Exploring the Role of Digital Technologies in Managing Dissertations Across the Business School

Brief Summary

This study 1) investigates the challenges business school students face during the dissertation process; and 2) creates briefing papers on how and what types of digital technologies students could use to address some of the challenges identified.

Context and Background

The University of Exeter is one of the UK’s leading universities and its business school is known to attract students with a high level of academic excellence. The Business School offers programs on the undergraduate and postgraduate (taught and research) levels; and for most of these programs, there is a dissertation component required for successful graduation. This dissertation program is however very common among postgraduate students (i.e. masters taught students, masters research students and PhD students).

The dissertation component is a unique module, worth double credit, where students work one on one with supervisors over a period of three months as they undertake research. The output of this module is a dissertation report with total word count varying from level to level. In some of the departments (for example the MBA), a one day seminar/training program is organized at the beginning of the module to prepare students for what is at stake.

For the purpose of this study, the challenges students face when managing dissertations are investigated among professors and lecturers supervising dissertations, masters’ taught students and PhD research students in the Business School. Such an environment is by definition multi-cultural and multidisciplinary.

The Challenge or Motive

The motivation for this study originates from the personal experience of the researchers.
Going through dissertations during their undergraduate, masters and, currently, doctoral education, they have learnt that digital literacy could be used to improve and ease the research process, the information search process and the management of large secondary data sets and their references.

On the other hand, through professional experiences, they realized that being able to manage knowledge is not enough if one cannot share and diffuse it easily. Thus they became interested in investigating how digital technologies could be used to improve cooperation and information sharing among researchers.

To this end, it is believed that an understanding of the challenges business school students face when undertaking dissertations will enable the team contribute by way of a briefing paper a document that students can refer to at the start of their dissertations for guidance.

These we believe will be useful to third year undergraduate students, taught masters students and MBA students at the University of Exeter going into dissertations.

The Digital Literacy Agenda

In terms of the digital literacy agenda, the researchers hope to contribute towards developing digital literacies in the business school using the following means:

- Provide information on free and easy to use technologies for organizing literature reviews and managing references. This information will be created in the form of a briefing paper which will be added to the course material given to students going into dissertations at the beginning of the module. This could be given out in paper or uploaded unto the module page on the Exeter learning Environment
- We recognize that there may be other people in the business school using various digital technologies to address some of the challenges identified in the business school. Therefore we see the creation of a resource that could be accessed and updated by students and staff regularly with new ideas useful. To achieve this considering the time frame, we intend liaising with another intern (Amy Burgess) who has already started work in developing an online resource for postgraduate research writing.

The Project in Practice

The case study has drawn on three data sources: email survey, video interviews and informal chats with students and lecturers.

These discussions were guided by three simple questions posed to a selected group. The questions are as follows:

1. In your opinion, what problems do taught students face in writing and managing dissertations? (This might be: Defining search strategy, deciding where to start and deciding what to read Structuring logical and coherent arguments, managing sources and citing references properly)
2. Have you seen students use technology to play a role in addressing these issues? How?
3. Which technologies (e.g. mind and concept maps, Endnote, Nvivo, Wordle, etc.) are you, or other academic researchers, using to address these problems?
The above questions were disseminated by email to a total of 22 lecturers and professors. Unfortunately we had only few responses. This then led us to the use of a more personalised approach; video interviews and informal chats. The following are findings from the video interview, email survey and informal chat:

- Language is a major barrier that affects the ability of students to structure literature reviews in a logical and coherent manner. We find that this problem transcends language to include a cultural and mind-set issue that makes expressing themselves in a logical and original way difficult.
- Deciding on the initial strategy of a dissertation is a major challenge.
- At present digital literacy is not widely addressed as a priority in the Business School. As a result, the research process is often not as efficient as it could be.
- Most of the interviewees use Endnote and are not interested in using other solutions for managing references.
- Apart from Nvivo, no one uses any other software for analysing research data.
- There a few specific cases where lecturers use uncommon technology such as the Livescribe pen to aid teaching.

Findings from this study are not intended to be representative of practices in the Business School but to provide useful insights.

**Benefits and Impacts**

The following are outputs from the study that are found to be of benefit to both staff and students at the business school:

- Briefing Papers on reference management and mapping in literature reviews.
- Edited video on what lecturers think student struggle with when doing dissertations.

The briefing paper on reference management has been found useful by a lot of people so far. One of the researchers on this project, with the help of another researcher have given presentations on this tool during one of the Cascade project’s internal meetings (8th March, 2012) and at a national event titled “Supporting Academic Practice in a Digital Age” (17th May, 2012).

About a month and a half after the presentation at the cascade project’s internal meeting (23rd May, 20102), one intern put a blog post titled “Goodbye Endnote, Hello Zotero”. It was obvious from the interns’ post that the presentation had had a positive impact on his experience organizing and managing references during his research. As his final words in the blog post he said

> “If there is anything I learnt from this experience, it is to recognise the diverse body of software available and how difficult it is to make an informed decision on what I ought to have or use, or what is more purposeful for what I am doing. In my case, if it were not for this presentation, I doubt I would have ever tried Zotero out; and this only strengthens the perception that networking plays a pivotal role in the world of research”. Leo Rodriguez

Considering the timeframe of the internship, ideas developed from this study has not yet been used or embedded in any module. Embedding our outputs into the dissertation module will go a long way to create more positive impacts.
Reflections and Conclusions

At the end of this experience we have to admit that the Business School does not seem to be a place of digital pioneers. Most of the lecturers and students we met have a good level of competence of digital literacy but are not really engaged in looking for cutting-edge technologies to improve their work. Apart from few exceptions, our environment seems to approach research and teaching in a rather traditional way.

On a personal level we have to say that the internship has improved our awareness about our approach to technology. We also realise that, even though technology plays an important role in improving the quality of our research activities, human contact is still a major factor.

When we tried to contact people by an email survey, we received only few replies. But when we moved to a more personal approach, speaking personally with people and carrying out short video interviews, the response was better. Further, all the feedback we received through the interviews stressed the importance of human contact in managing dissertations and guiding new students through a research journey.