

It is our contention that these two approaches influence to a large degree the learning environment in which research supervision takes place. In respect of subject-centred teaching, knowledge is seen as a 'right of passage' between academic and student, it is as though the student is being inducted into a select club. Wilmott (1997) has commented on the world projected by such practice as 'an exterior object to be learned about' and that some notion of correct practice defines the formal curriculum. The 'club' with its 'experts' decides on what should be learnt, when and how much'. In contrast, student-centred teaching in this respect focuses more on what students and staff 'do', on how different knowledges are facilitated and enabled (Vygotsky 1978). Moreover this is a different view of the world where the latter is a 'contiguous subject to act upon and change' (Wilmott 1997). The supervisor's role is more of a facilitator helping the student to tackle problems. This may involve the student taking an active role in bringing to the fore particular knowledge they possess from their experience of full-time and part-time work, or assisting peers with critical questioning and dissemination of information, for example.

Learning environments also differ. Subject-centred learning is delivered more through the formality of lecture and seminar, as opposed to a workshop setting where objectives are more open-ended, driven by student need rather than the transfer of the lecturers subject knowledge. As indicated in Table 1, these different styles have relevance for measurement. In an audit culture, the formal lecture and seminar lends itself to adopting measurement tools common to other modules being taught across a department or School. However, the informal workshop setting, with its emphasis on individual/group need that changes as the project supervision progresses, is not so easily quantified in our experience. There are parallels here with the pedagogic approach developed within action learning (Revans 1982) in that the fundamental idea is to bring people together to learn from each other's experience. Students are encouraged to explore possibilities rather than being led.

## 5. The post 1992 environment

However, we also believe that this environment is being influenced by particular contextual factors that impact on this immediate micro-teaching environment. Both authors have experienced a symbiotic relationship forming between the needs of both students and staff in the 'Post 1992 University'. The increasing size of groups for lectures and seminar/workshops within our Business School, without attendant growth in staff and administrative resources, has contributed to an increased need to 'play safe': students seem reluctant to challenge the status quo and staff are reluctant to do anything that might involve more preparation, or even different ways of preparing. This pressure has been compounded by greater demands for accountability and the trappings of institutional audit (QAA 2004).

### Reflections from Honours project students

During the first term one group of final year Honours project students were asked what barriers there were to reflecting on how they researched, and linked to this what barriers they perceived in turning these reflections into action. Students stated (in their own words):

*Not enough time; Overload of information; I do not reflect on my experiences very often because... if I don't have to do it then I won't do it; No commitment to the idea; Too difficult to do; Sometimes I don't dare to reflect in case I have made a mistake which sets me back rather than forwards; No time to research a new way of going about doing things; I need good feedback to move on to the next stage; Fear that a new way of doing things may cause more problems than benefits; We become comfortable with how we do the things we do and subconsciously go about it in the same ways.*

It is our belief that student-centred teaching practices help to break down all of the barriers to reflection identified in the boxed example above. Students may have

experiences and pressures that create a very different context to that experienced by students in the past and this type of teaching recognises and values this. Working in a group with other researchers can lead to the sharing of resources and ideas, saving time and relieving many of the anxious feelings apparent in the comments above.

Moreover, in a pressured Higher Education environment where accountability in the form of audits and questionnaires is a driving force, it is easy to see why, for many academic staff, there is no logic in turning their attentions to reflective practice. It is not likely to be an easy pedagogical shift and it seems to offer challenges to previous practice and the status afforded by subject expertise.

## 6. Changes in the student environment

It has been noticeable also that student perceptions of their University experience have changed. Increasingly we seem to be working with the demands of what could be termed the '2.1 syndrome'. There appears to be an acceptance that without a 2.1 honours degree a student has basically 'failed'. This pressure to achieve is coming from a variety of sources (CSU 2004, HEFCE 2002) such as employers who, given the plethora of business studies courses from a range of institutions, are using the 2.1 as a blanket indicator of quality of applicant. According to a Graduate Market Trends report from CSU, the Higher Education Careers Service Unit, twice as many jobs now require postgraduate qualifications compared with the period 1998-2001. This screening process has gone further. A HEFCE report recently highlighted trends amongst major commercial organisations to screen out graduates with fewer than 22/24 'A Level' points, such graduates not being allowed to attend open-days or obtain application forms.

Both authors have been informed by students (before work has been assessed) that a mark in the '2.1 range' is their expectation. In one extreme case a student had to be warned that continued 'instructions' of her expectation of such a grade might be construed as harassment. This pressure to succeed, compounded by increasing financial pressures to get 'a

return on the investment' of fees and accompanying student debt<sup>1</sup>, seems to sit comfortably alongside the staff need, identified earlier, to smooth the passage of teaching.

The arguments above only begin to scratch the surface of this complex issue. For us they suggest a dichotomy for academic staff: they can honour the student experience with the potential for confrontation, as the student may perceive a failure to fulfil their needs, or treat the student simply as a consumer and 'give them what they want'.

## 7. Implications for the research/supervision relationship

So how do these two extreme types impact on the research/supervision relationship? For example, if supervision is regarded as an invitation to pre-existing knowledge then research is clearly an individual activity of absorbing and analysing knowledge of that subject area. Alternatively, if supervision is regarded as student-centred the theoretical underpinning for its practice is founded upon the collective/social nature of research, for example, Action Learning (McGill and Beaty 2001). The following table recognises the differences that may result from adopting these different approaches to supervision.

The positions of 'subject' and 'student' we believe are centred on the different 'theory in use' (Argyris and Schon 1974) as regards supervision practice. The experience that learners have is fundamentally grounded in the assumptions that drive supervisors (Cunningham 1991). It is rare in our experience for colleagues to recognize and rethink such assumptions. At a time when reflective practice has been promoted throughout Higher Education as a valuable way to develop lifelong learning skills (Dearing 1997, Skills Development in Higher Education CVCP, DfEE, 1998), within a highly politicised academic environment it could be seen as expedient to espouse the rhetoric of involvement, whilst at the same time continue to

<sup>1</sup> Average student debt after graduation now stands at £12,069, compared with £2,212 in 1994. The projected figure for 2010 is £33,708. Barclays Bank Annual Survey of Student Debt 2004.

supervise in an authoritative manner. Assumptions, therefore, of a more subject-centred position towards supervision are rooted in the view of the researcher as an individual agent pursuing his/her inquiry, welded to the supervisor and their subject knowledge, without recourse to others who may support/challenge such endeavours outside of the supervisory relationship. Whereas a more student-centred position on supervision recognises the social/collective nature of research; in that the student is not *apart* from the learning community but a *part of* this social domain that extends out beyond the academic institution to include fellow course members, flatmates, workmates at their place of part-time employment, and their families.

**Table 2:** Subject-centred Supervision/ Student-centred Supervision

<b>Subject-centred supervision</b>	<b>Student-centred supervision</b>
Theoretical basis is the individual nature of research	Theoretical basis is the social/collective nature of research
Positivist approach to teaching and learning. Formulaic.	Reflective /Action Learning approach
Objective knowledge that can be transferred	Subjective knowledge? Or at least a recognition that the sheer volume of knowledge increases the importance of researchers being skilled in researching rather than simply knowledgeable
Power discourses of knower as expert	Recognition of the wealth of knowledge and experience present in the student body. Particularly with the increase in mature students/part-time students and students that are in employment whilst studying
Potential arrogance/Superiority	Recognition of the power relationship of supervisor/student researcher. There is an authority arising from research experience, position, control over assessment etc. The question is more how you act with that as a supervisor? What do you do with that?

## 8. Power and authority

It would be naive to engage in such a discussion without recognising the differing power relations between the supervisor and student. That authority arises from research experience, publications record and academic position. There are many discourses of teachers as dominant forces stretching back through time resulting from:

*'the division of knowledge by distinct departments, the reliance on lectures and texts as pedagogical practices, the use of examinations to test student knowledge and the existence of highly select colleges and universities'*  
(Gergen, 1994, p.ix)

This is not going to change in the immediate future but shifting the focus of teaching to the student goes some way to address this and deal with some of its limitations. We would argue that the crucial factor is how the supervisor works with that power relationship. The subject-centred position reinforces the stance of the individual researcher, and discourages the student from recognising that learning can take place beyond the supervisor; that they themselves may have an insight into their own organisations that their academic supervisor does not. Moreover, there is a collective dimension that is missing from this subject-centred stance. We sense that there is much to be gained from developing awareness amongst final-year students of the collective dimension of organisational life (Cunningham and Dawes 1997). That learning in organisations, which we hope the student will embrace in the very near future, is not a totally individual reflective process but comes through interaction with others, both from within and outside of work.

Both authors were recently engaged in a review process of suitable texts to support their groupwork for the newly developed undergraduate research module. What was startlingly obvious from this process was the absence, in most of the texts, of any mention of the supervisory relationship or the emotional rollercoaster that many of our students experience in their final year. It is our contention that by adopting a more student-centred approach to supervision, this emotional dimension can be recognised and addressed. If

supervision is seen purely as a rational thought process of creating a question, deciding a methodology, determining existing literature and then analysing data towards a conclusion, then the context in which any of this takes place for the student is ignored. Our experience of group sessions has been marked by strong emotions being expressed of 'not coping', 'resignation' and a sense of being 'swamped' by deadline demands. However, as a group, they can be enabled to offer support and advice to each other, to recognise that 'they are not the only one' and listen to feedback offered to individuals that may be relevant to their own situation.

Undergraduates are unlikely to be experienced researchers, and are therefore likely to need support and encouragement to develop confidence in their abilities and knowledge before they even begin to develop the more formal skills of research. This may seem obvious, but undergraduate research textbooks tend to overlook the emotional dimensions of the research process (e.g. Saunders et al. 2003).

## 9. Conclusions

We have suggested throughout that contextual factors impacting on both the work of academic staff, and their students, play a large part in shaping the resulting supervisory relationship. To work with these factors involves challenging assumptions that are at the heart of professional practice.

In conclusion, the subject-centred approach would seem to make teaching into 'just a job'. There is little room for continuing professional development (Schon 1983), only in increasing subject knowledge. The limitations for students are more profound, perhaps a formulaic approach to research could curtail any interest in research long before it begins.

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