

Creating a learning activity in the form of a writing retreat for psychology undergraduate dissertation students

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This paper describes the implementation of a new and innovative learning activity created to enhance the learning experience of psychology undergraduate dissertation students. The writing retreat is a student-based learning activity which aims to address students' needs over the final stages of the dissertation module. Involving active-learning, blended learning, and integrating with module assessment strategies (Laurillard, 2007), the event offers workshops on responding to formative feedback, writing skills, preparing the discussion chapter, and putting together the final dissertation document. The event aims to facilitate a learning environment that supports student autonomy, since this type of environment can have a positive effect on students' intrinsic motivation (Hagger et al., 2003, 2006). To assess the effectiveness of the writing retreat, we employed a Self-Determination Theory perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to investigate if the writing retreat facilitated an autonomous – hence beneficial – learning environment.

Keywords: Psychology; dissertation; motivation.

Introduction

THE VAST MAJORITY, if not of all, psychology undergraduate and postgraduate programmes involve, in one form or another, a dissertation module where the students are required to complete an independent empirical research project as part of their studies. The dissertation epitomises the student's journey on a course of study, where the dissertation module acts as the 'battleship' of modules, involving all students, academic staff and lab technicians. A quick internet search reveals a plethora of anecdotal evidence supporting the idea that final year students find the dissertation a substantial challenge (Packham, 2016). Indeed, the little empirical evidence that exists suggests that students report high levels of anxiety and stress while completing their dissertation project (Devonport & Lane, 2006).

Even though the final year dissertation is an essential pillar of many psychology programmes, it seems that it has not been the subject of change and transformation. The delivery and management of dissertation modules tend to follow a traditional

model, where students are assigned to a project supervisor, design and conduct a research study, and then write up the results in the form of a research report.

There is a need to change teaching in psychology, and in other courses, by increasing creativity and delivering a teaching and learning experience to the students that is enriching and exciting, facilitating their talent and capturing their interests (Smith et al., 2009). Recent research suggests that a creative teaching and learning environment is not only beneficial for students, but also creates an element of fulfilment for academics as well (Pollard et al., 2018).

In this article, we explore our experiences of creating a learning activity in the form of a writing retreat for final year undergraduate students as a way of employing creative teaching.

Organisational and historical context

The dissertation module aims to allow students to undertake ethically approved

empirical research within a chosen area of psychology. The module is based upon an accumulation of prior learning, utilising a social constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978) in which the dissertation project enables students to develop new knowledge from learning schemata that they have gained during the previous stages of their course. It should be noted that the nature of the module (i.e. utilising skills and knowledge that students have accumulated throughout their studies) results in deep learning processes, which are beneficial for student learning (Biggs, 1993).

The aims of the module hold a holistic approach, according to which the learner is at the centre of the learning experience (Cullen et al., 2012). In a nutshell, the module aims to enable students to understand research issues, which is an essential skill for psychologists operating in an evidence-based paradigm. The ability to produce an in-depth dissertation and present a logical argument using such research is crucial and is expected from a successful psychology graduate.

Stakeholders

It is important to highlight that the dissertation module and related learning activities involve a critical number of key stakeholders (Zhao, 2003) including the students, academic members of staff, lab technicians, the research participants, and in the case of psychology, our accrediting body the British Psychological Society (BPS). The dissertation teaching team at our institution consists entirely of members of staff, who are led by two module leaders. Approximately eight to ten students are assigned to each member of staff for supervision. The role of the supervisor is key to enhancing the teaching and learning environment and motivating students, as it operates at the core of the dissertation process.

Importantly, the students themselves are crucial stakeholders in the dissertation module. It is important to perceive students as agents of change and essential contribu-

tors in the module's development and evaluation (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). We hold two mid-module evaluations per academic year, as well as feedback discussion forums with final year Student Academic Leaders.

Student support and guidance

The dissertation requires students to work under one-to-one academic supervision, and encourages students to approach their dissertation in an independent manner. The supervisory process aims to facilitate the module's learning outcomes and help students tackle the complexities of the module. Supervisors provide individual feedback on a series of formative assessments throughout the module. The formative assessments correspond to the research proposal and individual chapters of the final dissertation, and are spread throughout the module to help students manage the long-term work required.

Outside of one-to-one supervision, the module leaders offer lectures on generic research-related skills relative to the dissertation project. The lectures are aligned to the two distinct stages of the assessment: the research proposal and the final dissertation. Lectures have the following themes: welcome to the module; how to write a research proposal; how to complete the research ethics application; using the American Psychological Association (APA) formatting and referencing style; preparing for data collection; how to approach your data analysis; and drafting the final dissertation. Furthermore, students have access to additional online learning resources and optional workshops on technical support.

Module limitations

After analysing the module and liaising with the module stakeholders, we identified two issues that required improvement. Data from student feedback forums indicated that students were satisfied with the amount of support and guidance they were receiving from their supervisors in the form of formative feedback. However, they would appre-

ciate further assistance on data analysis and on soft skills related to empirical research, which are applicable when drafting the final research report. Furthermore, the sporadic nature of lectures throughout the academic year does not create a powerful group ethos among the students, meaning that the module lacks in providing opportunities for peer-to-peer support.

Responding to student feedback, we designed a full day writing retreat, which includes a programme of learning and development activities. The scope of the writing retreat aims to facilitate and aid dissertation students in the writing up of their final dissertation.

Discussion of theoretical underpinnings

The writing retreat is embedded in the psychology dissertation module. It is designed as a learning activity that is student-orientated, involves active-learning, integrates with the module assessment, and attempts to increase students' intrinsic motivation by creating a more autonomous and supportive learning environment. Perhaps the most important of these aims is that the proposed learning activity is learner-oriented, as it is designed to address students' needs on the dissertation module.

The writing retreat event and pre-session materials are based on knowledge schemata that students have been taught at previous stages of their degree. Thus, the writing retreat follows an active learning social constructivist approach, where learners will not only learn by the acquisition of new information, but will also further develop their existing knowledge and learn how to apply this to their dissertation. This aspect of the proposed learning activity aims to facilitate the development of skills that are necessary for students to complete and succeed in the dissertation assessment.

The dissertation module encourages students to work autonomously to complete their dissertations. Autonomy supportive environments can have a positive effect on intrinsic motivation (Bailey & Phillips,

2016; Gillet et al., 2014; Hagger et al., 2003; Hagger et al., 2014; Kaplan, 2018). For example, autonomy-supportive learning environments hold the ecological determinants for choice provision qualities, and acknowledge experience and confidence. The opposite is controlling environments – behaviours and contingencies such as threats, surveillance, evaluations, and deadlines all characterise these kinds of environments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Among other environmental factors that can determine if an individual is experiencing high levels of intrinsic motivation, is a sensation of ownership and choice over a learning activity. Indeed, autonomy supportive learning environments that facilitate student choice can positively affect learners' intrinsic motivation, retention and academic performance, and this has a positive effect on the students' learning experiences (Valentine et al., 2004). The dissertation project is one of the few opportunities where students can own the curriculum and shape their learning experience. The dissertation module, as a whole, enhances students' levels of autonomy and choice, as students are encouraged to pursue a project that aligns with their area(s) of interest. The writing retreat supports this by scaffolding their independent learning through the inclusion of group activities and support from module staff.

To assess the effectiveness of the writing retreat, we employed a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The SDT is a theory of human motivation, psychological needs and human personality. It is concerned with human development in social contexts, and focuses on how human behaviour can be self-determined. The writing retreat was designed to foster and nurture dissertation students' – according to SDT – 'basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness'. For example, the need for relatedness involves the innate human need for a sense of connectedness with others (Deci & Ryan, 2002). In each academic year, the writing retreat is attended by approximately

120 students. Instructors emphasise the fact that students and staff are members of the same university (hence, they share a collective academic identity), and try to create a sense of community amongst the students and of a shared goal in drafting and submitting an empirical piece of research in the form of a dissertation. During the writing retreat, students work together on group tasks such as peer reviewing and discussing formative feedback, enhancing opportunities for peer-to-peer support.

Description of the writing retreat

In line with the theoretical underpinnings discussed above, the writing retreat is an innovative learning activity which has been strategically designed to provide an autonomy supportive learning environment to facilitate students' intrinsic motivation (Chatzisarantis et al., 2004; Hagger et al., 2003, 2014). The writing retreat takes place externally, providing students with the opportunity to escape the realms of the university and focus their attention solely on their dissertation project, with the aim of facilitating a structured space where students can utilise academic support in the final stages of their dissertation. The event is carefully timetabled at a crucial stage in the module where students have already designed and conducted their independent project and have collected and analysed their data. As such, they can benefit from support and guidance surrounding the finalisation of all sections of the dissertation.

Similarly to academic writing retreats, the dissertation writing retreat provides students with the opportunity to invest quality time in reading and writing, and is supplemented with structured workshops throughout the day. The workshops provide advice and guidance to support students in developing their final dissertation document. We carefully evaluated existing student feedback for the dissertation module to determine core areas where students may need additional support and guidance, transforming the paradigm of module instruction and customising delivery

to meet our students' needs (Reigeluth, 1999). Workshops included: responding to formative feedback; writing skills; writing the discussion chapter (the only section of the dissertation in which students do not have the opportunity to submit a formative draft for feedback from their project supervisor); and formatting the final dissertation document. Workshops are organised to provide initial guidance followed by active participation in activities that link the guidance to the students' projects, providing an opportunity for active learning and guiding students in applying their knowledge from the workshops to their own work. Workshops are optional, facilitating an element of student choice, which, as discussed, is an important predictor of learners' intrinsic motivation, retention and academic performance. Additionally, structured free writing time allows students to focus on their dissertation independently, and there is also an opportunity to meet with their supervisors if they wish to do so. Post-event resources, including PowerPoint slides from the workshops, are provided via the module's online portal to support students' learning and the development of their final dissertation up to and including submission, supplementing the event with additional blended learning opportunities.

Implementation issues

The writing retreat is dependent on support from academic staff throughout the department of psychology. Module coordinators scaffold students' learning, providing module-level support throughout the academic year, and leading workshops at the writing retreat. However, much of the support that students receive is provided on a one-to-one basis by the project supervisor. Student feedback suggested that support from their project supervisor would provide the most valuable guidance at this critical stage in the module. Investment of staff time at the writing retreat is therefore crucial for students to feel adequately supported in this process, yet this presented a chal-

lenge around staff availability and other commitments. To alleviate concern amongst students, module coordinators acted as additional points of contact, and students were provided with the opportunity to book meetings with their supervisors at alternative mutually convenient times.

Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that all students are encouraged to conduct an independent, empirical project for their dissertation. It is therefore important to note that all students are invested in individualistic topics and project designs. Student feedback suggested that students often experience statistics anxiety surrounding quantitative projects (Devonport & Lane, 2006), so data analysis workshops may have been an effective inclusion to the writing retreat. However, materials for the writing retreat had to be carefully designed so as not to discriminate against students who may be conducting projects in less familiar areas of interest, or students who are conducting qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research. Students are therefore encouraged to attend additional statistics workshops run by external agencies within the university or to seek guidance outside of the retreat from their project supervisor, if they feel that this kind of support is required.

Conclusion

The final year dissertation is an important aspect of the student experience in higher

education and it is important to consider how it can be informed by creative teaching and learning practices. The purpose of this article was to present a creative learning activity that is intended to help final year psychology students with the final stages of their dissertation. Indeed, existing theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that the more creative and innovative a teaching and learning environment is, the more advantageous it will be perceived from a student perspective. Imperative to developing an innovative teaching and learning environment is a teaching and learning framework that is not based on traditional models, but one that is student-centred and willing to adopt creative teaching techniques distant from traditional models (Pollard et al., 2018). In doing so, students will not only be encouraged to take ownership of their dissertation, but will be enabled to flourish in an autonomous, supportive academic learning environment.

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