**Teaching and Learning Centre podcasts: the DISSERTATION SERIES**

**Managing your research project**

I’m Helen Green from LSE’s Teaching and Learning Centre. In this series of podcasts about your dissertation, I’m offering advice on some of the key aspects of doing research and writing a dissertation.

In my last podcast, I went over the various sections of the dissertation and their functions. In today’s podcast, I’ll shift my attention away from the dissertation as a written piece of work that you’ll hand in – and talk more about the actual research project that you’ll carry out for the dissertation.

The specific issues I’d like to talk about today are developing specific research questions, and creating a viable research plan.

**Developing a research question**

Once you have a general topic in mind, it is important to develop your research questions. A topic is not the same as a research question!

Where your topic delineates a broad area of research, your research questions indicate your specific focus, what you are seeking to understand better. Formulating research questions is the process of narrowing your broad topic down to a few specific aspects that you can investigate and draw some conclusions about.

Your specific question shapes your research process in a few important ways. It guides your literature review – by helping you decide where and how you search the literature, what you read and what you decide NOT to read, and how you write about it. Your research questions also help you make decisions about data collection: the methods you’ll use, how you select your sample, and whether you set a particular time frame, for example. Finally, your research questions also influence how you analyse your data and present your findings.

In a word, the research questions help you maintain a clear focus across the 10,000 words of your dissertation. They are ESSENTIAL to keep you from going off on tangents – in the literature, the research, and the writing! Once you have your research questions, you can then consider whether every research task – and every part of your dissertation text – contributes to responding to those questions.

Once you have some draft research questions, take time to check them: are they written in a way that is clear? Someone not specialised in your field might not be able to respond to your question, but even a non-specialist should be able to understand it.

Check that your questions are researchable? Is there a literature or data related to the questions? Check the breadth of the question: can the question be researched given the time, skills, and word count that you have – could the question be too ambitious? Perhaps the question is too narrow? There may not be sufficient around a micro-phenomenon – or the findings might be difficult to generalise to a broader scale?

If you have more than one question, are your questions linked to each other? Do they come together to make a unified, coherent story? Or does it seem like you couldn’t choose from among a number of questions?

Your supervisor is probably best placed to help you make decisions about your research questions. Be sure to consider this early in the research process.

It may be that as you conduct your research, you wish to make some slight revisions to your research questions. For example, if the data you wanted to analyse is not available, or if you discover a new idea or direction as you review the literature, this could cause you to re-consider how you frame your project in the research questions. This happens often in the course of research – it doesn’t necessarily mean there’s a problem. Again, be sure to discuss any changes you’re thinking of making to your research plans or questions with your dissertation supervisor.

**Managing your research project**

I’d like to talk about managing your research project. Here, when I say ‘managing’ – this has to do with creating a vision over the many parts of the project – so that it comes together in a coherent way as you advance. I also mean understanding in advance what is required so that you can plan effectively. I have two specific ideas to propose.

First, write a detailed research proposal. Maybe you’ve already done this. Many departments ask for a brief description of the research project early in the year. What I’m suggesting here is a detailed proposal – even if you don’t have to hand it in. The idea is for you to have an overview of your own project, a narrative for yourself. Once you get involved in a research project, it can sometimes be difficult to see the wood for the trees. This is a way to keep some perspective on your project. For example, write out a few sentences on what you will investigate, what you aim to find out, and why this is potentially useful. Write about the data you plan to gather or use, why those are appropriate, and what you propose doing with them. Be sure to try to include the reasoned justifications and the honest limitations of what you are proposing. I’ve included a worksheet with a few writing prompts to help you write this proposal. The areas where you have trouble writing are a signal of the areas you can focus on first. With these in hand, you have a good basis for a fruitful conversation with your supervisor.

My second proposal is to develop a specific plan that includes all your research-related tasks and the various stages of research. Deciding how many weeks you’d like to leave before the deadline for writing, reviewing, and editing your text – then you’ll see how much time you have for your research. Try to foresee your various activities and obligations and get a clear picture of how much time you will have to devote to your research project. From here you can then identify your main tasks and allocate time to each of them.

Do your best to be realistic about how long each task is likely to take. Planning early on – with the help of your supervisor – can save much time, energy, and worry later on. Write down each task and the resources required – including time, someone’s help, the use of some equipment, a room that needs to be booked, etc. If this is your first research project, it can be hard to foresee what might be included among these tasks. So I’d like to talk about a few other important tasks that your project might involve.

Access

If your project requires you to be able to reach certain individuals in an organisation, or retrieve some specialist data held by a particular institution, or perhaps consult some archive materials in a library – you need to plan for access. This could involve permission or simply someone’s co-operation. Be prepared for any changes that might effect your access to what you need. This might be a change of management or government, someone else using the resource.

Practical arrangements

Depending on what kind of research you are doing, there might be some essential practical arrangements to make. Be sure that you factor in time for things like getting visas and government authorisations to buying or borrowing audio recording devices or transcription equipment.

Pilot study

A pilot study involves preliminary data collection, using your planned methods, but with a very small sample. This can help you test out your approach, and identify any details or problems that need to be addressed before you go ahead with the main data collection.

For example, you could ask a few people to fill in your questionnaire to be sure your questions are clear-- or test out your online survey, to make sure everything functions as you planned. Running a pilot study takes time – but it can raise issues that could be crucial to your project. I highly recommend taking the time to pilot your research tools and to be sure whether any adjustments are required – to the tools, or possibly to your plan.

Collecting data

For empirical projects, you may be very eager to start collecting data. Be sure that you are well-prepared before you start. For example, it’s probably not a good idea to collect data before you are clear on your research questions! Your data-collection instruments – surveys, questionnaires, experiments, but also searches for secondary data-- should be designed with your specific questions in mind.

The risk of collecting data without having a clear idea of what you want to find out is that the analysis of the data you do collect then doesn’t shed light on the question you want to address.

Also, think of how you will record and store your data. How will you organise the paper surveys that your participants complete? Where will you store large data files? Very importantly – how will you back up your data? What happens if your papers are lost or destroyed, if your computer is stolen, or if your online file storage is hacked? How will you store your participants’ responses – AND keep their anonymity protected? Be sure to discuss both the theoretical ideas AND these practical issues with your supervisor.

Analysing data

If you are new to data analysis, don’t underestimate just how long this can take. Most forms of data need to be input, transcribed, cleaned, or otherwise prepared before you can analyse them. If you are using unfamiliar software – your first attempts may be difficult. In some cases, qualitative data must be reviewed numerous times to identify patterns or themes. Be sure to leave sufficient time for a thorough, thoughtful analysis.

Dealing with the unexpected

Make sure that your plan allows for the unexpected! You should have some time planned to deal with any surprises you might encounter. These could be practical issues, unexpected results, or a fascinating new development that could have an impact on your topic. You should also think about whether you are dependent on any one else to complete your project, and think about what you are going to do if they are unable to help you. Devise a plan B in case the head of an organisation decides she doesn’t want you to interview her employees, or if the person who was going to code your online survey falls ill and can’t help you.

Bringing the research to an end

Try to plan when you will aim to stop collecting and analysing the data – and when you will shift your attention to writing and revising your dissertation. Of course, you’ll likely be writing all along the research process. But it is important to leave enough time before your deadline to devote solely to writing and the critical review of your writing. Consider planning a break from your project at this point. Try to take a few days for a short break between completing the research and writing up the dissertation.

You should decide how much data you’ll collect in advance. When you reach that point, you may feel that you need to do more research. Or that you need more data to be able to make your point. A little time away from the project can help you take some distance and ask yourself whether that is really necessary. Your supervisor can also weigh in on this decision.

Checking in with supervisor: don’t let term-time slip away

But of course, your supervisor can only help if you call on him during the times he’s agreed to be available. In most cases, this is term-time. As you make your plan, keep in mind the academic calendar – especially the dates of the Easter and summer breaks. In general, there is no supervision outside term time. For more about this, please listen to Thursday’s podcast on time management and making the most out of your dissertation resources.

In this podcast about managing your dissertation research project, we’ve talked about developing your research questions and creating a viable plan for your research. Again though, let me point out that every research project is different, and these ideas may be applicable to different projects in different ways.

One aspect that dissertations do have in common though, is that they typically include a literature review - and that’s the topic of tomorrow’s podcast.

Many thanks for listening to this Dissertation series podcast from LSE’s Teaching and Learning Centre! I hope this podcast has been helpful for you. If you have any comments or questions, please do get in touch with us – via the online feedback box, or by e-mail, to tlc@lse.ac.uk.