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Conor Horan

Dublin Institute of Technology, conor.horan@dit.ie

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TOWARD NON-PRESCRIPTIVE ISSUES: A TEACHING FRAMEWORK FOR SELECTING MARKETING DISSERTATION TOPICS.

Conor Horan, School of Marketing, Faculty of Business, Dublin Institute of Technology, Aungier St, Dublin 2, Ireland. Tel: +353 (1) 402 7146. Fax: +353 (1) 402 7198. Email: conor.horan@dit.ie

ABSTRACT

There is a significant absence in academic literature, textbooks and practical teaching tools for advising or guiding student learning, in a practical non-prescriptive manner, toward topic selection and development. Prescriptive or rational approaches, taken by many research methods textbooks, are not adequate or sufficient when teaching this important first stage in the research process. Non-prescriptive approaches describing manageable steps should be researched more to fill this pedagogic gap. This paper attempts to promote academic discussion on a pedagogic gap that is broadly overlooked, and to examine how marketing and business academics can better instruct dissertation students in the area of dissertation topic selection. At the end of this paper a teaching framework for dissertation topic selection is presented.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

It has been recognised that teaching and supervising marketing dissertation students is a complex (McCormack & Pamphilon 2004), poorly understood (Grant 1999) and under-researched pedagogy (Harrington & Booth 2003). With the advent of performance-driven measures in all aspects of teaching and instruction, supervisors and teachers in the area of marketing dissertation research are increasingly coming under pressure to relate their activities to '*accountability and appraisal, excellence, effectiveness and efficiency*', as listed in McCormack & Pamphilon (2004). This pressure is coming when opinion suggests that there is a lack of effective teaching tools in this area of dissertation research methods, no consensus to best practice and little empirical research being conducted to rectify this (Harrington & Booth

2003). The motivation for writing this paper comes from a personal interest to improve classroom guidance and diminish student frustration at the commencement of their research process.

Following calls for pedagogic gaps to be filled (Harrington & Booth 2003), this paper attempts to deal with the first stage in the marketing dissertation process pedagogy: topic selection. There is a significant gap in academic literature, textbooks and practical teaching aids for advising or guiding students in a practical non-prescriptive manner toward topic selection development and rationale. Prescriptive guidelines are listed in textbooks (Saunders et al 2003; Malhotra & Birks 2003; Burns & Bush 1998; Crask et al 1995; Easterby-Smith 1991) but these are quite limited in terms of practical application or direction for the novice student researcher. By developing non-prescriptive techniques the teaching community may be better equipped to deal with what is perceived as a daunting first step in doing research (L'Anson & Smith 2004).

The secondary aim of this paper is to promote and develop academic discussion on a topic that is broadly overlooked; the examination of how marketing and business academics can better instruct dissertation students in the area of topic selection. This paper suggests a framework for developing appropriate teaching methods in the identified pedagogic gap.

ISSUES REGARDING DISSERTATION

TOPIC SELECTION

Research Methods textbooks allude to vague guidelines on topic selection by prescribing a course of action i.e. '*you must select a core topic!*' or '*you must derive hypotheses!*' This approach rarely attempts

to explain to students how to actually go about selecting and developing topics further, and how to derive hypotheses and/or research objectives.

Comments such as, *'that's what the dissertation is all about!'* and/or *'working in an ambiguous environment prepares you for the real world!'* can often be used to *'explain away'* rather than tackle the difficulties students encounter at this stage of the research process. The student is left without clear steps to follow wasting valuable time that could be better utilised developing and refining a possible topic. Indeed the very nature of using the above statements suggests that any attempt to improve our pedagogy is futile and any aim to develop non-prescriptive techniques could paradoxically result in prescriptive guidelines.

From this pedagogical perspective the concept of 'scaffolding' (Collins et al 1989), has been recognised in the teaching of topic selection and development. It promotes breaking down teaching into manageable steps for students (Manathunga 2005). This approach has been referred to as 'scaffolding' While discussing a related issue i.e. supervision', Grant (1999: 6) raises the point that can be used to inform our thinking on the dissertation process pedagogy. Grant states; *'...how to both be explicit enough to guide behaviour....yet avoid being so prescriptive as to create a monstrous bureaucratic framework...'* She concludes her paper with the metaphor of the *'rackety bridge'* implying that the pedagogy, relating specifically to supervision, is a balancing act between the rational and irrational structures. This indeed may also be the case with prescriptive and non-prescriptive approaches toward the pedagogy related to topic selection. Prescriptive or rational approaches, taken by many research methods textbooks, are not enough when teaching this first stage in the research process. Non-prescriptive, including irrational approaches describing manageable steps should also be covered (Manathunga 2005). This is tacitly supported in the literature where the *'actual experiences of participants'* should be focused upon (McCormack & Pamphilon 2004 p32; Johnston 1998).

Using this conceptual framework, this paper attempts to open a debate on some non-prescriptive issues around dissertation topic selection. The issues raised in this section form the basis of some guidelines for teaching and the development of a teaching framework. By teaching the breath of viable dissertation topics, students can become aware early on of the possible relationships and configurations that underpin viable student research. This differs from the idealised, overly theoretical and indeed prescriptive approaches to research that can collapse in the world of student research.

PRESCRIPTIVE DYNAMICS IN TOPIC SELECTION

Many textbooks, referenced above, prescribe a number of issues to be considered when selecting dissertation topics. However little by way of practical advice is offered to the novice researcher on how to use these guidelines for their own research process. Easterby-Smith et al (1991:18) point out that: *'It is very rare for students to have a clear focus from the outset of their research, and yet many find the lack of a clear focus is a major impediment to getting started'*. Some of these items can include the following (Saunders et al 2003);

1. You should select a topic of interest.
2. You should select a topic that is easy.
3. Can you gain access for primary data collection?
4. Beware of the resources & time available to you!
5. Select a topic that will get you a job!

While these are just five points, step-by-step guides to implementing them are often absent. One possible reason for this is that textbooks prescribe what is *'academically sound'* or *'ideal'* (Harrington & Booth 2003). Telling students that *'you need to narrow down your topic'* or *'you should be interested in your topic'* is limited in terms of meaningful direction. The ideal research process requires levels of resources beyond that of most individual students. Therefore practical compromises, to be dealt with below, have to be considered when

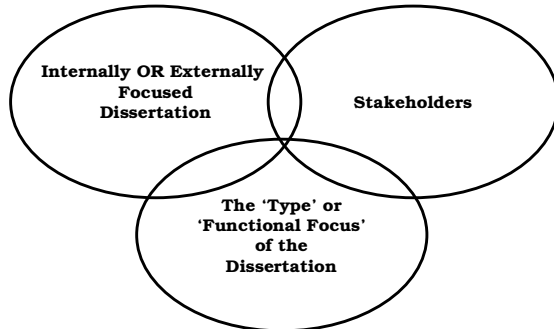
developing research objectives. These compromises have an immediate impact on the chosen topic and the classroom teaching associated with it. An effort must be made now to elucidate the non-prescriptive issues surrounding the teaching of dissertation topic selection.

NON-PRESCRIPTIVE DYNAMICS

SURROUNDING TOPIC SELECTION

There are a number of non-prescriptive guidelines that can be used to help students understand 'how' to go about finding a viable research topic. The following teaching framework (Figure 1) is by no means a strict rule or exhaustive list of issues but is presented as the basis of commencing some academic debate. The method of instruction that is recommended is but one method reflecting anecdotal evidence and the authors' own classroom experiences.

FIGURE 1: A PROPOSED TEACHING FRAMEWORK



External versus Internally Focused Dissertations

The Issue: Management literature reflects an internal versus external analysis dichotomy reflecting the pedagogy of many strategic marketing or business policy textbooks i.e. SWOT analysis and Porterian Theory (Porter 1979) etc. Indeed the unit of analysis of *'the firm'* underpins much of economics as a discipline.

Dissertation topics can reflect an internal OR an external bias. For example a topic studying resource allocation issues within the firm reflects internal decision-making

procedures. This is a different research process to a study on inter-organisational relationships or market dynamics, which are external phenomenon. The body of literature required to study the former is fundamentally different to that body of literature that will be consulted for the latter. Being aware of the unit of analysis is one method that can be used to focus a dissertation topic.

The Academic Questions: The key academic questions a student might address are;

'Is my dissertation topic an internally or externally focused topic?'

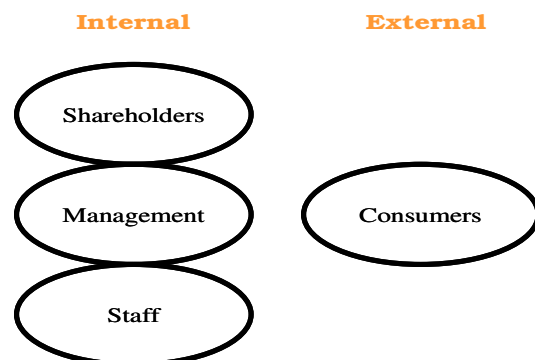
'What broad body of literature am I considering?'

'What is my unit of analysis?'

'Does this body of literature broadly focus on one unit of analysis?'

The Recommendation: From a teaching perspective it is recommended, that students tend to focus on either an internally OR externally based topic. A project that tries to attempt to cover both will divide the efforts of a student by splitting coherent research objectives, forcing the student to look at two diverse bodies of literature and potentially multiple units of analysis. This concern often arises with an MBA cohort, who attempts to complete a 'business plan' type research report. This reporting style often covers both internal resource allocation issues and external market analysis, ultimately diluting the research efforts of a resource strapped candidate. In conclusion, proposals that result in a split in literature reviews ought to be avoided. The embedded nature of concepts in the marketing discipline does make the separation of units difficult for students.

FIGURE 2: SAMPLE STAKEHOLDERS



Who, or what stakeholder, is going to be researched?

The Issue: A common requirement for a dissertation is for a stakeholder group to be researched¹. In marketing there is a particular emphasis on the consumer and consumption behaviour (Holbrook 1987). If we try to list the stakeholder groups that dissertations focus on (see Figure 2 above) we realise that the number of groups is quite limited from a 'dissertation topic' perspective. Indeed these groups can be aligned with the external and internal focus taken above. A dissertation proposal that focuses on internal corporate issues but then considers researching external consumers is bound to raise concerns for the reasons expressed above. Thus there has to be alignment between the focus of the dissertation; internal or external and the stakeholder group being researched.

The Academic Questions: Students could ask;

'What stakeholder group do I want/need to collect 'data' from?'

'What are the types of questions I can ask my stakeholder group?'

'Do I intend to ask questions from more than one stakeholder group?'

The Recommendation: The recommendation here is to focus broadly on one stakeholder group. This helps to focus the writing of the research objectives around one group within either an externally or internally focused dissertation. As a consequence of this the literature that the student considers will broadly take on a unified form. Whereas the recommendation is to focus on one stakeholder group there are some examples of research that covers more than one group i.e. opinions of

employees and managers. This is a more demanding approach requiring access to two different stakeholders while care is taken to ask the same 'questions' of both groups. Where this happens, for whatever methodological reasons, the student's research skills will be tested further.

What is the 'Type' of Dissertation that will be produced?

The Issue: A dissertation that is internally focused and with questions directed at internal stakeholders i.e. senior managers will result in becoming a 'strategic' type dissertation. By addressing managers the issues that can be tackled in detail are limited to strategic 'decision making' or 'resource allocation' concerns. This reflects the introductory chapters of most Strategy or Business Policy textbooks e.g. DeWit & Myer (1998). In the same vain questions that are addressed to shareholders, by their very nature, can only be of financial or strategic nature unless they have a vested interest that can be shown in other non-strategic topics. Indeed the latter (strategic issues) will filter down to financial concerns as the student progresses through the dissertation process.

The Academic Question: The students could ask;

'What type of dissertation do I want to produce?'

'Do I want to produce a Strategic Dissertation? Who will I be talking to?'

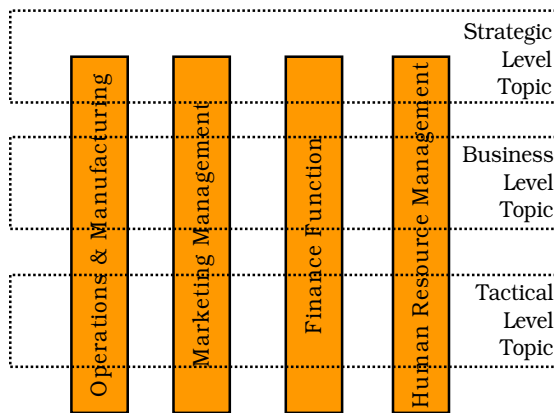
'Do I want to produce a piece of research that is looking at the behaviour and attitude of consumers?'

The Recommendation: Many students fail to see the broad body of literature and thrust of a potential topic early on (Easterby-Smith et al 1991). By becoming aware of the type of dissertation process one is going to engage it at an early stage a student can avoid locking themselves into a topic they are not interested in. Some dissertation topic ideas are presented in the form of functional specific topics i.e. a study of consumer behaviour, which is clearly linked to the function of marketing management (see

¹ Of course there are many exceptions to this proposed guideline including some exceptions in the fields of accounting and finance where a database such as DataStream is used, or Content Analysis where a stakeholder may not be the subject of primary research.

Figure 3). Indeed this is linked to internally focused topics that look into the mechanics of marketing management issues i.e. decision making or resource allocation issues. An illustration of key areas that can be focused on can be seen in the following organisational chart;

FIGURE 3: FUNCTIONALLY SPECIFIC TOPICS



From a teaching perspective it is recommended, that students tend to focus their attention within a broad functional area or on a topic that is strategic in nature. The three pedagogical steps highlighted here are not linear in nature (as illustrated in Figure 1). Some of the issues confronted by the student in the final section may well appear before dealing with understanding the stakeholder or internal/external dichotomy to be studied.

CONCLUSION

The above framework represents an expanded approach to teaching topic generation in a non-prescriptive manner. This approach, while not the definitive answer, may be used to highlight the broad structure of marketing management literature, the stakeholders involved in marketing research and the broad types of dissertations that can be produced in management fields. By breaking down the pedagogical steps this paper has attempted to fill in the pedagogic gap surrounding dissertation topic selection that has been

highlighted by previous researchers (Harrington & Booth 2003).

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ⁱNote the emphasis in the literature is firstly on edited books and Learning & Teaching centre articles as opposed to mainstream published journals. Secondly the emphasis in the literature is heavily biased toward issues around 'supervision', rather than classroom pedagogy. In the absence of literature in this area I have tacitly reused these references implying that they have referenced classroom pedagogy. The link between the two is strong as the advice for students would remain the same if delivered in either setting.