

The Emotional Experience of Doing a Dissertation

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Students asked to email me accounts of the process of writing dissertation.

6 students out of a possible 25 responded. These accounts ranged in length from half a page (N:1), one page (N:4) and three and a half pages (including the reflective chapter from the dissertation) (N:1).

- divided each account into units of sentences i.e. each sentence became a unit
- read each account and allocated a category to each unit and then collected all sentences from these categories together
- looked at the categories that had been generated and then collapse categories together to produce themes
- This resulted in the generation of nine major themes with Theme 7 being divided into 6 sub themes

Table 1: Major Themes:

1. Changes in and Insights into Self
2. Own emotions through the process of doing the dissertation
3. Therapeutic Power of Dissertation
4. Recognising similarities between own stories and participants
5. Professional Learning from the process
6. Comments on Method/Topic Chosen
7. Importance of Support/ Safety
Sub themes: a) Supervision b) Friends c) Family d) Other students
e) Work Colleagues f) Creating own safety
8. Interest in this research
9. Challenging own values

Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self

Examples from Participants Accounts

Rose: 'It helped me to clarify lots of blurriness with regards to the person I have become and where I'd like to be in the future. One of the most profound realisations came with the new found awareness of how I dealt with my experience as a child.'

Lilly: 'I really felt that I was putting my head above the parapet in expressing my opinions. Circa twenty years ago (aged 40) I engaged in a great deal of assertiveness skills training in order to increase my confidence – evening classes, self-help books etc. Norman Vincent Peale's "The Power of Positive Thinking" became my Bible." My constant mantras were "My needs are just as important as those of others;" and "My opinions are just as good as those of others. I had to condition myself to believe this. It was only with the Diploma course that I became prepared to voice my opinions in public, and even then would wait for others to give theirs first. After completing the Dissertation, with the desired result, particularly as it was far better than I dared hope for, I finally, genuinely, believe that my opinions are just as good as others. With that has come a feeling of having grown up over the past year...I now sense that I am gaining more respect from the people who know of my achievement, which is a really good feeling, and has a further knock-on effect on my confidence. Of course, it could be that I am expecting that respect now. As far as my self-awareness is concerned, the process confirmed what I already knew about myself. Most significantly, just how painstakingly thorough I am, and how I always give myself a lot to do...I believe that for once, my thoroughness really paid off, and I now have a feeling that there is nothing that I couldn't do if I really wanted to.'

Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self: Examples from Participants Accounts

Chrysanthemum : ‘Such feelings have taken me by surprise, although this in itself is surprising because there is a familiarity about them.

I discover that the war on perfectionism I have waged for so long - and thought won - rages on after all and destructive messages of anything less than perfect being rubbish have resurfaced with a shout.’

Lilac: ‘After finishing my research, death become a monster, less frightening and easier to fight with because I had already talked about it so much through this process. My favourite Cretan author would say: “Only if you look your biggest fear in the eyes, then your fear will feel scared and it will run away”. Actually my fear didn’t run completely away, but it became something recognisable ,something I could touch and feel , something I know better; and the best way to fight enemies, I know from my childhood , is to know them better. Regarding my great difficulty of counselling people with suicide ideation because of my moral values; the dissertation again became a great support... One thing I learnt for sure out of this effort; I learnt to accept suicide as somebody’s decision, no matter how much against I am towards it. And this helped me to deal better with my clients, my fears and eventually with my own life.

Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self

Examples from Participants Accounts

- **Daffodil:** ‘Something about me is that I want to know the end before I start anything. So it’s about identifying any obstacles and being prepared for these. It’s about keeping safe in a situation I don’t know. Because the dissertation is about being reflexive and doing this by bracketing of my own thoughts, experiences etc, not reading the literature, so not informing myself of what has already been said, I really struggled with the battle in me to have the solution, the answer to the question before I had put pen to paper...So as a result the way out of this is to break the rules. To be dishonest and not tell or own up to what I had done. This was a continuing struggle to remain honest...Maybe also around this was the desire to succeed and to do anything rather than be a failure. I learnt that if I write down everything, revealing all that happened then this was OK. I realise that I have cheated in my life to get out of a situation, to solve a problem etc. Anything goes when I’m in this situation. I could subtly argue that it was ok to cheat. This has been a great piece of learning and understanding especially as I would not have gone there to examine this (keeping it out of my range of awareness) or even denying that it was even cheating. Everybody cheats a little bit so its OK are the little voices. I also was not prepared to analyse, discuss, conclude, in any personal depth for fear that my opinions would be wrong. It was a light touch approach in my dissertation. I had strong feelings about the subject but was not prepared to say. It was a cautious approach. I could not be wrong, could not fail, so it was a very negative and did not push my boundaries, I did not challenge myself. So if I am to grow as a person I need to be as honest as I can be. When I’m being challenged, not to shrink away but to struggle against this protection of myself and see it as an opportunity to reveal more of myself that is so wonderful!!!!’

Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self

Examples from Participants Accounts

- **Tulip:** 'Originally I had decided against my chosen subject as I knew that I could not allow my dissertation be in the library at University for everyone to read. I changed my mind when I heard that you could limit it so that only three people could read it. I asked my daughters for their permission which they gladly gave. An aspect of my dissertation was the effect of secrecy. By the end of it I realised that not permitting anyone to read it went against all I felt and had learnt about secrecy. In many respects it didn't seem right. Yet I knew I must keep to what I had originally told my daughters. This was difficult at the time. Having taken a few steps in time away from the experience I am continually surprising myself. I hear myself saying 'Did I really say that?' What I mean is that somehow those thoughts that were always an internal dialogue seem somehow to have been connected to my voice now so that I say things without thinking and that seems good and right.'

Major Theme: Therapeutic Power of Dissertation

- **Chrysanthemum** : ‘The experience certainly affected me profoundly. I feel I learned a great deal about myself in the process.’
- **Tulip**: ‘I found the process of doing the dissertation therapeutic...However why was it that I could then get to places in my counselling that I had not managed to get to before? This question fascinated me and became one of the themes for my dissertation...It was a truly therapeutic experience with all the risks and all the gains.’
- **Lilac**: ‘Writing my dissertation and conducting this small case research was for me an exceptional experience with not only academic but also with therapeutic value. During the process of conducting interviews, organising my data, and writing up my reports, I had the opportunity to face one of my biggest fears and deal with it: the fear of death.’
- **Daffodil**: ‘The process of the dissertation was therapeutic. Yes. It taught me a few things about myself. The intensity and consequences riding on the dissertation brought out some interesting feelings and behaviours.’

Conclusions

'Qualitative researchers often study concepts or topics that are personally significant and thereby involve them in self-examination, significant personal learning and change' (Stiles, 1993, p. 604)

'A qualitative researcher in counselling and psychotherapy is part of the process, not just an external observer. He/she thereby affects and is affected by the interaction' (Grafanaki , 1996, p. 335)

References

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