

Dissertation replaced by practical project.

Identifying and supervising a dissertation topic for a dyslexic student with mental health difficulties.



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Presenting Situation

K was a mature student with dyslexia and a medical history of depression. During her final year, the depression became so acute because of the pressure of her studies that she could not complete the year. In particular, she was unable to complete more than a small amount of research on her dissertation. She was allowed to suspend studies on medical grounds. Six months later she indicated that she wished to return to complete the degree.

Staff response

As her personal tutor, and at the instigation of the Study Support Centre tutor, I attended a 'review' meeting with the student shortly before she was due to resume her studies. Although she was completing her final year part-time on medical grounds, she was still suffering significantly from depression, and so the issue we faced was how to organise the student's studies so as to minimise the pressure placed upon her.

The dissertation, in particular, presented problems. It represents a major piece of sustained, autonomous work for final year students spread over two semesters (40 credits; 12,000-14,000 words). The dissertation topic initially chosen by the student was in many ways fairly "typical" of a humanities dissertation. It involved a large amount of reading, the understanding of complex and technical knowledge and data, and the employment of abstract concepts. The student felt that to undertake large amounts of reading and assimilate a mass of technical information would be too stressful for her given the combination of her dyslexia and her depression.

During the meeting we explored some of the non-academic activities which the student enjoyed and used as relaxation. Textiles emerged as a major element. I, therefore, suggested that the student consider undertaking the reconstruction of an actual version of a primitive vertical loom, of a type discussed in the archaeological literature. The project would include an element of library research into the different ways in which the archaeological evidence had been interpreted, but much of the work would involve practical skills, such as the drawing of plans for the loom derived from her understanding of the discussions in the literature.

Construction of the wooden parts (“hardware”) of the loom would be undertaken by a professional woodworker, but the supervision of the construction, the complex work of setting up the threads on the loom and the actual weaving would be the student’s responsibility. The idea was that the student would describe the processes involved in each stage of the project and keep a photo journal of the progress. The dissertation’s conclusions would relate back to issues relevant to the archaeology of textiles.

Practical problems

This ‘non-standard’ approach to a research project in archaeology needed validation. The case for it had to be made to the external examiner before the student could attempt it. In this case he considered it acceptable. The cost implications were significant. The timber for the “hardware” of the loom had to be purchased, and payment for the joinery work involved in construction was another major cost. So, too, was the purchase of quantities of woollen yarn for the weaving. In this case the student’s partner was very supportive and quite content for family finances to be employed on the project. Domestic problems, such as having a large loom taking up a considerable amount of space in a room in the student’s house were overcome by the forbearance and support of the family.

Supervision of a non-standard dissertation

As supervisor I was able to provide moral support and also archaeological knowledge. However, throughout the project, the support of the Study Support Centre tutor was crucial, providing a detached viewpoint to the project which I did not always have. Together we explored and resolved any emerging difficulties.

Outcome for the student

The student developed increasing confidence in her abilities as the project progressed. She completed the dissertation, and also the rest of her modules. The dissertation was awarded a clear II:i mark, and in no small part as a result of this the student gained an overall II:i degree. At the start of the year I had considered that the achievement of even a II:ii degree would have been a success.

Thoughts on future practice

The employment of non-standard approaches to dissertations is very dependent on agencies over whom the student and supporting staff have very little control. In particular, departmental policies and external examiners need to be aware of the kinds of problems which dyslexic students can have if such an approach is to be successful. In addition, it is evident from this example that a great deal more can be achieved if students and teaching staff work in partnership with Study Support staff. The support and encouragement of such staff can be a crucial factor in encouraging academic staff who wish to explore further the approaches which enable dyslexic students to maximise their potential.