How to make a 'promising' start to your dissertation: Development of a process mapping approach

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Identifying a topic for a dissertation is widely considered to be one of the most important, challenging, and stressful parts of the research process. Students often find it difficult to navigate this early yet pivotal stage due to heightened pressures, a lack of structural guidance, increased independence, and more pressing time constraints. In efforts to support students' topic selection in a way that does not circumvent the independent nature of the activity and process, a 'self-guiding navigation tool' (process map) – published in Holliman and Jones (2018, Psychology Teaching Review) – was developed. This was presented as a 'Masterclass' session (a workshop style with a mix of presentations and practical group activity) to an academic audience at the Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology Annual Conference at Cardiff University, Wales, 2019, where critical feedback was obtained via anonymous comment cards. A template analysis (a form of thematic analysis) revealed that while the 'map' was considered an important starting point, it required significant amendment in order to enhance its utility for a wider audience and account for differing practices/circumstances both within and across institutions; such as time differentials (programme of study and allocation of supervisor), level of autonomy available (whether a project is student- or staff-led), and whether the project is part of a group project. As a result of this evaluation, we offer some revised (and more flexible) guidance for users, which accounts more effectively, in our view, for the diversity among students, supervisors, and institutions with respect to the dissertation. As with the original 'map' and its associated guidance, we welcome feedback from students and our peers along with further empirical evaluation of its effectiveness.

Keywords: *Dissertation/thesis topic; Supervision; University/College Students; FE; HE.*

Introduction

MOST undergraduate and postgraduate degrees require the successful completion of a dissertation (also referred to as a thesis or final year project). The dissertation is quite distinct from other assignments on a degree; for instance, it occurs at the end of a programme of study reflecting a culmination of prior learning; it is typically more extensive in terms of word length, study hours, and credit weighting; it is less structured than other assignments demanding heightened independence, commitment, self-determination, and critical thinking; and it is considered unique in its link with employability. Additionally, for 'empirical' dissertations – those involving the collection of data – students are often required to identify and/or commence work on a topic that is appropriate, of personal interest, ethical, and achievable, and rooted in an academic literature, methodologically sound, and with originality. These factors (i.e. heightened demands coupled with increased independence and reduced structural guidance and support) pose significant challenges for students, who are trying to successfully navigate this early yet pivotal stage of the research process.

In an effort to support students to identify a 'promising' topic for a dissertation in a way that does not circumvent the independent nature of the activity and process (thus, maintaining student empowerment and self-determination), a 'self-guiding navi-

gation tool' (process map) was developed (Figure 1). This was designed to support students to navigate through three major steps that culminate in a supervisory meeting (see Holliman & Jones, 2018, for a comprehensive summary of the 'map' along with a rationale for its development):

1. *Identifying a general area of investigation* (here, students are supported to identify a topic area that is relevant, of personal interest, familiar, and linked to their future aspirations, resulting in the identification of some suitable 'search terms', for the next step);
2. *Preliminary literature review and narrowing the subject area* (here, students are supported to enter those search terms in (1) into research databases in order to identify a 'key' journal article that may serve as a catalyst for a more extensive literature review, in the next step);
3. *More extensive literature review and idea refinement* (here, students are supported to use the 'key' journal article to access a range of other relevant articles enabling a more comprehensive review of relevant theory, empirical evidence, methodologies, and avenues for further research; thus, culminating in the identification and development of a research topic that is personally appealing and achievable, rooted in an academic literature, and with evidence of originality);
4. *A supervisory meeting* (here, having completed the previous steps, students are encouraged to discuss the dissertation topic with their supervisor, knowing that they can do so more confidently displaying evidence of critical application).

In their article, Holliman and Jones (2018) provide some anecdotal evidence of its utility and effectiveness; but highlight the need for further (and more empirical) evaluation via consultation with, and data collection from, the different stakeholder groups. In this paper, we provide the first empirical evaluation of this 'self-guiding navigation tool' (process map) using a sample of academics who have vast experience of the supervisory process. Following a presentation of the 'map' by one of its developers at the Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology Annual Conference at Cardiff University, Wales, 2019, qualitative feedback was obtained via anonymous comment cards and subjected to a thematic analysis.

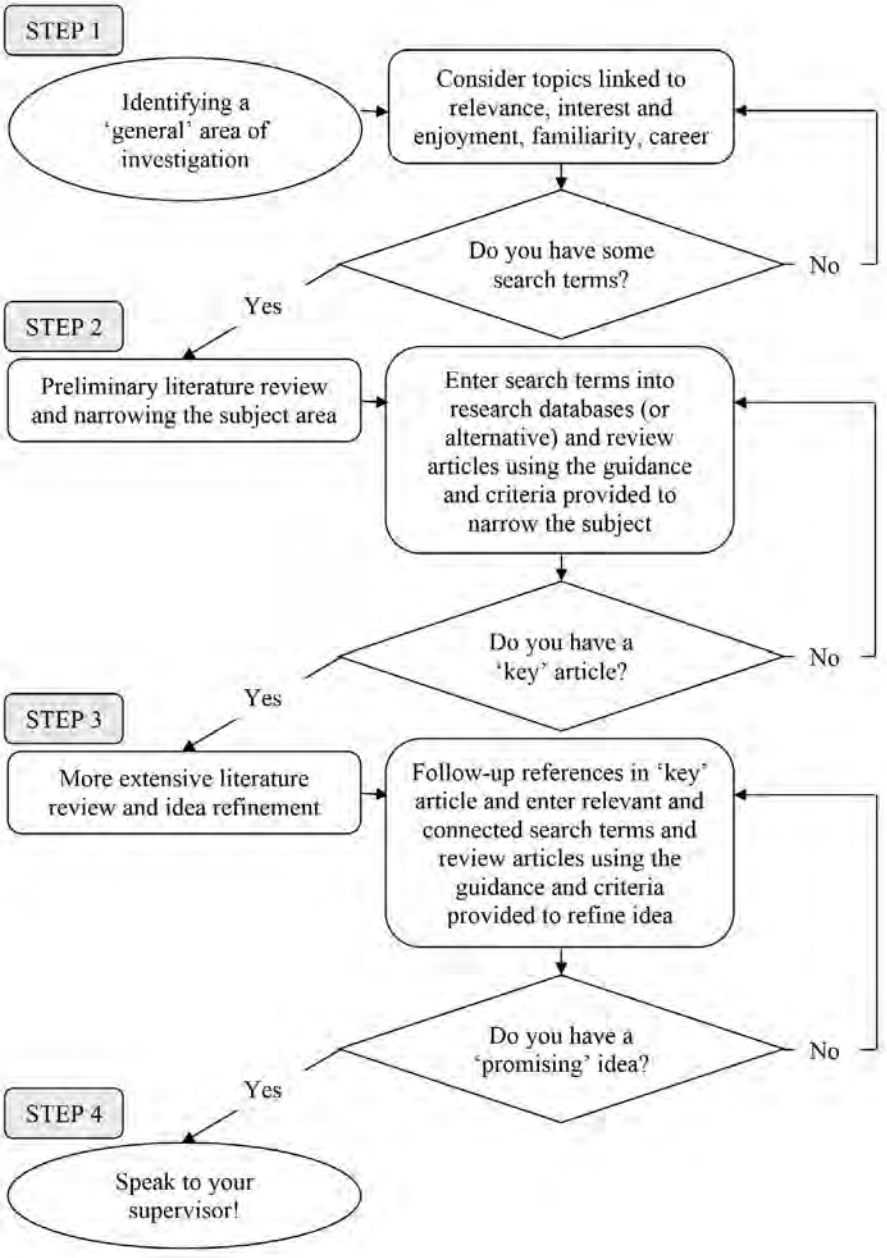
Method

Participants and procedure

Data were collected at the Division of Academics, Researchers and Teachers in Psychology Annual Conference at Cardiff University, Wales, 2019. A one-hour 'Masterclass' session (that is, a workshop style with a mix of presentations and practical group activity) titled *Identifying a 'promising' topic for a psychology dissertation: A process mapping approach* took place with an audience of 18 delegates from the division (females = 13, aged between 25 and 57) who were mostly involved in Higher Education ($N = 16$). The session comprised a 20-minute introduction to the process map (i.e. Figure 1, using accompanying details from Holliman & Jones, 2018) followed by a 30-minute small-group discussion activity, which involved delegates familiarising themselves with the 'map', considering it in relation to their own experience, and critically discussing aspects of it (e.g. areas that resonate, strengths and usefulness of the 'map', possible barriers, omissions, dangers, extensions, revisions etc.). In the final 10 minutes of the session, delegates were invited to write on anonymous comment cards what they thought in relation to two general questions:

1. What will I take with me into my supervision/provision; i.e. what have I acquired that will positively inform and influence my future pedagogical practice?
2. What are the continued challenges for staff and students, and what do we need to do and/or learn in order to enhance current understandings and improve pedagogical practice in this area?

Figure 1: Identifying a topic for a psychology dissertation: A process map for students (adapted from Holliman & Jones, 2018).



These comments were then transferred onto a single document, that detailed participants' gender, age, sector/profession, and of course their comments. Ethical obligations were upheld throughout the data collection process: participants were provided with an overview of the study and were told that they did not have to participate; they were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time; and that their responses would remain anonymous (using pseudonyms) and untraceable to any individual.

Data analysis

The aim of the data analysis was to adequately describe participants' responses to the two general questions (noted previously) to draw conclusions about the usefulness of the process map to educators and to also identify ways of improving it. The epistemological position taken for this analysis was broadly pragmatist, in that the main emphasis of the investigation was on the utility of the process map for educators, as well as insight into what changes may enhance this utility. As there were strong prior expectations on what the responses would address, due to the focus of the questions, a template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015) was chosen as the most appropriate way of analysing the data. Template analysis is a form of thematic analysis that allows researchers to articulate pertinent *a priori* coding templates to address their research questions. Prior coding templates were derived from the two general questions that directed the responses. The first question asked about what aspects of practice educators would take with them, aspects that would positively inform their practice. From these, two initial codes were derived: *intentions of using the process map* and *evaluation of usefulness*. The second question asked for challenges as well as things to do or change. These constituted two further codes, namely *challenges* and *recommendations for use or changes*. In summary, the coding template for the dataset was as follows:

1. Evaluations of usefulness.
2. Intentions of using the process map.
3. Challenges.
4. Recommendations for use or changes.

On an initial read through, the above codes appeared to adequately and exhaustively describe the data. The full data set was then coded, and responses collated.

Results and discussion

1. Evaluations of usefulness: The map gives structure

Broadly speaking, the process map was seen as a useful tool for students and educators. The main way in which it was seen to facilitate the choice of dissertation project was through providing a framework and structure for the process:

> *'this gives structure to the process, which will be a useful aid.'*

A further participant commented:

> *'(the map offers) an explicit framework for guiding students through initial phases.'*

The standardised structure of the process map was seen to be useful in a different way. For instance, it enables the supervisor to provide more standardised guidance across their students:

> *'Students receive a more equal level of input from their supervisor if they all follow the same structure/map.'*

This standardised guide was also seen as enabling students' self-determination and agency in this aspect of the research process:

> *'It's a good starting point to give students independence and autonomy in "their" research process.'*

The evaluation of usefulness of the process map appears to align with the intended function of the map as a 'self-guiding navigation tool'.

2. Intentions of using the process map (but it's in need of some modification)

Related to the positive evaluation of the process map as a guide was the intention of using it in one's own practice:

> *'I will make use of this model. I find this very easy to follow for the students, which will help them to a great extent.'*

Most of the educators at the workshop wished to use the map, but in some cases, this would require some adaptation:

'I will think about adapting this for our environment.'

A further colleague, notes:

'I am going to try and adapt it to a group project.'

While most participants of the workshop stated that they intended to use the map, in their own context, some could not do this without some modification.

3. Challenges – the complexity of different academic environments

The main challenge that participants saw in using the process map was adapting it to fit the differences in practice in their own academic environment. Final year dissertations can be run as group or individual projects, supervisors may prefer giving students prepared project topics rather than allowing them to choose freely. This general point was reflected here:

'There may be difficulties with implementing (the map) across different institutions due to different set-ups/systems for UG and PG courses.'

Timing was also seen to be a challenge in the sense that much of the efficaciousness of the map depended on when it is introduced:

'Challenges might include differences in how institutions manage this process and the timing of when to introduce the map. Also, is this a step or circular process?'

Moreover, choosing a topic freely, which is the assumption of the process map, is challenging in situations where the research interest and topics of the supervisor constrain this choice. Similarly, collaborative group projects, in which students work together, poses a further challenge as the map does not address this:

'Some sticking points on how this would work for group projects and the fact students are assigned to me based on my established research interests (so it's not completely a free reign!).'

4. Recommendations for change – more flexibility

The challenges of implementing the process map (above) also provide the first step for recommendations for improving its utility:

'It could be developed to offer greater "authenticity" by considering how it could be applied to group projects, the role of the supervisors, and supervisor-led project.'

A possible way to allow for this authenticity is by incorporating greater flexibility to allow it to accommodate different types of supervisor practice as well as allowing for group projects. Participants further recommended flexibility around the timing of the map. One participant suggested introducing the process map earlier in the programme to get students used to it:

'It can be embedded in Year 2 research methods modules, so it becomes more familiar before the dissertation. It can be used in the module guide which goes out to students early in the year.'

Lastly, it was recommended to incorporate open science practices as pre-registration into the process map:

'Futureproofing psychological research practice, for instance, how can open science practices like pre-registration be embedded in this tool.'

To summarise, the analysis showed that the process map was seen as useful for educators as it can provide a structure for the process of selecting a dissertation topic; most participants intended to use it as a navigation tool, however not without some modifications that would address some of the challenges of implementing the map within different academic environments. Recommendations

suggested accounting for the degree of independence of selecting a topic (student- or supervisor-led), when to introduce the process map in the programme (e.g. in prior research methods teaching) and to account for different modes of conducting the projects (individual or group projects). We believe these modifications are compatible with the original 'map' (Figure 1, see also Holliman & Jones, 2018); but suggest three additional considerations (amendments) to maximise user effectiveness.

Supervisor-led or staff-led

The original 'map' (Holliman & Jones, 2018) was principally developed for 'student-led projects' i.e. where students are required to develop a dissertation idea for themselves. However, it is becoming increasingly common for students to join 'staff advertised projects' whereby they commence work on an 'already designed study' (although the rigidity and flexibility of that study may vary). It is advised here, that if a general area of investigation and/or a research title has already been provided by a (prospective) supervisor, then students might enter the process map at 'Step 2' and commence a preliminary literature review using the key terms that have been provided. If a (prospective) supervisor has also provided a 'key' article, then students might enter the process map at 'Step 3' and commence a more extensive literature review.

Individual or group projects

The original 'map' (Holliman & Jones, 2018) was also principally developed for 'individual projects' (i.e. one researcher, one topic); however, it is often more economical for students (and their supervisors) to work together on a dissertation project. Although students may need to take extra care to ensure they avoid plagiarism and/or collusion (which is heightened during group projects), working together can lead to bigger and more meaningful research projects. It is advised here, that while the original guidance can be followed (integrating the above, should it be a supervisor-led project), students working on group projects should consider the needs of the 'group' (rather than themselves) at each stage of the research process, and should also negotiate different roles, and be flexible in their approach and open to compromise. Of course, the dynamics of working in groups are more complex than this and there are likely to be other considerations, but these are beyond the scope and focus of this article.

When to introduce the 'map'

Lastly, the original 'map' (Holliman & Jones, 2018) and associated guidance, did not specify 'when' to commence the research process nor did it indicate how long the process typically takes to complete; although it was thought that this initial stage of the research process normally occurs at a very busy time where resources are limited. We recommend here, that for undergraduate students, the 'map' would be most effective if introduced prior to the final year in Year 2 in order to maximise the time available to engage with the process. It may also be best-positioned in a research methods or dissertation preparation module (if available). For full-time postgraduate students, there is of course less flexibility; but the 'map' should be presented and made available to students at the earliest opportunity and may even be referred to during a course/programme induction.

In sum, we believe that the revised (and more flexible) guidance offered here is compatible with the original 'map' (Holliman & Jones, 2018) but accounts more effectively (in our view) for the diversity among students, supervisors, and institutions with respect to the dissertation. We believe this self-guiding navigation tool is cross-disciplinary and will be of great value to undergraduate and postgraduate students, dissertation supervisors, and other module and course teams. As with the original publication of the 'map', we welcome feedback from students and our peers, and particu-

larly encourage further empirical evaluation of its utility and effectiveness using different stakeholder groups.

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