

Knitting connections: establishing and exploring research links in the discussion section of master's dissertations using the SCE model

Introduction and background

A key component of most taught master's programmes of study (and other levels of study at the higher education level) is the dissertation. The critical role of the supervisor in influencing the success or failure of research studies towards higher degrees has received considerable attention (see Ngulube, 2021)¹, yet for those in the infancy of their academic career, the demand to effectively supervise taught master's students can be pressurising. Particular unease relates to the write-up stage of a taught master's dissertation given that this 'involves not only cognitive, linguistic, and social dimensions, but also emotional aspects that can condition it decisively' (Carvalho, Pereira, and Laranjeira, 2018, p.78)² such as anxiety and insecurity. These are never more present than when taught master's students initiate work on their discussion, the 'unlikely' key chapter (Şanlı, Erdem, and Tefik, 2013, p.20)³ which 'tie[s] together the research questions or hypotheses, the data you have unearthed, and the previous research and models and arguments' (Atherton, 2010, p.9).

This opinion piece by Dr. Simon Brownhill at the University of Bristol School of Education focuses on the 'discussion', an important chapter which typically provokes 'fear, uncertainty, and doubt' (Mewburn, 2016)⁴ in the minds of taught master's students. He argues that supervisors can alleviate some of their supervisees' anxieties by introducing them to the SCE model – Support, Challenge, and Extend – which he has developed and shared with taught master's students in England for a number of years. He shows how this simple, yet useful model can encourage taught master's students to establish and knit connections between their review of literature chapter and findings chapter. Dr. Brownhill explains how the SCE model can help students to generate a stimulating discussion about what is known (literature) and what is now known (findings).

Problems faced by master's students

- Of significance to this opinion piece is the word 'connection'. For many of the students whom the author has supervised at taught master's level, their struggle (at least at the drafting stage) has centred on their inability to offer a rich discussion by linking their research findings back to the literature. The importance of effectively undertaking this key activity is rooted in Cottrell's characteristics of 'critical analytical writing' (2013, p.198)⁵ and is emphasised by Lunenburg and Irby (2008, p.228)⁶: 'As you discuss your results, you evaluate what your results mean, how they fit with your theoretical framework and the literature you reviewed earlier, and what you can conclude about the research questions or hypotheses you posed at the outset.'
- This connectivity between findings and previous literature has been defined as the 'golden thread' by Smith (2015).⁷
- Academics have previously offered detailed supporting structures and guidance to facilitate the linking process. In contrast, the author advocates the use of the simple yet useful SCE (Support, Challenge, Extend) model.
- The author's late mother was an avid knitter of blankets. Observing her manipulate the knitting needles and wool with mastery skill served as the inspiration for the SCE model. The model initially requires taught master's students to choose either their review of literature chapter or their findings chapter (these represent the two knitting needles). From their chosen chapter, taught master's students need to select a piece of literature or an empirical research finding that relates to one of their main research questions.
- They then need to link this to a relevant empirical research finding or piece of literature from the other chapter. By bringing together a select aspect from each of the two chapters, the model then encourages taught master's students to establish a connection (this represents the wool) between the two items by knitting them together. This could be: a) a supporting connection where the finding validates the literature;

¹ Ngulube, P. (2021) 'Postgraduate supervision practices in education research and the creation of opportunities for knowledge sharing', *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 79(2), pp.255-272. <https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/21.79.255>.

² Carvalho, J. B., Pereira, L. A. and Laranjeira, R. M. (2018) 'Writing a master's dissertation – students' perspectives', *Journal of Academic Writing*, 8(2), pp.78-88. <https://doi.org/10.18552/joaw.v8i2.481>.

³ Şanlı, Ö., Erdem, S. and Tefik, T. (2013) 'How to write a discussion section?', *Turkish Journal of Urology*, 39(Supplement 1), pp.20-24. <https://doi.org/10.5152/tud.2013.049>.

⁴ Mewburn, I. (2016) 'The difficult discussion chapter', *The Thesis Whisperer*, 20 April. Available at: <https://thesiswhisperer.com/2016/04/20/the-difficult-discussion-chapter/>

⁵ Cottrell, S. (2013) *The study skills handbook*. 4th edn. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

⁶ Lunenburg, F. C. and Irby, B. J. (2008) *Writing a successful thesis or dissertation: Tips and strategies for students in the social and behavioral sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

⁷ Smith, S. (2015) *PhD by published work: A practical guide for success*. London: Palgrave.

b) a challenging connection where the literature opposes the finding; or c) an extending connection where the finding builds on or adds to the literature.

Illustrative examples of the SCE model

- Using extracts from dissertations which he has supervised, the author provides a range of examples of how the SCE model can operate.
- Student A writes: 'At the same time, the findings **support** the research by Srinivasan (2015) and Yagnamurthy (2017) on the improper implementation of feedback practices in the classrooms of India, by highlighting that teachers lack the knowledge and skills to provide actionable feedback.' Student A clearly establishes a link **support** that corroborates their empirical research findings with academic literature drawn from South Asia.
- Student B writes: 'However, at no point did students explicitly identify that a lack of clarity in instruction was the result of teacher ability or confidence. The absence of this perception **challenges** the research of Holzberger et al. (2013) who found a correlation between the self-efficacy of teachers and the quality of the instruction they provided'. Student B is here presenting a link (challenge; bold text) which questions the validity of select research reported in their review of literature in comparison to their own data (findings).
- Student C writes: 'The findings from the student FGDs [focus group discussions] showed that despite recognising the pervasive role of literacy for future success, students expressed narrow views of the place of literacy in secondary disciplines. Students' opinions on the importance of literacy across different subject areas were based primarily on the quantity of reading and writing required. This **extends** the findings of O'Brien et al. (1995), suggesting that not only does the compartmentalised subject-based curriculum impact student perceptions of writing and non-writing subjects (Applebee and Langer, 2011), but that this belief is established within six months of starting secondary education'. Student C is here explaining how their research is complementing and adding to previous academic findings.

Addressing the 'next step'

- The discussion about the SCE model needs to address an important 'next step'. Critical to any quality discussion is the necessity for taught master's students to not only establish the link, but to interrogate why the connection between the literature and the findings exists.
- They need to consider the influence and impact of a diverse range of factors on their empirical research findings. The author offers examples which include socioeconomic background, professional training, work experience, and theoretical perspective.

Conclusion

- This opinion piece has sought to show new and developing taught master's supervisors the value of the simple yet useful SCE model as an effective way of helping their supervisees to develop a rich discussion as part of their taught master's dissertations. The author believes in its original contribution, having introduced his taught master's dissertation supervisees to it for a number of years.
- Its impact is reflected in taught master's student attainment by those who capitalise on the SCE model

to aid their writing; the extracts offered in this opinion piece all came from taught master's dissertations which were awarded a high grade (double marked). Of interest is the potential transferability of the SCE model to other stages of an individual's academic journey, e.g., at the undergraduate, PhD/EdD, and, by extension, the research master's level. Further research would be needed to interrogate the efficacy of the model at these different stages.

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