

Helping Students Select a Dissertation Topic: a motivation-based approach

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Keywords: *dissertation, dissertation topic(s), motivation, person-centred approach, transformative learning,*

Introduction

It is not unusual for students to struggle to find a dissertation topic. To address this problem, I designed an exercise that helps students to better connect with their motivations, or the inner drives they have, for wanting to choose one topic or another. The results of student feedback suggest that the exercise is helpful in enabling students to be more aware of their motivations and to have a stronger sense of personal connection - and so be more satisfied - with the topic of their choice.

For the Research Methods module for students taking the *MA in International Business* and other similar Master's degrees, students have to select a research topic and write a proposal for their dissertation. The proposal is worth 50% of the course marks. Every time I teach this course, I find that students are very unsure as to what topic to choose. Quite a few struggle to formulate specific topics, and many initially come up with rather vague, general propositions. The thought occurred to me that perhaps students struggle to choose a topic because they are not sufficiently aware of their motivations, by which I mean motivations to choose a particular area or topic of research, motivations to do a Master's degree, motivations to attend a course on research methods, motivations with regards to the sort of skills they wish to develop over time, motivations as to what they should be doing in life and how this relates to their studies, etc.

In order to help students better identify their motivations, I designed an exercise which looks at a range of possible motivations. I then collected questionnaire and interview data on the effectiveness of the exercise. In what follows, I describe the methodological details of the exercise, present the results and discuss these in the light of different pedagogical schools of thought.

Methodology

The exercise which I gave to students considers nine areas of motivation, or what I call in a rather general fashion 'approaches'. They are: (1) instrumental (how does a Masters' degree serve me as a tool to fulfil my professional aspirations?); (2) responsive/symbolic (is there anything that has caught my attention recently?); (3) justice (is there any issue of justice which I would like to explore in my research?); (4) core beliefs/spiritual (what are the most important things in my life, and what topic can I choose that is related to them?); (5) emotional (what arises in me strong emotions?); (6) direct (is there a particular issue in business studies which I want to research? if not, why not, considering that I am doing an MA in business studies?); (7) socio-psychological (what have been the major influences in my life? do I wish to write something related to them?); (8) altruistic (how can I help the people around me?); (9) and self-developmental (how can I grow? what skills do I wish to develop?). Each approach is briefly described in the exercise and for each approach one example is given of a business topic related to the particular approach. The exercise can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/cc722xq> (as can the questionnaire given out to students).

I asked students to consider the above approaches on their own to begin with, and then to form groups in which they could share and discuss their thoughts. It was glad to see that that the students were very taken by the discussions, and asked them to stop after about forty minutes. Group secretaries stood up and summarized the group findings for the benefit of all. I collected questionnaire data for two cohorts of students in different semesters, one class of 57 students, the other of 50.

I then conducted one-to-one interviews with 9 students from a subsequent cohort. The interviewees, 4 female and 5 male, came from a diverse range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. The questions I asked them were:

- Before the exercise, how worried were you about choosing a topic, and how much thought had you given it?
- After the exercise, do you feel more confident that you have a topic for the dissertation?
- After the exercise, do you feel you need more guidance to choose a topic?
- Can you think of other motivational approaches? How can the exercise be improved?
- Why did you choose to do an MA in your particular subject?
- What are your motivations for choosing the area or topic you have in mind?

Results

For details of the questionnaire results, readers are invited to see the *Economics Network's* webpage <http://tinyurl.com/cm2lufn>. Essentially the questionnaire results confirm that, at the start of the exercise, most students were very unclear as to what topics to choose. On average, students found the approach fairly helpful, and most of them thought the exercise should be repeated with students in the subsequent semester. Students found the group discussion quite helpful, and rated the various motivational approaches fairly similarly.

To assess if the exercise is actually effective in enabling students to develop a better awareness of their motivations and to select a research topic congruent with their motivations, I carried out a more in-depth analysis of the qualitative data from students interviewed about they felt before and after the exercise¹. Although I am still in the process of analysing the interviews, I am able to present some preliminary findings. Overall, interviewed students found the exercise to be very useful; in fact, they found it so useful that I felt obliged to go back to the students and invite anyone with objections about the exercise to come forward for interview; one did so and it turned out he only had minor objections.

Key findings from the interviews are as follows:

1. The exercise enabled students to see better what it was that they wanted to do in their dissertation research

A comment from one student summarizes this point well:

“Before the exercise, OK let me give an example, like if you come into this room, the lights are off, you don't see any chair, anything, you just don't know where to go, you don't have courage to put a step [...], but the exercise made me [see] that the lights are turned on and there are many chairs out there, and which chair I chose to sit [in], that's up to a further kind of approach. I see lots of chairs, I have lots of ideas”.

2. The exercise promoted the integration of different motivations

Most students worried considerably about finding employment after completing their Master's degree and this concern made them look for topics that are appealing to employers, i.e. their focus tends to be on extrinsic motivations². However, the exercise helped students to choose or re-define their topics so that their intrinsic

¹ Interviewed students scored 7% more than non-interviewed students in their dissertation proposals, the p-value being 0.11. However, these students also performed better in the other component of the subject (by 3%), weakening but not completely invalidating the evidence that they performed better in their proposal because they took part in interviews.

² In fact, many had chosen to read international business as they felt that this choice was 'broad' and so could provide them with a number of work opportunities (as opposed to choosing some specific area of study which, in their opinion, would have curtailed the number of options available to them).

motivations too were addressed, making them feel personally much more connected with the topic. Intrinsic motivations were captured by approaches in the exercise such as the 'justice' approach, the 'core beliefs' approach and the 'altruistic' approach. Indeed, quite a few students during the course of the interview steered towards a topic that had both commercial merit and social value, e.g. a student wanted to set up a company designed to help new students in London find suitable accommodation.

I was very pleased to see that students were inclined, as a consequence of the exercise and of taking part in the interviews, to select topics which embraced their own, past personal experience; for example, a student who, to her horror, had observed credit card fraud by colleagues at work chose to pursue credit card fraud as her topic.

The integration of different motivations and the inclusion of students' personal experience in the process of choosing of a topic caused students to experience a sense of excitement. One student who had already chosen a topic prior to taking the exercise felt happy that the exercise had made her more aware of her motivations, indicating that there is value to be had simply by coming to know one's motivations more clearly, even if this greater awareness does not alter one's choice of topic. Some students were so impressed with the exercise that they continued to reflect on it weeks after it took place, or they discussed it with their spouse.

3. The exercise reduced worry and anxiety

Students were acutely aware before the start of the exercise that, in terms of academic credits, the dissertation is worth 3 modules (taught units of a degree programme), and some felt that the topic they chose might well determine their future career. As one student put it, "*It's the end point of all we are studying, it's what we are all working toward*".

Some students worried so much about their dissertation research that they made a deliberate effort not to think about it; on the other hand, another student could not master such a high degree of self-control and said that his worrying about the dissertation interfered with his studies. This student had borrowed two books from the library about writing a dissertation, one did not discuss topic selection, and the other he had not yet looked through.

All students said that the exercise alleviated their fear and anxiety (I am sure that the interview also assisted in this respect); for example, one student was very grateful that she had been given the exercise and the interview as, before the exercise, she had been "*freaking out a little*". Some students felt that the exercise had enabled them to choose topics in which they could continue to be interested, throughout the process of working towards the dissertations (about 3 months for most students). One student felt that, through the exercise and the interview, the university had finally shown that it cared about its students, specifically by fulfilling its

pledge to provide I-to-I tutorial assistance to students, a pledge which, this student said, the university had made to students at the recruitment stage. As a consequence, this student now feels much more attached to the institution.

Further points concerning practical aspects of the exercise are as follows:

- Students tended to focus on those approaches which they straight away found more attractive, which I think is good as it is consistent with the spirit of the exercise of encouraging students to intuitively link with their 'inner drives';
- Students felt the exercise was complete in the sense that they could not think of further approaches³;
- All students except one felt that group discussion was useful (the student who disagreed had already chosen a topic and had spoken about it with friends before taking the exercise);
- The part of the exercise where secretaries stood in front on the class and read out summaries of group discussion did not strike students as very useful;
- Students expressed the desire to be given more time to reflect on the various approaches (they were given about forty minutes)⁴;
- Students would have liked to see more examples about each approach on the exercise sheet, even though they acknowledged the problem that the inclusion of more examples by the instructor would probably inhibit them from reflecting deeply about their motivations and their choice of topic.

Discussion of the results in the light of modern pedagogical approaches

It seems to me that there are two major schools of pedagogical thought that are related to the exercise, namely Roger's person-centred approach and transformative learning.

Carl Roger's approach is holistic, seeking to involve and integrate all aspects which make up the psyche of the human being (see Rogers and Freiberg – 1994 - and the entry under his name at www.infed.org). The exercise achieves precisely this aim by asking students to consider a wide range of different motivations or approaches. Furthermore, in terms of Carl Roger's approach, the student senses that his or her whole person (i.e. all his or her faculties) is involved in the learning process, stirring in him or her a sense of adventure, of excitement, of greater self-knowledge and so of coming closer to the truth. This is precisely how the students in the interviews felt, with one student explicitly stating that the exercise had made her excited about

³ Female students seemed to be more at ease with the justice (and possibly emotional) approach than male students.

⁴ Some students expressed the desire to have the exercise earlier in the module, to give them more time to reflect on their topic and to reduce their level of anxiety; it should be noted that interviewed students were given the exercise in the second half of the module, whilst those students who had filled in questionnaires and who belonged to previous cohorts were given the exercise in the first half of the semester.

working on her dissertation. Finally, both in Roger's approach and in the exercise, students undergo a kind of existential learning whereby students are encouraged to feel the need to discover from within and have full autonomy in exploring this need, with the teacher acting as a guide in the process (the exercise serving mainly as a source of suggestions, or pointers).

Transformative Learning theory, of which the main proponent is Mezirow (see Taylor 1998), is concerned with enabling students to become more aware of their beliefs and to assess these beliefs through self-reflection, being open to transformation of deeply held views. To some extent this is what happens during the course of the exercise, with students who had previously believed that they had to focus on choosing a topic that would land them a job, an extrinsic motivation, finding that in fact they have an opportunity and the freedom to pursue their interests and other intrinsic motivations, such as seeking to help others. Furthermore, as Boyd's work clearly indicates (again see Taylor 1998), transformative learning involves the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness, resulting in greater personal integration; indeed the exercise is a means of resolving a personal dilemma (choosing a dissertation topic) and, as is apparent from the results described above, enables students to be more aware of their own, often conflicting motivations and to reconcile them, leading to personal integration. As a result of such integration, transformative learning leads to improvement in decision-making, which, in the context of the exercise, means choosing a dissertation topic (or coming closer to doing so, such as choosing an area of research) which satisfies the students' various motivations.

There are other theoretical frameworks which too relate to the exercise. One is the model of reflection proposed by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005), represented as a set of "concentric circles" or "onion rings" in which one's identity (self-concept) and sense of mission form the inner circles and these affect the outside circles, which include one's behaviour⁵. Whilst the model is designed with professional development of teachers in mind, it can also be applied to students. Specifically in the context of this article, it can be applied to students who are trying to select a topic for their dissertation, a process which a tutor can make easier for them by helping them to be more aware of their identity and, if they perceive one, their sense of mission. The literature on spiritual intelligence is also relevant in so far as spiritual intelligence can be seen to harmonize rational and emotional intelligence (Zohar and Marshall (2000)) and so help students come up with a balanced choice of dissertation topic⁶.

Conclusion

The interview data confirms and expand the results of the questionnaire, and provides a substantial degree of support for the value of carrying out in class the

⁵ The causality also runs from the outside in.

⁶ Other relevant frameworks include those on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, reflective practice and experiential learning.

exercise on student motivations described in this article. In particular, the interview evidence suggests that the exercise helps students to see better what they want their dissertation to be about, promotes the integration of students' diverse motivations, and markedly reduces the stress and anxiety of not knowing which topic to choose, particularly where the dissertation is a major component of the degree and when students see it as the natural trampoline to a particular area in which to work in the future.

Whilst the exercise is designed with students of international business in mind, its core principles have, I think, general application across most if not all disciplines, so that the exercise, after appropriate adaptation, can be offered to students in different subject areas. Students find group discussion in class and 1-to-1 support by the tutor (which took the form of interviews in this article) very helpful, pointing to the importance of not leaving the students alone in making their choice of dissertation topic.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Associate Professor Digby Warren (Head of the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning & Teaching [CELT] at London Metropolitan University) for very helpful comments which helped me prepare the interview questions, and the *Economics Network* for funding the project.

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