

Student perspectives on the dissertation process in a masters degree concerned with professional practice

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Despite the proliferation of taught masters courses, the experiences of masters students in general have received comparatively little attention within the research literature, and the dissertation process in particular has not been investigated extensively. The present article focuses on the findings of detailed interviews with 15 professionals studying part time who had recently completed a masters dissertation in a faculty of education, and is part of a larger study that examined both student and staff perspectives. A central facet of these students' experiences of researching and writing-up a dissertation was their representation of their own agency and how this was connected to a particular sense of personhood and a strategic approach, whilst being enabled by supervisors and supportive others. The normative order that study participants believed should prevail within the supervisory relationship is delineated and issues concerning the conceptualisation of student agency are addressed.

Keywords: masters dissertations; professional degrees; student perspectives

Background

Masters dissertations have attracted far less scholarly attention than Ph.D. theses despite their distinctive character and the worldwide proliferation of taught masters programmes, particularly those involving continuing professional development. In her editorial to a publication about masters courses, Helen King (2005) remarks on how:

...relatively little has been done to develop learning and teaching at taught postgraduate level despite the fact that, in the UK, 'in 2002–03 almost 120,000 postgraduates embarked on taught masters programmes compared to 16,000 starting Ph.D.s (HEPI 2004). (King 2005)

This comparative neglect extends to the dissertation that is a required component of most taught masters degrees.

While there may be some similarities in students' experiences of undertaking a research project at whatever level (undergraduate, masters or doctoral), differences will also exist, on account of contrasts in intellectual demands and time-frames. The 40% increase in student enrolments on taught masters programmes between 1995–1996 and 2002–2003 (HEPI 2004: 6) has been accompanied by the publication of some guides to masters study that include valuable advice about the dissertation (Hart 2005). There has also been a, still modest, number of research studies geared to

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investigating students' perspectives on engaging with masters dissertations and on the supervisory relationship. Certain of these studies have focused on examining the expectations that masters students and their supervisors have of each other (Hetrick and Trafford 1995; McMichael 1992; Rodrigues et al. 2005; Woolhouse 2002). McMichael's (1992: 309–310) study concluded that 'though student and supervisor expectations may not greatly diverge in general terms, their interpretation and elaboration in individual cases [may] leave room for mutual disappointment' and recommended that both parties 'clarify their aims, needs and expectations not only at the beginning of a project but from time to time as the project proceeds'. This emphasis on the clear sharing of expectations and perspectives has also figured in subsequent studies.

In addition, a few studies have taken a wide-angled look at students' dissertation experiences, including one in the US by Demb and Funk (1999: 24) where 24 graduates of a higher education/student affairs masters programme were characterised as 'remarkably focused and self-motivated' and as basing 'their actions on personal, intrinsic reward systems'. The participants described their engagement with the thesis as 'not one smoothly continuous experience' but as involving movement through 'identifiably different phases, much like passing through rapids on a river, with each phase bringing different challenges and learning outcomes' (21). In relation to supervision, this group 'wanted faculty advisors to offer a complex and balanced blend of guidance and autonomy. Too much of either created problems' (23).

A wide-ranging but fine-grained analysis of ten education students' experience of masters-level supervision conducted in South Africa by Sayed, Kruss and Badat (1998: 283) described the challenges participants experienced in developing their understanding of the research process and found contrasts in expectations of the supervisor as either a 'director' or a 'guide'. The importance of emotional support from supervisors came through strongly, with respondents also viewing family support and encouragement as crucial to their progress.

A narrative analysis of Finnish students' accounts of writing masters theses by Ylijoki (2001) identified four ideal type 'cultural core narratives' (22): heroic, tragic, businesslike and penal stories. These stories informed the 'personal narratives of individual students, each of which has its own idiosyncratic features' (31). In discussing the findings of her study, Ylojiki suggests that it is 'essential for students to reflect on which kind of story they are protagonists in. Changing the story alters the student's relation to the writing process' (32). She also notes how if mutual understanding is to be achieved between student and supervisor, both need to be 'part of the same story' (32).

To produce a masters dissertation of an acceptable standard, students need not only to display sufficient mastery of subject content and requisite research skills but also to achieve sufficient facility in the discursive practices of a particular subject area. Recent writing on 'academic literacies' has portrayed academic writing and reading practices as sites where power is exercised (Lea and Stierer 2000; Stierer 2000). The 'academic literacies' approach to analysing students' encounters with texts has also argued that more is at stake in developing academic writing than the acquisition of technical skills of interpretation and composition. In Stierer's (2000: 181) words, it 'recognizes that students' so-called failures as academic writers may be explained by, for example, their struggle to reconcile their own identities, and

purposes for studying with the authority and control of the institution'. Stierer himself has taken a critical look at the literacy practices surrounding the construction of professional knowledge within masters courses in education, questioning the extent to which existing genres of writing on these courses enable teachers 'to construct professional knowledge for themselves' (Stierer 2000: 194).

Dysthe (2002) has examined how Norwegian university lecturers in three different subject areas mediated masters thesis students' engagement with the 'textual practices' of these disciplines. As well as delineating features of the disciplines' textual practices and expectations concerning the writing of a masters thesis, Dysthe (2002: 518–519) identified three models of supervision: a *teaching model* (with an emphasis on asymmetry and status difference); a *partnership model* (marked by a sense of a joint, collaborative enterprise and fostering of independent thinking); and an *apprenticeship model* (characterised by cooperation but with the supervisor assuming 'a much clearer authority base'). There were relationships between the adoption of these models of supervision and expectations concerning the function of draft texts. Supervisors who adopted a partnership model (rather than a teaching model), encouraged students to hand in exploratory draft texts which served as a basis for dialogue and as a 'thinking tool' (525).

In discussing these models of supervision and their impact on the nature of interaction around draft texts, Dysthe was concerned to highlight the complexities surrounding the negotiation of authority in supervisory relationships. This theme has also featured in our own preceding work (Anderson et al. 2006), and has appeared prominently in the work of Grant (2003, 2005a,b). Seeking a more differentiated representation of the dynamics between supervisors and students, Grant (2003) has identified different layers of 'pedagogical power relations' within supervision. Grant views supervision as being a complex, uncertain practice which involves 'a messy and unpredictable pedagogy in which the academic and the personal come together in an unusual way' (Grant 2005a: iii). This complexity she argues derives in some part from the 'proliferation of discourses (systems of meaning) that produce supervision as a cultural practice' (Grant 2005b: 338). She identifies the four most powerful, competing and contradictory, discourses that shape the construction of supervision as: the psychological, the traditional-academic, the techno-scientific and the neo-liberal (Grant 2005b: 40). In addition, she discusses 'others on the margins' (ibid.), including the radical and the psychoanalytic discourses of supervision. The discourse that she characterises as being 'in the ascendant' (Grant 2005b: 350) is the psychological which constitutes 'supervision as first and foremost an interpersonal relationship' (Grant 2005b: 350) and the ideal-type supervisor as 'a caring, expert professional' (Grant 2005b: 340).

The discourses that Grant identifies centre on the relationship between a student and a supervisor. This focus on student-supervisor relations, even in more radical discourses concerning masters-level and Ph.D. study, hides from view the role that peers can play in supporting each other's dissertation writing efforts. Peers come more to the forefront in a recent development study reported by Dysthe et al. (2006) which aimed to improve research supervision on a Norwegian university's Masters of Education programme by means of three fora to support students' efforts. *Student colloquia*, organised by the students themselves, 'provided personal support, and served as a first filter for ideas and texts' (299). *Supervision groups*, which brought together two supervisors and their masters students 'provided multivoiced feedback

on student texts and enculturation into the discipline' (299). *Individual supervision* 'provided more specific advice' (299) and 'directly confronted [students] with the norms of disciplinary discourse' (316).

Methodology

Questions pursued in this study

The preceding literature review has highlighted challenges at the levels both of theorising the nature of dissertation study and of actually engaging with dissertation work. Much terrain remains to be explored, including that of gaining a clearer sense of how students enrolled on professional masters degrees view the dissertation and its relation to their own life projects. For students pursuing an academic career, the completion of a masters dissertation *en route* to a PhD can be viewed as a stage in their academic socialisation and the formation of their future identity. By contrast the dissertation in a professional masters degree will typically be students' culminating university task – a task which customarily places considerably higher demands for engagement with research practices and with theoretical frameworks than they will have met in preceding coursework. Its purpose is less clear-cut than in the case of students following a research career and consequently the orientation to the dissertation task of professionals pursuing a masters qualification cannot be easily predicted. Accordingly, it seemed appropriate to examine in an open-ended fashion during interviews with experienced professionals:

- The purposes that they saw themselves as pursuing in the dissertation.
- Their representation of how they oriented themselves towards the task.
- Their accounts of how they pursued the dissertation in the midst of other life commitments.

In addition to examining their positioning in relation to the task, it was important to investigate how participants in degrees concerned with professional practice both characterised and had found the supervisory relationship.

Clearly a small-scale study can only make a modest contribution to knowledge in this area; but the intention has been to open up issues and to prompt wider examination of hitherto under-explored matters. The following sections detail the context of the study and how the research questions were pursued.

The context

Our study was conducted in an education faculty offering a variety of taught masters courses that mainly focus on some area of practice and its development. The dissertation (15,000–20,000 words) is undertaken once students have successfully completed eight coursework modules and obtained a postgraduate diploma. The dissertation usually involves empirical (rather than library) research and must be completed within two years for part time students who are the focus of the current study. Each student has a supervisor chosen on the basis of substantive and methodological expertise matched as well as possible to the student's topic area and likely research approach. At the time of the study, the research plan for the dissertation was formulated with the supervisor (rather than being developed within the coursework modules). Dissertation student workshops focussed on specific tasks

were held each year, but there was no formal peer support group system. Thus students were principally reliant on their supervisors for guidance and support.

The population from which we drew our interview sample was composed mainly of experienced professionals, the great majority of whom were studying part time, often in an intermittent way as a result of work and other demands. These students were therefore differently positioned from those on taught masters courses with full time participants and/or individuals who have recently completed undergraduate degrees.

Relationship to a wider study of masters level dissertations

The student interview study reported here formed part of a wider project, concerned to examine the perspectives of both students and staff, which involved:

- A detailed survey of all masters level students (91) who had recently completed, or were about to submit, a dissertation.
- Focused interviews conducted with a subset (15) of the students surveyed.
- Focused interviews with supervisors (13) of masters dissertations (see Anderson et al. 2006).

The survey findings helped frame and shape the topic set for the student interviews and the questionnaire was also the route for recruiting interview participants.

Characteristics of the interview participants

Fifteen of the 91 survey respondents were willing to be interviewed and fortunately they were a reasonably representative subset of the larger cohort as regards the congruence of their attitudes with the larger survey findings and their general characteristics. The gender ratio of thirteen women (87%) and two men (13%) interviewed mirrored the programme enrolment of 82% female and 18% male. Ages ranged from late 20s through to late middle age, with most participants clustered in the mid-30s to mid-40s. All the interview participants were currently in full time employment, with a spread of occupational status from junior to senior posts. Most interviewees reported little prior experience of research to guide their dissertation efforts, apart from work undertaken in their masters programme. There was some variation in how participants were located in time in relation to the dissertation. One person had yet to submit her dissertation, some had finished fairly recently, and others had completed over a year ago. This factor was taken account of in the analysis, but did not prove to be a significant influence on conceptions and perceptions.

Nature of the student interviews

While the in-depth interviews with students were focused around topics related to our research questions, participants were free to explore any other matters of individual interest or concern and the interviews were conducted in a fluid, interactive fashion to encourage full and rounded accounts. Most interviews lasted about an hour, with some taking considerably longer.

Analysis of the interview data

The first stage of analysis involved a close reading and annotation of the individual transcripts by all members of the research team. Team meetings had the explicit purpose of testing out each other's readings and emergent interpretations of the data.

The initial fine-grained reading and the subsequent stages of analysis and interpretation were guided by a twin alertness – to differences in attitudes and perceptions between participants and to commonalities in reactions and representations. As the 'Findings' section will demonstrate, certain differences were noted between participants in their purposes in undertaking a dissertation and in the gains that they reported. However, commonalities (particularly in key matters such as how they viewed their own responsibilities to advance their studies and conceived of the actions and qualities that should be exhibited in the supervisory relationship) were *much* more evident than differences.

Further exercises in comparison and contrast within and between interviews followed the initial reading and discussion as the data were coded on two distinctly different levels. The first level was that of drawing together and organising material on specific, substantive topics, while the second level was concerned with a conceptual coding and ordering of the elements that had emerged from earlier stages of analysis. The key element that emerged from this second level of analysis was participants' representation of their personal agency. The relationships between this key element and other central features of the student experience of dissertation research and writing are described in the 'Findings' section.

A close search was made for possible gender issues in relation to the dissertation experience, including the supervisory relationship, but this search did not bear fruit.

Once the analyses had been completed, a draft of this article was circulated to each interviewee for comment – respondent validation would be rather too grand and ideologically loaded a term to use. While the process of taking an account back to participants had distinct benefits in terms of ensuring the veracity of the findings reported here, its primary purpose was to keep participants informed of how their contributions had been used and provide the opportunity for points of detail to be contested. Those participants who responded to the draft indicated their satisfaction with our use of quotations from their interviews and did not raise any concerns over the interpretations advanced.

Findings

The presentation and discussion of the findings takes the following structure. The scene is first set by describing the general *purposes* that participants were pursuing, before attention moves to the central matter of students' representations of their own *personal agency*.

It will be shown how participants' representations of their personal agency were closely connected to:

- *A particular sense of their own personhood.*
- The adoption of a *strategic approach* to study which in turn involved *creating a dissertation space*.
- *Support from significant others* and the presence of *supervisor assistance*.

Participants' conceptions of the actions a supervisor should or should not take and of the *norms that should underpin the supervisory relationship* are delineated, along with reactions to their *academic socialisation* as dissertation writers. Individuals' *feelings on completing the dissertation* are explored as are their *perceptions of benefits*.

Purposes pursued in the dissertation

For all participants intrinsic interests were presented as the primary motivation rather than an extrinsic career motive. These intrinsic interests can be divided into three main classes: *practice intrinsic*, *academic research intrinsic* and *personal intrinsic*. While some participants' motivations fell within a single category, the majority displayed elements from more than one class.

A *practice intrinsic* approach was driven by a strong wish to advance practice and a felt sense of satisfying commitment to this goal. The following extracts from the interview with Participant 6 indicate what was at stake here:

Everything I did was totally in the context of further education – my job. It helped me a lot. . . . I used it to research an area that had been giving us some problems. . . . So I used that [topic] and we were able to make use of the results. . . . It wasn't just an academic exercise.

The second discernible class of motivation, *academic research intrinsic*, involved a desire to make intellectual progress, along with a commitment to academic standards and values and an inclination to find research questions and the research process inherently interesting. Participant 10, for example, noted how:

I could quite easily have chosen a much easier dissertation to do to get the bit of paper. I was on a kind of quest to do a good job because it is reasonably unique. . . . Because I actually quite enjoyed the process of research and study I wanted to stay in my own area and go in deeper to it.

The third class of motivation featured strongly in the accounts of most participants. The term *personal intrinsic* interest captures the motivating effects of a satisfying sense of personal involvement, development and/or challenge, as the following quotations illustrate:

Not that it was for something but it was actually for – it was for me rather than anything else. (Participant 5)

Personal, yes. I didn't actually do the masters [dissertation] particularly for career advancement. I did it for me! (Participant 7)

I wasn't doing it for the masters. I was doing it because I wanted to extend myself. (Participant 9)

Representations of aspects of personal agency

While their dissertation purposes differed, this set of participants (who it must be stressed had brought their work to a successful conclusion) had a common focus on the need to be agentic and a conception of personal responsibility to meet the demands posed by the dissertation.

In their accounts the participants positioned themselves as the kind of people who were ‘self-directed’, displayed initiative and took prime responsibility for progressing a task. This emphasis is evident, for example, in this quotation from Participant 4:

I think as well, if you decide to go back and study again you don’t go back with the undergraduate mentality that people will do it for you. If you do that then you haven’t got to grips with what the whole thing is about in my opinion. Equally . . . if you hang about and wait for other people to do it for you you will never do it. You have got to arrange to meet people, you have got to speak, you have got to initiate it . . .

The following brief extracts illustrate how some other participants displayed the same positioning of their own responsibilities and way of engaging with dissertation-related tasks:

At the end of the day, it’s your piece of work, it could be you, me, or A.N. Other, it’s up to you. (Participant 5)

I’m self-directed and I do my own thing . . . (Participant 7)

I just thought it was my responsibility . . . (Participant 9)

This presentation of themselves as independent, active determiners of their own dissertation fate cannot be dismissed as simply instances of rhetorical face-work within the interview context. Analysis revealed that this intention ‘to boldly go’ was clearly linked to other central aspects of the participants’ dissertation experience. The highly agentic stance displayed was associated with a particular sense of personhood, connected with being strategic in planning and executing work for the dissertation, and either enabled or constrained by the supervisory relationship and specific supervisor actions.

Sense of personhood

The participants’ emphasis on the need to be proactive, independent and shoulder prime responsibility for success and failure while engaged on the dissertation was congruent with the sense of self that they presented during the interviews. They stressed the importance of being and acting as a particular kind of person who is: self-motivated, committed to an enterprise and persistent, yet at the same time able to respond flexibly and opportunistically to possibilities and situations. They described themselves as being able to draw on qualities of ‘determination’, ‘self-discipline’ and ‘focus’ in their dissertation efforts. The following extracts illustrate how students described the personal qualities that they believed underpinned their dissertation work:

I think you have to be quite a strong person to – not drive yourself, but have the determination to get through difficult bits. . . . You’ve got to be quite tough to get through a dissertation, I think, when you’re not actually doing it full time. (Participant 13)

As a more mature learner, you have the resilience to realise that a block is perhaps a step or something but you don’t need to bash your head against it, there are other routes. (Participant 3)

This view of the personal qualities that enabled dissertation work with its accent on independence and self-reliance does need to be set in context. As subsequent sections will reveal, participants also appreciated and acknowledged the psychological and practical support provided by significant others, friends and colleagues. They also described how appropriate support from supervisors engendered confidence.

Being strategic

The participants presented themselves as putting their personal qualities into practice by adopting a strategic attitude and approach, whereby they gave careful consideration to the overall planning and structuring of their dissertation efforts.

The demands of organising and sequencing dissertation-related tasks were particularly acute for this group of students due to the constraints they were working under. While a number of participants received some financial support from employers, only a few received any allowance within ordinary working hours for their dissertation work. They had to find time and effort for the dissertation amidst already busy lives and somehow balance the competing commitments of study, personal and family life and work.

Participants responded by acting proactively; setting out and then following, as far as circumstances permitted, a clear game plan. They also described the range of strategies deployed to allow them to stay on track in moving the dissertation forward. Quite a number acknowledged that their supervisor had made an important contribution in helping them structure their overall schedule of work and manage individual tasks.

Once a clear framework had been established, other important aspects of being strategic came into play, such as being appropriately flexible in planning and action (particularly to meet unanticipated difficulties), and seizing on opportunities that came along (like using new contacts to further the research).

Creating a dissertation space

Implementing a strategic approach required participants to *create a dissertation space*, a term used to indicate more than straightforward efficient time and effort management. Continuous periods of time for the dissertation had to be carved out of home and social life which could involve participants reserving an extended time slot for effective work; sometimes setting up a social 'space' recognised by others as study time not be encroached upon. In the following extracts Participant 3 describes the need for such a dissertation space and the particular routine that she followed:

... balancing work, family, children, commitments and trying to find a life in amongst all that as well. Disciplining myself to write. But having worked through the certificate and the diploma, I had given myself a routine. It took a long time to build up and finding time for it was originally a real issue ...

What I had to do was I made Saturday afternoons my working time because I had commitments with the children in the morning ... I shut myself in the spare bedroom, put a desk [there] and from 1 o'clock until 6 o'clock, every Saturday, almost without exception, that was my work time. That worked. I used to make myself go up and sit there, sometimes I wouldn't do anything but I'd sit and think. But that was my time.

Once you get other people accustomed to the fact that you are not available at that time that's all right. So sometimes I would just sit there!

Participants' talk concerning how, within already busy lives, they carved out time and social space for their dissertation work resonates with certain of the findings from a study by Kember (1999) where part time students who were successfully integrating study demands with existing commitments were involved in renegotiating:

... previously accepted social positions and status. This negotiation process may involve others taking over roles previously undertaken by the student, and usually encompasses defining a sanctuary of time and/ or space for the student to study. (Kember 1999: 120)

Support from significant others

Having the space in which to work was often made possible by family or friends giving practical support, such as providing childcare. A number of participants benefited in addition from the informed advice that partners or friends who had already completed a postgraduate degree were able to give, while work colleagues also acted as useful sounding boards for testing out ideas and decisions. Almost all participants described the significant others in their life as being generally supportive of their dissertation work and acknowledged the importance of this emotional support in sustaining their efforts. There are parallels here with Haggis's study of postgraduates' learning experiences, where students indicated 'how helpful it was to be able to talk to partners or family members and talked about the importance of "discussion" and "human input" in learning' (Haggis 2002: 213–4). Thus, although participants stressed their own agency and responsibility to take the task forward, they were not isolated agents but could in the main rely on support from those around them.

Supervisor assistance

The large majority of participants also benefited from the advice and direction given by supervisors who demonstrated a supportive attitude. In the words of one student: 'I didn't feel alone at all. X was definitely there with me'. Another participant who experienced considerable difficulties in establishing her research role and 'ownership' of her project commented: 'But my supervisor helped because she was able to listen to me'. A few participants regarded the support provided as helpful but not altogether central to the progress of their dissertation, but most portrayed their supervisor as having made a valuable, and sometimes quite indispensable, contribution.

Twelve of the 15 interviewees indicated their satisfaction with the supervision received and usually this satisfaction was expressed in very enthusiastic terms. Appreciation was shown for:

- The confidence that supervisor support had engendered.
- The quality of the supervisory relationship.
- Assistance with shaping up the project and structuring research time and effort.
- Guidance on writing.

- The benefits that came from having a knowledgeable supervisor with research experience.
- Specific pieces of academic advice.

One of the three participants who experienced problems felt that more timely, proactive comments on drafts could have been given, together with clearer indications of the need to meet certain academic conventions. The other two students had contrasting experiences of ‘over’ and ‘under’ supervision. In one case the supervisor was viewed as having little interest in the topic or the student’s efforts and providing insufficient input, particularly at the stage of shaping up the project. In the other case, the student felt respect for a very committed supervisor, but found her over-controlling and over-demanding in the later stages of the project, leading to feelings of a loss of control. As we have noted earlier, interviewees in Demb and Funk’s study (1999: 23) similarly highlighted the matter of supervisors offering ‘a complex and balanced blend of guidance and autonomy. Too much of either created problems’.

Everyone else was content with the overall amount and patterning of contact with supervisors, although it is interesting to note that the levels of contact perceived as appropriate varied between participants. Whatever the actual frequency/duration of contact, students appreciated the fact that their supervisors did not view meeting times in a bureaucratic fashion as a fixed allowance; they were ‘flexible enough to be able to fit you in’ and conveyed a sense that further contact was *potentially* available.

I would say we met about six or seven times, plus telephone calls and some postal communication. I felt that was right. I am sure there could have been more if I had wanted it. (Participant 6)

Normative expectations of the supervisory relationship

Participants had a shared set of expectations concerning the supervisory relationship. They believed that supervisors should perform their role in a wholehearted manner, displaying a genuine interest, acting in a ‘friendly’, informal fashion, and demonstrating an empathic appreciation of the wider constraints on academic study that the students faced. At the same time participants believed that supervisors should not adopt a laissez-faire approach, and indeed a number of students explicitly welcomed a supervisor being appropriately demanding of a certain standard of work. This was seen as a positive feature:

... as a mature student ... you are not looking just to get a pat on the head. You are looking for a little more depth and a little bit more ‘this is not quite up [to] the standard that I would look for’. (Participant 4)

The knowledge that a supervisor could be quite demanding made students feel that any praise they received was genuine which in turn stimulated their efforts. Participant 12, for example, talked of how:

I felt very positive and reinforced and trusting with Y. If she said – if she gave you praise or said it was good, it was good. It was good.

In summary, participants expected that supervisors would use their expert knowledge to assist them to meet the demands of a new task and to satisfy

appropriate academic standards. They were thus seeing supervisors as having a very active part to play, but the *manner* in which this role was enacted was viewed as crucial. It was expected that a style of supervision would be provided which gave students a distinct feeling of support without intruding upon, or detracting from, their own sense of agency. This finding resonates with Dysthe's study (1999) of masters supervision which 'showed that what students termed as respect involved feedback as suggestions and advice instead of direction, and that they resented the supervisor taking over their text'. The importance of this kind of sensitively balanced approach was succinctly captured by Participant 8:

I certainly got a lot of support in [my] dissertation [work] from Z although it was respectful support.

Supervisor guidance and academic socialisation

Participants differed in their identification of the dissertation stage at which the supervisor's input was most salient. For a considerable number, the supervisor's assistance with the initial formulation and refinement of research questions and ensuring the research design was 'realistic' was particularly important, while for some the supervisor's craft knowledge was most appreciated during the analysis of findings. Supervisors also gave valuable assistance with the overall structuring of the dissertation report and specific aspects of the writing. Indeed most participants viewed guidance on how to follow the conventions of academic writing as a central part of the supervisor's role.

In some instances the intensive work engaged in with the supervisor on the dissertation was seen to have had a longer-term impact. Participant 2, for example, described how she had come to internalise the demands the supervisor had placed on her and had developed intellectually.

... it's sort of got me thinking at such a level now, that I'm finding it very difficult not to think at that level and it took a lot of getting to. I really feel I was well tutored, supervised to get – it was there within me and I know it was a gut reaction before – the actual you know, academic thoughts weren't there, it was just I knew from experience and I just had this feeling I knew that was going to be a problem but I couldn't put it into words.

In leading students into the research and writing practices required within higher education, supervisors were contributing to their academic socialisation. It is of interest to note that the participants in this study did not resist this process, and indeed in a number of cases gave it a very positive welcome, as the following short extracts demonstrate:

[The supervisor making sure] I was meeting the requirements and not going off too much on my own. ... I liked that. That gave me structure and it made me know what I was doing was roughly according to what was required. (Participant 8)

I enjoyed this focus, I enjoyed this – as you say – restraint if you like, that there was. It had to be written in an academic format, it had to make these criteria that had boundaries set. (Participant 12)

Consideration of these statements, and similar comments in other interviews, allows one to refine the picture presented of participants' representation of their own agency. While individuals appear to have acted in the determined, enterprising manner which they portrayed, they were not acting alone, and this sense of agency was enabled by supervisor guidance and support. They also accepted that their efforts would be framed *within* the research and writing practices of higher education. (The one student who found her supervisor over-controlling perceived a need to respond to the supervisor's comments and bring her writing in line with academic conventions. Feelings of resistance were sparked by the style of supervision and partly the level at which the supervisor set the standards to be achieved.)

In other words, participants were being agentic with, rather than against, the grain of the academy. Given that some recent work on the relationship between writing in higher education contexts and social identity has tended to highlight acts and feelings of resistance (Ivanic 1998) rather than those of conformity, this is an important finding.

Feelings on completing the dissertation: perceptions of benefits

The feelings of the participant who experienced considerable difficulties in negotiating her research role and establishing ownership of the project were a complex mixture of satisfactions and dissatisfactions, and of perceptions of success and failure. The student who saw her supervisor as exerting too much control also had rather mixed feelings, although those of achievement predominated.

The other 12 participants who had finished their dissertation work reported a strong sense of achievement, albeit accompanied sometimes by relief that the task of writing had been accomplished. Indeed the dominant note in the accounts that participants gave was one of a deeply felt personal satisfaction, congruent with the personal intrinsic motivation that had actuated many participants' efforts. The following extracts illustrate how participants expressed this feeling:

For me it was more of a personal satisfaction of knowing that I'd done it with all the kind of – I thought well if I can do it, a single parent, work and I also run [gives details here of a consultancy]. So all these things: and the house didn't fall down! It was a very personal thing. (Participant 7)

I've done all my study as a mature student, later on. So it was quite a – I felt it was quite an achievement for myself. (Participant 14)

In addition to this felt sense of achievement, participants identified a range of intellectual gains accruing from their dissertation work such as: developing and maintaining a deep knowledge of a particular domain, learning to read in an analytical fashion, establishing the habit of reading current research in areas that they found of interest. Gains were also recorded in their competence as professionals in terms of: acquiring specific knowledge and techniques, greater confidence in their professional role and in certain instances new perspectives on their day-to-day practice.

For a number of participants, the experience of researching and writing a dissertation had had a distinct impact on their professional identity, although not on their formal status. One of the participants, employed within the health service,

talked of how the depth of knowledge of a particular domain acquired over the course of the dissertation and gains in the ability to read research in an analytical fashion had led her to feel greater confidence and be more assertive in work groups. In her own words:

I feel confident now to say what I think about a study when people spout, you know, this study and that study and I can say: 'Well, that was a good one, that was a bad one', and I feel confident . . . feel confident in front of the doctors, who are the worst . . .

She also noted how the qualification was an important badge of esteem in this context: 'And because you've got an M.Sc. they see you in a different light as well'. A few other participants also described in similar terms how successful completion of the dissertation had an empowering effect and positively shifted how they positioned themselves within their workplaces.

Discussion: sense of agency in context

Presentation of self as *agentic* emerged as a central element in the analysis of findings from this study – an element that was closely connected with other key aspects of the students' dissertation experiences. It would be unwise though to view participants' conceptions of their own agency and responsibilities in too individualistic a manner.

The type of agency which participants presented themselves as displaying can be seen, in part at least, as a response to the structure of masters courses (where there tends to be less scaffolding of individual student effort than on undergraduate degree programmes) and to the structure of the dissertation task itself (which at masters level calls for considerable student initiative in conceptualising, planning, executing and writing up a project). In other words, the type of agency that participants displayed can be seen as very consonant with the demands of both the context and the task.

The picture of personal agency which the participants presented became more nuanced when the role of the supervisor in supporting and guiding their efforts was considered. It also needs to be noted that an account of their dissertation efforts which emphasised their own independent effort and responsibility did not lead participants to resist their 'academic socialisation' at the hands of supervisors and pursue their own agenda.

The emphasis in participants' accounts was rather on how their sense of a need to be agentic and to act as a self-motivated and persistent person enabled them to engage with the academic challenges of dissertation research and writing. This sense of self and a disposition to act in accordance with this view of themselves as agentic can thus be seen as an enabling resource for action in this academic context, in line with Holland et al's (1998: 278) observation that: 'Self-directed symbolizations are a . . . means by which a modicum of agency is made possible'.

The preceding paragraphs have portrayed a complex interweaving of personal dispositions to act in a self-directed, tenacious fashion with the affordances and constraints of a specific academic task and context. This enmeshing of personal initiative within a shaping and enabling context cannot be framed easily within any dichotomous view of the actions of structure and agency. However, it can be appropriately represented within Archer's (2003: 348) recent, nuanced, intricate account of the nature and effects of individual agency which argues that 'neither

structural determinism (the dominance of context), nor agential voluntarism (the dominance of concerns) can be sustained'. Archer notes that:

Fundamentally, we cannot account for any outcome unless we understand the agent's project in relation to her social context. And we cannot understand her project without entering into her reflexive deliberations about her personal concerns in conjunction with the objective social context that she confronts.

Indeed, it is what agents seek to do, the precise projects that they pursue, which are responsible for the activation of the causal powers of constraint and enablement . . .

Applying Archer's account of agency to the current study allows one to give weight to the causal powers of the participants' definitions of their 'precise projects' and orientation to the world in general and this specific academic task, without falling into an over-individualistic account of these personal powers.

This article has examined the experiences of dissertation research and writing on a taught masters degree among a group of mature professionals studying part time who had successfully completed or were about to do so. Quite clearly the personal motives, approaches, qualities, supports and outcomes which these participants characterised as actuating, sustaining and resulting from their efforts, may well differ from those of other students in different institutional settings, discipline areas and kinds of masters courses.

Nevertheless, the study has begun to address the hitherto relatively neglected area of student perceptions of the dissertation process in a professionally-based masters degree. It provides insights into the ways of acting among students and supervisors that were seen to help or hinder progress. Findings that do not accord with what might have been anticipated are of particular interest. For instance, there was little evidence in these students' accounts of resistance to grappling with the conventions of academic writing or to meeting the standards required. Again, it is striking that these participants' motivations were strongly intrinsic, which undermines any straightforward assumption that masters courses focused on professional development will attract students with a primarily extrinsic motivation to advance their career. (Perceived gains and benefits were also predominantly cast in terms of personal and intellectual development rather than in instrumental terms.)

We have indicated that there is a need to be very cautious in making any generalisations from this small-scale study. As a general point, however, the preceding sentences have highlighted how some commonly held assumptions concerning the motivations of masters students were not supported by the findings of this study and our research has pointed up complexities within participants' representations of their engagement with the dissertation. Accordingly it can be argued that to avoid students and staff viewing each other in terms of simplifying assumptions, it would be valuable to set up structures and processes in masters programmes which go beyond a setting out of formal expectations and allow a more open sharing of motivations, understandings, hopes, fears and uncertainties related to the thesis. Supervision groups of the type suggested by Dysthe et al. (2006) could provide an appropriate forum for this type of exchange.

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