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Time management of final year undergraduate English projects: supervisees' and the supervisor's coping strategies

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Abstract

This paper explores how the individuality of students affects their time management strategies in doing undergraduate final year projects. This study attempts to investigate how four students responded differently to the same time management advice given by the supervisor of their final year projects in two different teacher education programmes on teaching English as a Second Language. The strategies that each student used to cope with time management and the supervision strategies that the supervisor used in response to their coping strategies are explored. The areas of satisfaction and contention as revealed in the emotional reactions of the students and/or the supervisor during the decision-making process are also portrayed. The reasons for the students' and the supervisor's final strategy choice are examined. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

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Keywords: Time management; Final year undergraduate English Projects; Supervisees' coping strategies; Supervisor's coping strategies

1. Introduction

Many programmes in Hong Kong universities as well as universities in other parts of the world require students to do final year undergraduate projects, which means writing a thesis on a topic specifically related to an area studied in the programme.

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The topic is usually chosen by the student. Generally, students working on their final year projects have to complete their reports within a certain period of time. Extensions are usually not allowed. Any student who submits the report late could have marks deducted. Thus effective time management becomes a significant key to success. In related literature, great importance has been attached to time management when giving advice to supervisors on how to help their students succeed (Moses 1992; Kelly 1990).

One important strategy used in time management is planning. The importance of helping students to plan the research from the very beginning is widely stated in the literature (Allen, 1973; Mauch and Birch, 1989; Moses, 1985, 1992; Rudd, 1985; Watson, 1970; Zuber-Skerritt and Knight, 1992; Gottlieb, 1994). Effective planning can reduce wasted time (May, 1997). Gottlieb (1994: 112) suggests that a supervisor should assist the supervisee to devise a proposed schedule for activities to be undertaken at a very early stage and ensure as much as possible that the schedule is followed. Such a plan exerts a greater demand for structured and disciplined use of time on the part of the student (May, 1997: 60). It is suggested that dividing the project into smaller and more manageable units which can be planned and controlled makes what seems a huge task more attainable (Graham and Grant, 1997). Identifying expected dates for completion of each phase is important. Safety time can also be built into the plan to allow for catch-up periods. Though it may seem tedious to plan time in such a detailed way, the results will be worthwhile. A week by week schedule is most desirable (May, 1997). When devising the schedule, it is helpful to start with an expected date of completion and work the phases from the deadline backwards (May, 1997). It is also stressed in the literature that it is important to ask for a regular submission of written work from the very beginning (Allen, 1973; Moses, 1985, 1992; Nightingale, 1992; Rudd, 1985; Watson, 1970; Gottlieb, 1994). For example, it should not be a difficult task for the student to submit such written work in alternate weeks.

However, as stated by May (1997: 74)

certainly in all time planning, one thing which needs to be taken into account is the fact that different individuals have different ways of working, different tolerances of time pressure and require different degrees of urgency to produce their optimal best performance. Time deadlines therefore have a varied significance for different individuals.

To explore how the individuality of students affects their time management strategies, this study attempts to investigate how four students responded differently to the same time management advice given by the supervisor of their final year projects in two different teacher education programmes on teaching English as a Second Language in a university in Hong Kong. The following areas are examined in this study:

- the strategies that each student used to cope with time management and the supervision strategies that the supervisor used in response to their coping strategies;

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