Inculcating Scientific Approach in Research Methodology

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Abstract: Research methodology is a compulsory course for all 3rd year students for the Literature in English Programme at University Kebangsaan Malaysia. The course is conducted over 14 weeks at 3 h week^{-1} which takes students through the rigours of finding a suitable topic and writing up the research proposal. In the following semester when they continue working on the proposals into their project papers, the capstone project of their 3 year studies at UKM, many supervisors feel that most of the students' proposals have been poorly written and conceptualised. This action research attempts to look at four aspects of proposal writing: What are the problems students face in proposal writing? What are the common mistakes and errors students commit in proposal writing? What steps can be taken to promote cutting edge research? What kinds of input do students require for them to be able to write good proposals in current areas of research? As a way forward, this research is designed to provide students with a grounding in the fundamental concepts of literary theory, techniques of literary research and strategies for scholarly writing in the field. Within its broad representation of current approaches to literary scholarship (along with their historical antecedents), the action plan will offer opportunities for students to identify their own orientations within the domain of literary studies and to develop the research methods, interpretive procedures and conceptual frameworks that are cutting edge as well as most conducive to the critical projects they plan to undertake. In addition to developing students' expertise as professional researchers and writers, the research hopes to encourage them to become confident, critical readers of philosophical and theoretical materials.

Key words: Action research, scientific inquiry, proposal writing, students, material, approach

INTRODUCTION

One of the major problems which undergraduate students confront is the requirement that the research thesis must be completed in a short time normally in one whole semester in their final year. This problem is compounded by the fact that undergraduate students have had no informal experience of independent research or any formal tuition in techniques and methods of research. Educational research on undergraduate study has so far tended to concentrate on problems confronted by the students in writing their research proposals.

Through the inquiry, many students were clueless about the exact statement of the problem, the research questions that need to be constructed and the conceptual framework used. Due to their attitudes and fear of embarking on new topics with insufficient literature review, students tend to choose dated topics where literature in electronic or print version abounds. With such safe and jaded topics, the students are ill-prepared

to embark on postgraduate work later on when they must make the leap into something innovative and fresh not recycled. Hence, this research is designed to provide students with a scientific approach to writing proposals by grounding in the fundamental concepts of literary theory, techniques of literary research and strategies for scholarly writing.

Background to the project: Research methodology is a compulsory course offered to all final year students in a local institution of higher learning. It is a three-unit course taught in 14 weeks. The course exposes students the foundation of literary research. Quantitative and qualitative methods will also be introduced simultaneously with approaches in collecting data and writing better research proposals and undergraduate research papers. Many supervisors feel that their proposals were poorly written and conceptualized. It was found that the traditional method of 1 h of lecture and 2 h of tutorial on a weekly basis was inadequate in inculcating scientific investigation in the students. This

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situation does not support the prime goal of research as expressed by Hammersley and Atkinson quoted in Harris where an inquiring mind serves as a means for the production of knowledge. The incapability of students to grasp fundamental concepts in literary research and failing to master proper strategies for scholarly writing in the field will lead to them being lost in the sea of research. Therefore, teaching of the course has to be revised to make it more practical. By doing this, researchers hope to reduce students' anxiety when embarking on thesis writing and nurture researchers who are able to produce cutting edge research work.

Literature review: The dissertation or thesis is often the capstone research that a student will undertake in the final year of study prior to graduation. With guidance from a designated supervisor, students are expected to conduct research on a particular topic and produce a study varying in length between 10,000 and 15,000 words. This study is perceived as the crucial element of undergraduate studies that offers students ample opportunities to reveal their honours worthiness (Rowley and Slack, 2004) and to apply both their intellectual and skills development which they have acquired in various courses throughout their years of learning in higher learning institution. I'Anson and Smith (2004) quoting Hussey and Hussey (1997) outline four major objectives of the undergraduate research project as follows:

- Analytical problem solving skills
- Active learning through identification of a problem to be explored and completed
- Skills development for independent research
- Application of academic knowledge

Similar aspirations is also expressed by Todd *et al.* (2004) who state that the core expected outcome of undergraduate study in higher learning institution is to cultivate and enhance the notion of learner centeredness and autonomous learning with minimal supervisions from teachers and educators. In relation to this, a dissertation is designed to allow learners to be more engaged in making decisions about the choice of subject matter, learning methods, control over which aspects may be focused upon, pace, sequence and content of their study which all these support the key characteristics of independent learning.

Besides nurturing self independency in learning and decision making, producing the thesis also promotes several noted benefits to students as outlined by Smith which include enabling students to delve into an area of interest in-depth; enhancement of students' academic and practical value and facilitating skills development such as project planning, time management, stress management and for international students and language skills.

Reviewing undergraduate dissertations: A large body of research has been conducted by scholars pertaining to the writing of dissertation research project among students in higher learning institutions. However, it was shown that most of the research conducted primarily intended for higher degree students. Despite crucial significance it plays in terms of student learning there is very little literature on undergraduate dissertation which explores the practical challenges faced by undergraduate students when researching and completing their dissertations projects. In order to understand the challenges that posed difficulties among undergraduates students, it is fundamental to summarize some of the basic processes and tenets of research that the experienced researcher may take for granted but which the beginner student researcher may be exploring for the first time (I'Anson and Smith, 2004).

They may be unaware of the standard convention of representing the research process as a series of steps or stages that fit together in an arrangement of scientific inquiry. I'Anson and Smith (2004) summarize the process into eight steps:

- Identification of the problem
- Assessment of value of the research process
- Development of the research proposal
- Development of the research design
- Determination of data collection methods and procedures
- Determination of analytical procedures
- Evaluation of results
- Final report including results, evaluation and recommendations

Although, the stages are constructed in a sequence however, scholars like, Hussey and Hussey (1997) emphasize that in actual practice, this ordered sequence is unlikely to happen and that repetition or overlapping of stages is more likely.

Indirectly, in conducting a research, researchers will be presented with situations where decisions have to be made regarding the direction of the research as noted by Clewes (1996), they exemplify independent enquiry and exercise of judgment. I'Anson and Smith (2004) state that this may involve re-directing the research from the original research plan. But how many students will be able to see opportunities when they come to a stumbling wall? Students often feel like they are in a dark tunnel with no

hope of ever seeing the light at the end of it. Some of the problems include difficulties getting started, becoming stuck on data collection and problems with the writing-up (Clewes, 1996). The extent to which Malaysian students share some of these anxieties will be shown in the later part of this study.

Focus on undergraduate dissertations research projects into the role and process of student research is evident in Styles and Radloff (2000) who explored students problems embarking on their dissertations using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. These students showed that feelings of incompetency impinge on students' motivation, willingness to persevere and to work consistently to complete their theses in minimum time. Todd *et al.* (2004) reached similar conclusions with regards to problems faced by researchers which include generating a research topic or question, producing researchable research questions, collecting primary research data, accessing relevant secondary material and managing their time effectively within the short period of time allocated to them. The findings underlined were also evident in I'Anson and Smith (2004) where students contended that the initial stage of determining a research topic is relatively difficult and posed a great difficulty for them. They were also challenged by the format of research and data collection. They encountered difficulties in getting access to certain agencies, collecting sensitive data or being faced with unwilling respondents. But these problems are mainly articulated within the postgraduate framework in a setting where English is the first language. The paper attempts to fill in the inadequacy in the body of knowledge by delving into challenges faced by Malaysian undergraduate students who are not only novices in research paradigm but are also challenged with the language of much of the literature review which they must cover in the course of their writing.

Undergraduate dissertations

Current issues and challenges: The role of dissertations in the students' learning experience will change with different demands of coursework and assignments as means of assessment in undergraduate courses. Rowley and Slack (2004) contend that with the course work being used much more widely as a means to assess both knowledge and skills, the dissertation should build on writing, referencing and other information eliciting skills that the students have developed earlier in their studies. In addition, many courses seek to develop independence in student learning throughout different courses, rather than offering the dissertation as a unique opportunity for independent learning. The dissertation

therefore provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate learning skills that they should have acquired throughout their study, rather than being as it was in the past, a new departure in which different skills are acquired. With changes taking place in the design of curriculum taking into account innovations in teaching and learning such as greater use of computer-mediated teaching, the demands of the dissertation have shifted to an ability to show originality and freshness of approach. Rather than providing a novel opportunity to exercise independent learning and to sharpen a profound approach to learning (Todd *et al.*, 2004), it is now served as a requirement for undergraduates to obtain their bachelor degree.

Therefore, it becomes an exercise of do or die with disregard to the quality of work produced. Some of the research projects conducted by undergraduate students are relatively aged which do not promote cutting edge research and may have limited relevance to today's environment (Gatrell, 1991; Cook, 1980). Instead of seeing better written undergraduate research projects, the standard of these projects has dropped. While information is at the fingertips, students have abused this flexibility by copying and pasting chunks of literature review from the internet. Instead of using scholarly articles, they have resorted to Wikipedia and answer.com as their literature review.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The respondents of this study were 27 adult Malaysians who were enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts (English Language Literature) programme at a local university in Malaysia. The respondents were made up of 13 Malays, 7 Indians and 7 Chinese. Mostly in their 20s there were 25 females and 2 males. The names of the respondents have been changed to maintain confidentiality (Fig. 1). About two methods were used which were focus group interviews and five workshops.
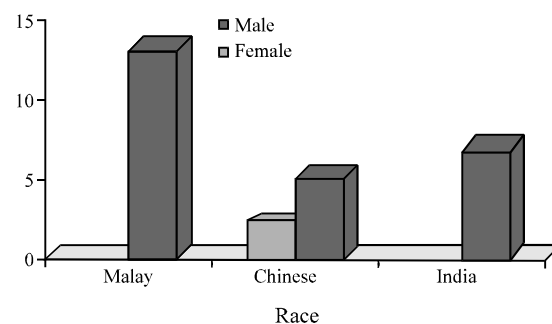

Fig. 1: Tabulation of respondents according to gender

The focus group interviews elicited responses from the students about their anxieties in taking the Research methodology course and specific problems related to thesis writing. The purpose of focus groups is to promote disclosure among participants. It is important to allow individuals to express their perceptions, attitudes and point of view about a specific topic in a friendly, relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. Focus groups allow comments, explanations and shared experiences. Focus group research involves organized discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences of a topic.

This kind of interviewing is particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic. Its benefits include gaining insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation. Interaction of participants adds richness to the data that may be missed in individual interviews. The interviews began with several opening questions which were largely about their understanding what research was all about followed by those on problems that they encountered in the process of formulating their research proposal. All the interviews were audiotaped with permission from the respondents.

Respondents also wrote personal narratives about themselves, their feelings and perceptions throughout preparing their research proposals. A content analysis of the narratives provided additional information and insights to supplement the participants' responses from the interviews session. The data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Coding protocols were developed based on the interview material. Case studies of the 27 respondents were compiled. Emergent themes were derived from the commonalities in the coding protocols.

Data from the three sources (target group interviews, personal narratives and workshops) were triangulated to ensure the data consistency. The data was first analyzed individually. Coding was carried out for each respondent and themes were drawn based on the codes.

The next stage was to scrutinize the data across respondents, looking for commonalities from which to derive codes. Coding was then carried out based on the codes of each subject. The researcher found certain dominant themes emerged across all the respondents. Consultations with a peer were used when there were needs.

Workshops: The workshops were part of the change introduced in the teaching of Research Methodology. Previously, the course was taught on the basis of a weekly 1 h lecture and 2 h of tutorial. It is found that this method of teaching has not contributed to making students confident researchers. It is felt that workshops at intervals during the 14 weeks duration would be a better way of nurturing better research skills. The teaching of research methodology has specific milestones where they are required to show the following:

- Statement of the problem
- Research questions
- Significance of the research
- Literature review
- Conceptual framework

They were not required to show analysis of texts and conclusion because the chapters will be written in the following semester when they embark on the actual thesis writing. Therefore, they were required at each timeline to produce in writing each of the section.

Five workshops were conducted the first one involved the write-up of the statement of the problem, research questions and significance of the research. The second workshop was organized at the library by the librarian.

The third workshop involved showing the literature review, the fourth workshop required students to show their chosen conceptual framework and methodology and the final workshop culminated with the students' presentations of their proposals in front of an audience. For each workshop, facilitators who were experts in the area guided students for each of the section produced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Selection of topics and defining the ideas: One of major problems that respondents encountered was selecting a topic for their research proposals. About 10 out of 27 respondents admitted that they were entirely clueless about what topic that they should pick for their research proposal. Many of them claimed that it was difficult for them to choose one particular topic as the scope of literature is wide. They have been exposed to a number of literatures from different regions, spanning from America to India and they were familiar with a number of reading approaches. Yet, they could not find a topic of interest. This is compounded by the fact that all of the students stated that they were not familiar with the format of a research paper.

For the last 2 years of their study, they were mainly given guided topics and reading techniques. They had never been given the autonomy to find an area of interest and develop an essay based on it. For instance, Siti one of the respondents says:

Technically we're still vague actually ...because we need to decide on a research problem. I do not know how to choose the right topic for the research because normally we're...we know ...because the lecturer would give us the questions and structure of essays...what to find where to find...But to do some research... to do research actually, it's not just doing the topic...but when we do research we have to go through it...the topic itself, what is it

Siti admitted that in her first 2 years at the university, she mostly relied on the guidelines of essay questions. She felt secure and confident in a sense that she knew that if she followed the guidelines given, her work would be accepted. However, this reliance also caused her inability to think creatively or explore other ideas on her own. Other students felt a similar sentiment of being overly dependent. Carrie, a Chinese student who is fluent in English revealed that she cannot begin to write her proposal because of a mental block:

I know I must start thinking about my proposal but as long as I'm stuck with my topic there is no way for me to move on. I'm totally stuck. I never expect doing research is very difficult. I used to do assignments and get stuck but assignment.....you know...you have the topic, you are given the framework...sometimes even important points to be included. You'll never get lost too far. But this time...I don't know. Thinking about a topic make me sick...[Laughs]

Similar to Siti, Carrie shows a difficulty of be an independent researcher. Another respondent, Halimah stated that while her friends are busy with their research proposals, she had no idea where to start, I tried but it is difficult. I sometimes feel that I am left alone in the middle of the sea and I try so hard to find my way back. I wish that I knew everything so that I can choose my topic easily. She feels that due to her lack of reading and limited knowledge about the field of study, she had not been able to find a topic that could sustain her interest for two semesters. The other 7 out of 27 students had too many topics of interest that they were spoilt for choice. But upon further probing what they had were merely broad subject areas. They had not reduced the scope of their research to something meaningful that would be practical within the limit of the time given. The topics they had in mind such as effects of postcolonialism and feminism in Malaysian Literature are so wide that they would probably be suitable for a research at a postgraduate level as Azlina says:

The problem I'm facing at the moment is I'm quite interested in many topics. I have a passion in Diaspora but later on I found out that Gender is quite good and then I found out that I have another passion in Multiculturalism. Actually...to choose a right path for my topic is quite a problem for me

Azlina's interest in diasporic literature, gender in literature as well as multiculturalism in literature showed that she was not focused. Lim, a Chinese respondent stated that throughout the years, he had been exposed to many theories in Literature and all of them fascinated him. Therefore, according to him, it is not easy to choose one particular topic that I like the most because I like them all. Hence how do we bring round this group of students who want to do everything? Their motivation is definitely an advantage but taking on an unwieldy topic will lead one to an academic journey of wilderness.

The remaining 10 students stated that they have a particular topic in mind but they are uncertain on what to do next and they are afraid that the topic that they had chosen will not be approved for continuation. This situation also posed a problem to the respondents. One of them states:

The main problem that we are facing now is topic. I think what I would expect more from this course...maybe more on insight...a personal experience in research. Right now in my case, I haven't decided a topic because I don't know which topic will be a good topic for the level...things like that

These responses showed high anxiety levels even before they embarked on writing up their proposals. Due to this problem of where do I start? a teaching strategy has to be devised to address this predicament.

Developing ideas: In planning a research, the stage of developing ideas is crucial in ensuring that the research will not face great stumbling blocks. Certainly, problems will arise along the way and how we solve them will make better researchers. But as we gathered from the focus group interviews, the next step of developing ideas of their proposed topics was another big hurdle.

About 10 out of 27 students admitted that they faced this problem. Three main contributing factors for this crisis is due to the kind of data collection needed. They were uncertain of the differences between quantitative or qualitative research. About 1 of the respondents, Zakiah says that:

I am passionate about my topic but as I sit back on my table and start thinking about what should I do next....I'm blank. I know a little bit about research but in the proposal I have to mention which design I would like to choose....So I don't know. All I know is quantitative is about numbers. I don't like numbers so if it is true that it involve numbers...then I will avoid it [laughs]

The lack of exposure and knowledge about the concept of research design has misled the respondents view about methodology. Another respondent also expressed a similar view when she claimed that her limited knowledge about research design has clouded her ability to write something coherent. When she was asked to explain further, she revealed that:

I am confused when asked about what method that I want to use for my research proposal. In fact, I don't know the significance of my research method and what is the impact on my research. I am afraid that if I don't choose wisely, I will not be able to complete my thesis within the time given. As long as I'm stuck with this matter there's no way for me to go. I'm lost....Twice [laugh]. First, to select a topic and now to develop my idea

When asked whether she has knowledge in quantitative or qualitative research, she said that her understanding about research design is very limited and most of them were in the form of hearsay advice from the senior students. She expressed that with her lack of knowledge in selecting the appropriate research design, it is hard for her to predict the outcome of her research because according to her i am stressed out thinking about how to proceed with my topic. I'm afraid that I might need to change my topic if it doesn't match with the research design. The confessions made by the respondents were important to the us because we need to rectify this problem to alleviate further anxiety. Feedback was important to the students. Most students did not want to begin thinking about developing their ideas until they get positive feedback from their tutors. They were unwilling to move on with their proposal in case their topics were deemed unsuitable. If it turned out that they have developed their ideas based on a premise that was wrong as pointed out by the tutor then it would certainly be a waste of time. As stated by Sujata, conducting a research is totally alien for her and as a first timer doing a research, she hoped that her proposal would not be rejected:

I am totally depressed when thinking about doing a research project. I know...I cannot run from it because it is a must for all final year students. So, I hope my lecturer will not be too unhappy with the way I write. I get depressed if the supervisor keeps pointing out my mistakes. So I'd rather wait until further instructions. That will be less stressful, I guess

Therefore, while developing ideas is an important component in writing up one's proposal, students were either vague about the steps they should take or they were reluctant to progress further without immediate feedback. Since it is difficult and time consuming to approve topics and scrutinize research questions for 30 students in a short time, the workshop helps to provide immediate feedback so that the students knew what they lacked in their approach and what they could do for the next phase of their research.

Access to external reading sources: Another dominant problem that emerged from the data related to access to external reading sources. The university library subscribes to more than a million journals in various disciplines. Yet, the students reported that they had problem searching for the right reading material. Nearly all the respondents stated that they had never used online journal databases such as Eric, Ebscohost, JSTOR and SpringerLink since they began their university education. There was no need to search for extensive literature because the assignments did not prescribe such as approach.

Every Ist year student was given a tour of the library and the ways in which they could access materials but because there was no need to be familiar with the databases the students had not used the facility. Only 2 out of 27 respondents knew how to use online databases but their proficiency was limited. One of the respondent said that he knew how to use online databases through his seniors nevertheless he rarely used it. He explained that the journals are difficult to understand. The language is too difficult. My English is not that too good [Laughs] so I prefer to read materials from books or the internet. He further asserted that language constraint was not the only reason; he rarely uses journals because of the difficulty in locating the ones related to his field of needs.

Another respondent does not have a problem with the language of journals but she too accessed online databases infrequently. When asked for the reason was she replied, searching for journals is not easy. I spend nearly 1 h or more at the PTSL but ended with an empty hand and mind. Sometimes there are journals that interest

me but I could only view the abstracts. Perhaps the university does not subscribe the volumes I need. There are times where my friend and I have gone to the library together. When researchers go back, she brought along 4 books for the assignment but me nothing. So, rather than spending so many hours for nothing, I prefer to find books.

About 19 out of 27 respondents stated that they like to refer to the Wikipedia, Blogs and some unreliable websites as their online references. These are easier to comprehend. Unfortunately, not all of these sites provide reliable information or show academic writing styles. If they were looking at these websites as models then they would be given the wrong guide. As students of higher learning institution, they were expected to familiarize themselves with academic materials such as journals, proceedings and conference paper. One of the respondents claimed that:

> I know as a final year students I must not rely to Wikipedia. Even my lecturer always says so in the classroom. However...I don't know how to use online databases. I haven't even heard of Ebscohost before. The only way is to do online search and Wikipedia always has very easy to understand articles. I get my idea there...every time when I want to complete my assignmen

Ideally, sourcing for literature review is a skill which should be nurtured in the 1st year of study. For many literature students there is a dilemma in doing a meaningful interpretation. How much should one rely on past interpretations and how much should come from one's own responses? Therefore, the students need to be guided to use external sources responsibly to strengthen their arguments not to regurgitate previous interpretations in an unthinking manner.

Finally, 8 out of 27 students claimed that they always referred to online materials without giving specific websites. One of the respondents revealed that she just googled it which means that she like many others used reading sources indiscriminately. They did not make use of Google Scholar search engine because they had never heard of it or they had never used it. This implied that total reliance towards internet had somehow impeded the students' ability in sourcing reliable readings for literature review. Although, to a certain extent, technology has helped in gaining and developing one's knowledge however when attention was not given to the reliability and authenticity of the information, the consequences might be severe. One of the respondents, Soraya, explained her reason of using Internet as her only source of reading materials as follows:

> With the internet, it is easy. I can find any information at my finger tips. Sometimes I am aware about the issue of plagiarism, copy paste and so on. Oh,...internet....The language is easy to understand than journal articles...easy to get, I just need to type in the search box and everything will come out. I don't have to go to the library at all

Soraya was clueless about the authenticity of whatever she read on the internet. She says:

> To be honest, I don't know. My friend once told me that we can only trust books because books are written by experts. But I think, articles from the internet are also reliable because sometimes when I open ...emm...answer.com for example, yes, the name of the author is stated in the page and the author is also an expert in literature. So...it's the same, right?

Her comments showed that novice researchers are unable to discriminate between what is real scholarship and what is not. Therefore there is a dire need for them to be shown the ways to use the electronic databases for books and journal articles. Once we have taught them how to fish for materials, they would know the way to source for them the rest of their academic lives.

Format of thesis proposal: Formats of research proposals vary according to the requirements of different institutions. About 16 out of 27 students stated that they did not have any idea of the composition of the proposal or the dissertation. Leela, one of the respondents, pointed out that even if she had a topic of research, she still did not know what she should do next. She says:

> I don't know whether what I am going to say looks silly or not but I really don't know what should we do next if we have a topic. What must I look for? Is it just past research or the theory which I need to use for my analysis? I'm completely clueless. I really hope that in this course, the lecturer will assist me in structuring my proposal

Her peer, Ahmad, shared a similar view:

> Time is running out...and I have not written anything at all. I have found some past research for my topic but I don't know what should I do with them....that's my problem. I am confused. Also, I don't know how many pages I should write, the spacing, font and so on

About 11 out of 27 students on the other hand stated that they have very limited ideas about the format of thesis proposals. According to them, they believed that a thesis is different from an assignment in a sense that it requires more work and it's harder than an assignment. They never took the trouble to look at previous theses even though they are available in the main library and the resource centre. This problem is easily rectified if the students had been more proactive in their attitude to work. Hence, the workshops were also used as a way to inject motivation in the students to be more independent in their quest for academic excellence.

Inadequate exposure in academic writing: Throughout the interview sessions conducted, most of the students reported that their inadequate exposure in academic writing was another one of their problems in the research methodology course. The different register of academic writing where one needs to show agency in one's evaluation of previous scholarly works was not unfamiliar territory to them. As students of Literature in English, their command of English was expected to be better than average. But they were still making grammar mistakes in their writing and not using proper literary terms of expressions in their analysis. About 21 out of 27 students confessed that they were fearful of writing their proposals because of their language problem and lack of knowledge in academic writing. One of the respondents stated that she lacked the vocabulary of expressing her ideas on paper. When asked whether she knew how to write academically, she states:

> When I'm writing, I am too busy to check whether my grammar is right or wrong. I don't have time to concentrate on academic writing aspect. But I think as long as I write the way I write my assignments then I'm on the right track

When further asked whether she used citations in her writing, she says:

> I always use citations. I use a lot of them. I was told that's the principle of good academic writing. what make the writing look academic. But I take it as it appear in the book or the internet. I know I must change it but I don't know the exact way. My friend once taught me but I'm not sure whether it is the correct way or not. She told to change the verbs. So when I write, I just click the button synonym and I change it. That's all. I don't know how to put the name of the author, date, page and so on. I must get Gaya UKM but the book is quite expensive. So I use my friend's knowledge as my point of reference

The problem was also shared by other respondents and most of them stated that they could never match the standard of competency as the journal writers. Sometimes due to her frustration, she tended to copy everything from books or the internet. Without realizing the consequences, she stated that:

> Well…we don't have any choice. I want to write academically but I don't know how. So I just take it all. Sometimes I summarize it but I'm afraid my summary is incorrect and it is not the same as the original meaning

From the quotations stated as above, it can clearly be seen that inadequate knowledge and information about the correct way of academic writing contributed to plagiarism which is unethical in the academic world. Without proper guidance from the educators, the students will never learn the right and honest way of doing research.

Workshops: Four workshops were conducted for each of the milestones. In the first workshop, students showed their academic adviser the statement of the problem, research questions and significance of the research. An academic adviser took charge of three students and pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the research problems and questions. The immediate feedback as well as personal interaction with experts in the area helped students to narrow their focus, rewrite research questions and find rationales for the significance of their intended proposals.

The second workshop was a practical session with the librarian who tailored the course on literature review for students of literature. With examples taken from the students' topics, they were shown how to find books and articles that would help in their reading. The course was an eye-opener; students who grumbled of not finding enough materials in the library were surprised at the amount of literature available in print and in electronic form. The third workshop focused on the literature review that the students had produced. Given the limited time frame, they were only asked to produce five kinds of articles taken from various sources-books, chapters in books as well as journal articles which have been published the last 5 years. The emphasis on the currency of what they read was important because students often relied on dated sources in their literature review. By asking for variety and currency, the students were guided on the importance of being up to date and being sensitive to cutting edge research findings.

The fourth workshop centred on the conceptual framework and methodology used in the analysis of texts. This is another challenging part of the proposal. Through discussions with facilitators, students were able to explain their choice of framework and method of analysis. Whatever reservations the facilitators had regarding the choice of approach were sorted out in the session.

The fifth workshop was the grand finale where the students presented their proposals to an audience made up of students and experts in the area. The presentation was a culmination of all the sections required in writing up the proposal by laying out the background of research, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of research, review of literature and conceptual framework and methodology. Prior to the workshop style teaching, former students produced thin proposals of about 10-15 pages long. Researchers were pleasantly surprised that the respondents in the workshop produced extensive proposals ranging 30-40 pages long. Their topics were innovative, focusing mostly on newer literary texts and genres rather than old dated texts which have been worked to death.

CONCLUSION

Undergraduates are understandably apprehensive in embarking on a piece of writing which requires some originality, academic rigour and scientific organization. Through focus group interviews and written narratives, some of their problems emerged in the discussion. These hurdles include the inability to arrive at good topics, vague about the format of proposals, apprehension about language proficiency and academic writing style, failure to locate reading materials, lack of ability to choose a suitable framework and methodology. These problems compounded the anxiety of having to complete their proposals within a short period of time.

In order to alleviate their anxiety and guide them towards writing better proposals, several sessions of workshops were organized. At every step of proposal writing, from the brainstorming session to selection of conceptual framework and methodology, prospective supervisors worked through with the students on their proposed topics. In this way, the students were able to see from the very beginning the problems that arose due to a topic that was too big or too small and the development of the topic was a mutual agreement and collaboration between the student and his/her supervisor.

It is crucial for the course coordinator to pair off the students and their respective supervisors as early as possible so that both parties will have the luxury of time for consultation purposes. By organizing workshops at regular intervals, both supervisors and students could meet in a collegial environment (not as intimidating as one-to-one consultation) before they proceed to a more focused supervision the following semester. Therefore, the way forward in research methodology class is to make plans for regular seminars to stimulate better discussions and research proposals.

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