

Identifying the Academic Gap and Positing a New Perspective

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Objective

- To establish what constitutes original content for a PhD or research Masters, and which will satisfy the criterion that a research degree constitute a 'substantial contribution to knowledge'.

Central Arguments

- There is no single way to establish originality within a research degree.
- There is no single way to 'identify the gap' within the literature.
- No scholarship occurs within a vacuum; drawing from diverse literatures will enhance the prospects of identifying gaps.
- Constantly remembering and reviewing the literature that drew your attention to the topic may help to establish ways to generate originality.

Structure

- 1. What constitutes originality in a research degree?
- 2. Some important questions to ask.
- 3. Some other points.
- 4. My PhD experience.
- 5. Former PhD students' experiences.
- 6. Ways to test the importance of 'the gap' and your claims to originality.
- 7. Why this is important beyond the PhD.

Some Important Questions to Ask

- Who is writing on the topic? (gender, nationalities, ethnicities, religious backgrounds, disciplinary backgrounds).
- Why does a topic interest you?
- What sources initially stimulated interest in your topic?
- What do you feel the existing literature on the topic is missing?
- What do you want to read about the topic?

But First...

- Think of the literature review and your attempt to develop an original insight, framework, etc. like a television advert.
- There is a problem.
- Tell a little bit about the scope of the problem.
- You are not the first person who has attempted to address this problem.
- What have other people done?
- What have they achieved?
- What is still left?
- Based on what is still left unresolved, what do you propose as a potential solution?

Originality in a Research Degree

- 1. (Re-) Interpreting existing sources in a new way.
- 2. New case studies and data sets.
- 3. Incorporation of interview materials.
- 4. Applications of existing frameworks to new cases.
- 5. Interpreting recent events and developments within a field of knowledge.
- 6. Introducing foreign language materials never used before (both primary and secondary sources) into English language scholarship.

Some Other Points

- 1. No scholarship occurs in a vacuum, so read widely and within and between disciplines.
- 2. Consult frequently with supervisors on these matters.
- 3. Advantages of current school structures facilitates the potential for cross-disciplinary research and cross-fertilization of different research perspectives, experiences, etc.

My PhD

- *Electoral Reform in the USSR and Russian Federation, 1989-1993: Continuity, Contradiction and Departure* (Institute of Russian and East European Studies, Glasgow University. Defended 13 December 1996; Awarded 17 July 1997)
- Types of Literature consulted
- Limitations of the Literature
- Frameworks used
- The double edged sword of researching 'a moving target'

Recent PhD Students' Experiences

- Dr Peter Barrer, *Slovak Popular Culture and Glocalization* (2007)
- Slovak studies, post-communist studies, national identity, media culture, politics of popular music, hip hop, reality television, punk, sport, interview materials.

Recent PhD Students' Experiences

- Dr Muhammad Bakashmar, 'Government control, developmentalism and the rule of law in Malaysia' (2009) Fusion of comparative politics, legal studies, Malaysian and Asian studies. Significant use of Malaysian case transcripts.

Recent PhD Students' Experiences

- Dr Gaetano Joe Ilardi *Al Qaeda and IRA Intelligence* (2007)
- Terrorism studies, Al Qaeda and Irish Republican Army, Intelligence, anecdotal references to terrorist intelligence and counter-intelligence, no systematic analysis of their functions and effectiveness, studies of rationality in terrorist targeting, interviews with former terrorists.

Recent PhD Students' Experiences

■ Dr Jeremy Dwyer Soviet Crime Fiction (2005)

No history of the development of Russian crime fiction. Also, most literature on fiction, linked only to ideological factors. Established first comprehensive history, as well as novel interpretive framework, utilized many never-before used Russian language sources in scholarship (in either Russian or English).

Recent PhD Students' Experiences

■ Dr Emma Baulch Balinese Punk (2003)

Indonesian Politics, Globalization, Youth Culture, Politics of Popular Music, Ethnographic work, lyrical and textual analysis.

Ways To Test Originality

1. Seminar and Conference Presentations
 - a. Postgraduate (in-house)
 - b. Postgraduate (external)
 - c. Major national and international
2. Refereed Review Articles
3. When Ready--Send to Journals
 - a. Help to establish originality.
 - b. Additional feedback beyond supervisors' comments.
 - c. Necessary for career development.

Why Identifying the Gap is Important Beyond the PhD

- Postdoctoral Fellowships
- Research Grants

Conclusions

- No single way to identify the gap and establish originality.
- It is important to read widely and have a degree of flexibility in how to approach the materials that will contribute to, and frame the research project.
- Sometimes thinking of the lit review as an advert may help to establish a way to identify the gap and begin constructing your project's substantial and original contribution to scholarship.
- Ultimately, what you write should be directed by *what you want to read* and acknowledge is missing in the literature.