

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

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Abstract

The supervision of master's students at the dissertation stage of their taught programme is generally considered to be one of the privileges of an academic in higher education (Bacwayo, Nampala and Oteyo, 2017). Of concern to those who are less experienced or new to the supervisory role is knowing the best way to effectively support their supervisees, particularly at the write-up stage. This opinion piece focuses its attention on the 'discussion', an important chapter which typically provokes 'fear, uncertainty and doubt' (Mewburn, 2016) in the minds of taught master's students as they wrestle with its construction. I argue that supervisors can alleviate some of their supervisees' anxieties by introducing them to the SCE model – **S**upport, **C**hallenge and **E**xtend – which I have developed and have shared with taught master's students in England for a number of years. Designed to purposefully target key chapter content, I aim to show readers how this simple yet useful model effectively encourages taught master's students to establish and knit connections between their review of literature chapter and findings chapter, 'comparing and contrasting the study results with those of other relevant studies' (Bavdekar, 2015, p.40) with reasoning. Extracts from taught master's dissertations (from the academic discipline of education) are offered by way of illustrating the value of the SCE model for supervisors to help their students avoid making common mistakes in their writing, thus generating a stimulating discussion about what is known (literature) and what is now known (findings) in the supervisee's chosen area of study. The applicability of the SCE model to dissertations at all levels of higher education study is also recognised.

Keywords: dissertation; discussion chapter; research links; SCE model.

Introduction

A key component of most taught master's programmes of study (and other levels of study) 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), 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) such as anxiety and insecurity. These are never more present than when taught master's students initiate work on their discussion, the 'unlikeable' key chapter (Şanlı, Erdem and Tefik, 2013, p.20) 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).

Bloomberg and Volpe acknowledge a suite of 'frequent errors' that affect the quality of work master's students typically produce for this chapter:

[A]nalysis that is simple or shallow. Synthesis is lacking; there is no clear connection to other research literature, or theory. Credibility and/or plausibility of explanations is in question. The chapter is poorly structured, presented and articulated. (2016, p.11).

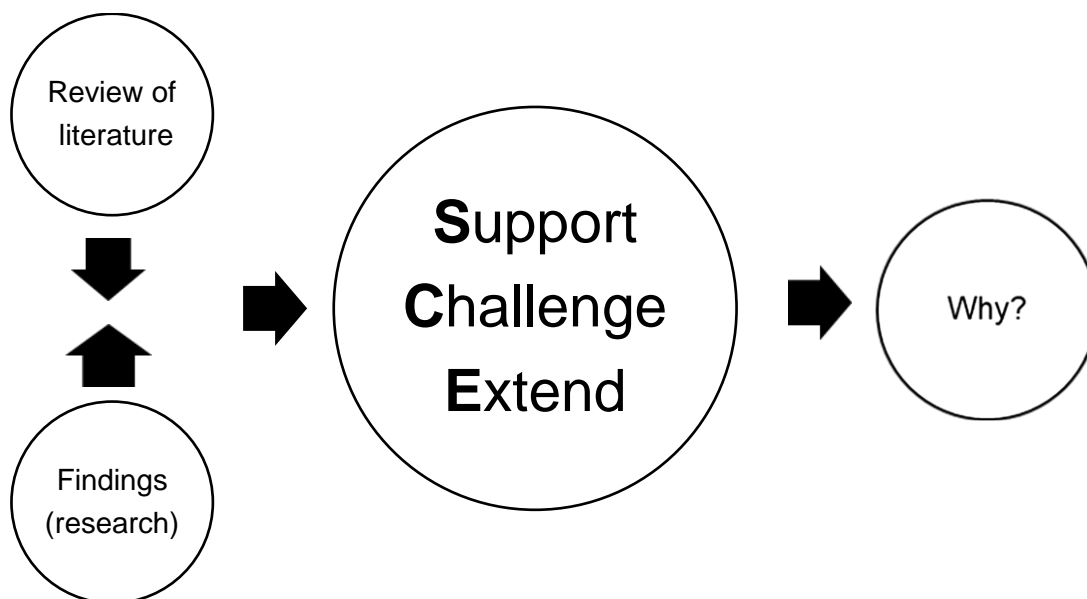
Of significance to this opinion piece is the word 'connection'. For many of the students I have supervised at taught master's level, their struggle (at least at the drafting stage) has centred on their inability to offer a rich discussion by linking their research findings back to the literature. The importance of effectively undertaking this key activity is rooted in Cottrell's characteristics of 'critical analytical writing' (2013, p.198) and is emphasised by Lunenburg and Irby:

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. (2008, p.228).

Bui clarifies what is meant by 'fit' (see above) by advocating that master's students should 'discuss the relationship[s] of your findings to previous research conducted in the literature' (2020, p.11). For Smith (2015), this represents the golden thread; for Grant (2011), this is the logic of connectivity. I strongly support the thinking above, arguing that once various connections have been established between the research findings (data) and the existing literature, supervisors need to help taught master's students explore the relationships between these connections, examining the influencing reasons behind these. To facilitate this, the likes of Hess (2004) and Vieira, de Lima and Mizubuti (2019) offer detailed supporting structures and guidance. In contrast, I advocate the use of the simple yet useful SCE model (see Figure 1), an explanation of which is offered below, along with samples of student work which are analysed to illustrate the efficacy of the SCE model.

The 'SCE model': an explanation

Figure 1: The SCE model (devised by the author).



My 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. Working sequentially left to right, 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. Taught master's students need to then 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 one of the following:

1. A **s**upporting connection where the finding validates the literature.
2. A **c**hallenging connection where the literature opposes the finding.
3. An **e**xtending connection where the finding builds on or adds to the literature.

In order to illustrate the positive contribution of applying the model to date, a presentation of discussion extracts (these represent the blankets) is offered below for review and reflection. These have been taken from a small number of taught master's dissertations (empirically based; from the academic discipline of education) whose authors were my previous supervisees. Institutional ethical approval (application number 15894) was sought to approach select individuals to consent to the inclusion of their work as part of this opinion piece as their writing successfully embraced the SCE model in the production of their respective discussions. Author anonymity has been maintained in response to the guidance of BERA (2018).

The SCE model: illustrative examples

Example 1. Support.

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

Example 1 shows Student A clearly establishing a link (support; bold text) that corroborates their empirical research findings with academic literature drawn from South Asia. In contrast, Example 2 shows Student B 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).

Example 2. Challenge.

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

Example 3 below shows Student C demonstrating an extension link (bold text) in their discussion by showing how their research findings expand on those reported in their review of literature.

Example 3. Extend.

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

Revisiting Figure 1 is important as 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 explore 'why' the connections they have established exist, deepening the analysis to enrich chapter content (see Hilsdon et al., 2010 for other critical questions). This requires taught master's students to think about the reasons behind these connections, considering the influence and impact of a diverse range of factors on their empirical research findings, illustrative examples of which are offered alphabetically in Table 1, these being drawn from my personal thinking.

Table 1. Examples of influencing factors on empirical research findings.

Biological age	Cultural bias	Curricula	(Extended) family influence
Gender identity	(Multi)media	National policy	Professional training
Social context	Socioeconomic background	Theoretical perspective	Work experience

By way of illustration, Example 4 presents a rich discussion extract from Student C who explores the 'why' that influences their knitted connections (support; bold text).

Example 4. Exploring the 'why'.

Building on the work of Brindle et al. (2016), the perception that writing is not relevant to all [curriculum] subjects is **strengthened** by the lack of writing opportunities provided by teachers. In this study, subjects such as "Science and Maths" (John; Focus Group 2) were identified as non-writing subjects due to the limited lesson time spent writing. This disconnect is self-fulfilling and **reinforces** the traditional view of literacy as a discreet skill (Rose, 2011), which influences the amount of extended writing incorporated across the curriculum and students' writing stamina. The implications of these findings may explain the lack of motivation students have to write in 'non-writing disciplines' (De Smedt et al., 2019). If the recommendations for a disciplinary approach to literacy is accepted (Education Endowment Fund, 2019) then these findings are significant, as they expose the challenge in changing perceptions of both students and the action of teachers so that writing is valued.

Student C

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. I believe in its original contribution, having introduced my 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. Understandably, further research would be needed to interrogate the efficacy of the model at these different stages which sadly falls out of the remit of this opinion piece.

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