Distance and E-Supervising: Experiences and Results

Abstract

This paper presents samples of electronic and distance supervision of Doctorate theses and Magister dissertations, step by step, from research proposal to viva presentation. The method proves to save time and energy for both supervisors and candidates and keeps permanent contact between the candidates and continuous follow-up of research progression by the supervisor and the research institution

Hacene HAMADA
Department of English
Ecole Normale Supérieure
Constantine (Algérie)

Introduction

This paper describes personal experiences of postgraduate courses and Magistère / Doctorate supervision. It gives a brief account of the postgraduate courses taught at Constantine, Annaba and Sétif Universities, and Ecole Normale Supérieure in Constantine. Despite the distant home locations of supervisor, courses and postgraduate students, distant supervision through modern ICT permitted transmission of pre and post conference documents; emails, attached and Pdf files permitted a wide flow and exchange of knowledge. At the personal supervision level, personal contacts and meetings were organised for research initiation and project elaboration. However, on the long run, many candidates kept distant contact for research elaboration (theoretical issues and practical/field implications, and feedback).

ملخص

يستعرض هذا المقال نماذج من متابعة الإشراف عن بعد على رسائل الماجستير وأطروحات الدكتوراه منذ الشروع في البحث، خطوة بخطوة، حتى موعد المناقشة. لقد أثبت هذا الأسلوب من الإشراف والمتابعة توفير الوقت والطاقة لكل من الباحث والمشرف، بحيث يبقي هذا الأخير على اتصال دائم بالباحث، ومتابعة مستمرة لتقدم البحث مع مؤسسات التكوين.

At the end of the process, many candidates finished their research work through personal meetings and distant exchange of elaborated chapters, research tools, results sections, etc, while a few others did not or completely abandoned their projects. The evaluation of this experience shows that, and similarly to other experiences, there are some positive and negative aspects of direct / distant supervision. Despite modern ICT, the Local Universities do not offer possible facilities for postgraduate research support and do not exploit to a better extent the available financial and human resources for ICT distant education and supervision.

1-Postgraduate courses

During the last five years, four postgraduate courses in applied linguistics and language teaching and two master/Doctorate programmes in language sciences and applied language studies were designed and taught at Constantine (Magistere 2007, Master and Doctorate 2007), Sétif (Magistere 2008), Annaba (Ecole Doctorale2007-2012), and ENS Constantine (Magistere 2009 and 2010). The researcher's contribution consisted of designing and providing lecture notes, reading documents and resources for Teaching English as a Foreign Language, syllabus and course design, evaluation, language acquisition and English for Academic Purposes/English for Science and Technology discourse. The research task required the elaboration of lecture notes for each programme course which were sent before, during and after lecture sessions to the candidates.

During the course, Information and Communication Technology facilities were exploited according to their availability at the host universities. Further readings related to topical issues in paper back and soft copies (Pdf files) were provided for topics explorations and oral presentations using ICT; as a response, the candidates provided software copies (for every participant) of their research reports and oral presentations in each subject. At this stage, there grew a generous culture of exchanging personal details and sharing general or specific knowledge related to topics of common interest.

Through the course process, the candidates were no longer participants but became contributors who supplied each other with supplementary materials or gathered more electronic documents for their own research perspectives. Exchange of email addresses and phone-numbers, between candidates and lecturer/supervisor lead to a rapid and immense flow of information exchange and knowledge accumulation (Barker and Schaik, 2O10: 110-125). This collaborative /cooperative process contributed in a positive presentation of seminar papers by the candidates themselves. It gave them more self confidence in their academic knowledge and use of electronic resources before and after the presentation of their papers.

2- Research initiation

Although Research Methodology was a subject taught by another lecturer during the course of study, there were many opportunities for the course participants to discuss methodological issues for their research perspectives mostly related to course design and evaluation, materials design and teaching in context, classroom discourse and observation, textbook analysis and evaluation, teaching/learning procedures, academic

and specific/scientific discourse features, and so many other issues related to linguistics, language teaching/learning and methodology.

This commitment of the candidates to dig into these issues of research methodology was the result of the steps and procedures engaged in the postgraduate course design and implementation; the generous flow of information and the rapid exchange of documents using ICT at a distance gave rise to autonomy, curiosity, and determination of the candidates.

As it is the case for every research project, every candidate had to limit the scope of the study according to the research aims and questions, and provide references that best illustrate the theoretical framework. Accordingly, a research scheme is set as a second step in order to write the review of literature. The practical implications would then correlate the research variables with the applied research tools. At this stage, the candidate provides a first draft of the theoretical framework and the research methodology to be applied in the field work.

After the application of the research tools, data gathering and analysis are recorded according to established norms of research methodology; depending on the research method (qualitative, quantitative, experimental, comparative or diagnostic, etc...), data presentation in tables, graphs, diagrams, histograms, observation grids and checklists are often commented and used to discuss the research variables and answer the research questions. At this penultimate stage, the candidate presents the second draft which includes both the theoretical and practical parts of the dissertation or thesis. Finally, the candidate revises the whole version and adds further research implications and a general conclusion. The role of the supervisor is of capital importance at every stage of the research process (Eley and Jennings 2005:63-68, Wiener, etal 2003: 1-14).

At an initial stage of a research project, every candidate had the opportunity for a personal meeting with the supervisor to discuss the research proposal, present his/her scope of the study and research problem, and adapt a relevant research methodology to the project. There follows usually a discussion of the research proposal in terms of the appropriate research questions to be answered, the hypothesis to be tested using appropriate research tools, and the target population / situation / context (Allan, 2010: 95-121). If there is agreement on all the elements of the research proposal, the candidate rewrites the final draft of the research proposal; almost all candidates send it through the email attached files.

3- Research Requirements and Elaboration

Distance supervising starts when the candidate submits a research proposal to be examined by the scientific board; almost all candidates send their proposals as attached files via emails. Once the research proposals are accepted, planned meetings are organised at individual and group levels. Most candidates who live within a distance from the supervisor send their versions as attached files and are informed, later on, of the consent of both scientific board and supervisor to register for the research programme. A second individual meeting is arranged for every candidate to study and plan together the possible steps to be undertaken regarding the theoretical overview of

related literature and the practical necessary measures to be applied in the research context.

E-supervising requires rigorous organisation of time and real and virtual space by the supervisor. The shortage of supervisors in the various fields of English Language Studies puts all the burden of supervising on a limited number of lecturers who can potentially find time and energy to manage their teaching, research, and supervision commitments (Wisker, 2005: 206-212). To avoid confusion, cross connections of files and documents, a virtual portfolio is created for every host university within which a personal portfolio document is created for every candidate. The former contains all the documents sent by and to the candidate. In order to save data and written documents from loss, formatting, airport X rays (on hard disc; USB disc, CD, Email documents), multiple copies of the portfolios are made (Delamont, etal, 2004: 122-123).

Reports and accounts of research progression take place through the net; immediate and delayed feedback are provided to every step taken by the candidates until they submit their first drafts. Compulsory group meetings / chats on Facebook (www.ENS Master as an example) are organised twice a year for every group of postgraduate students at the ENS Constantine and/or at Constantine University. Occasionally, when the supervisor is on a short visit to particular University around the country for a viva or a seminar, a meeting is arranged with local postgraduates. Here, the electronic data and the use of software/hardware equipment give immediate and satisfaction during those short meetings. Both the supervisor and the candidate can consult the required documents on the spot.

4-Process and Final Evaluation

On a regular basis, candidates are evaluated according to the evolution of the research process and achievement of the steps mentioned above. Every document/file, received or sent by the supervisor, automatically indicates the date of reception and the date of modification/correction. Despite this virtual proximity, some candidates occasionally need a face to face meeting to discuss problematic issues that hinder their progression. Depending on the supervisor's time management, special meetings are arranged for every particular case (Paltridge and Starfield, 2007: 163-167). However, a few meetings turn out to be much more focused on the candidate's state of mind, emotional, or social discrepancies to deal with the hard task of research challenges. The role of the supervisor, then, is a constructive one in order to make the candidate more confident, enthusiast and determined to finish the project.

At the end of the process, an evaluation report is sent, via email, to the university postgraduate administration. As the supervisor is involved in other postgraduate courses than those of the institution, expert reports from other university scholars/members of the juries are also communicated to the host university via email and attached files. Finally, a viva voice announcement is communicated to the supervisor, the candidate, and the examiners. Consequently, the candidate prepares a data show presentation, using power point software, and sends a copy to the supervisor for correction and advice if necessary.

5-Particular Experiences

Distance supervising initially started according to personal constraints of some candidates who lived in distant places, had professional and/or family commitments, or settled abroad for along period of time. The common feature of these candidates is basically isolation from the study context; they needed mostly permanent contact for discussion and advice but also some guidance to achieve their academic objectives. Through time, some candidates loose their initial motivation to do research and become locally absorbed by the constraints of their professional and family obligations (Delamont, etal, 2004: 80-100). Through distance discussion they receive hints, encouragements and support. Examples of these cases vary from simple distance supervision requiring email contacts and phone calls for discussion, advice, and feedback, to very complex situations of candidates who settled abroad for long periods of time that lasted more than two years. However a few candidates almost never used ICT for personal reasons.

Some particular cases are to be mentioned here for their outstanding results. For example, a Magistere candidate from the University of Constantine –we will use her initials: A.I henceforth- started working on her dissertation in September 2008 and won an award as a secondary school teacher for an eighteen months leave to the United States in June 2009. During this period of nine moths, she could set the main issues of her theoretical framework and gathered enough data from her research context. During her stay in the US, A.I reconsidered her literature review many times because of the library facilities she could find and consequently sent many sections via attached email documents for correction. A.I had to present and describe the data she had gathered while she was in the US, but meanwhile she got married to an American citizen. Given her family status and expecting a baby, A.I let down her research project for more than six moths but continued emailing the supervisor for advice and encouragement. Despite the break of more than a year, A.I sent her second draft with all sections of the dissertation for correction in December 2010; meanwhile, several emails and chats were necessary to make her correct the final version and send it back in march 2011. Through distance supervision via emails and chats, using ICT facilities at home and at work, the candidate submitted a final copy and a power point viva voice presentation in June 2011; she successfully defended her dissertation in October 2011.

Contrarily, and despite the provided internet facilities, a Doctorate candidate –and full time 52 years old teacher from the University of Annaba- A.B henceforth, did not take any opportunity to save her time and energy to travel from Annaba to Constantine; she used to phone and arrange meetings with the supervisor and insisted on meeting the supervisor in person on all occasions. The only attached file A.B sent to the supervisor was the research proposal in September 2007. However, she was very determined and motivated to undertake all the research tasks and bring all necessary changes to her research project throughout the process. The neglect of the ICT facilities did not necessarily affect her progress simply because she did not rely on it but because she never learnt how to use it; while preparing her viva voice, A.B relied on handwritten notes instead of typed documents. She was very embarrassed to admit that someone else had to type the thesis for her and she had to ask someone else, again, to design a power point presentation for her. During the viva voice, A.B read her notes and

successfully presented her research work while someone else –a teacher colleague- was displaying the slides from the computer desk top. The neglect of ICT, in this case, is not due to a failure of the candidate but to her personal attitude to and mastery of ICT literacy.

The younger generation of postgraduates seem to have a positive attitude to ICT in general and develop particular mastery of ICT literacy. While reviewing the individual portfolios of Annaba university candidates, four out of five Magistere candidates sent regularly their sections for corrections; the fifth candidate lives just next to Constantine University and had enough opportunities to arrange meetings with the supervisor. From Constantine University, four out of five candidates had similar positive attitudes to the distance supervision process as those from Annaba University; the outstanding example was that of A.I (mentioned above). However, the fifth candidate started the process at the same time as A.I (in September 2008) with some attached files and a few emails but let down the whole project later on for medical reasons.

A group of six postgraduate students from the University of Sétif started working on their dissertations in September 2009. Four of them live far from Constantine and consequently followed the distance supervision process till the viva voice session; they met the supervisor in person only three times (group meetings and seminars) during a period of two years supervision. However, the two other candidates live in Constantine city but adhered completely to distance supervision because of their job requirements and family commitments; the electronic portfolios reveal that the amount, nature and quality of their ICT use are equal to the other distant candidates. Similarly, four other candidates at the ENS Constantine started working on their dissertation in October 2010, followed the same process despite their relative home distance from the postgraduate institution and could, on a regular ICT process, defend their dissertation. In sum, the younger generation seems to be more ICT friendly, develops a positive attitude and behaviour towards distance supervision, and keeps regular progress throughout the process.

6-Results and conclusion

This five year experience shows that distance supervision could solve a number of problems for the supervisor and the majority of Magistere and Doctorate candidates. The latter did not waste their time and energy on travelling distances to and from the postgraduate course host institution to meet the supervisor. Although group meetings were necessary at particular stages of the supervision process, almost all candidates took advantage of the ICT using internet facilities. The rapid flow of information through the internet and websites kept regular contact between the candidates and the supervisor and between all the candidates. Not only did the candidates send their research sections as attached files and receive feedback, they also created a generous process of academic materials partnership of electronic resources for their research projects. The initiative is growing among some institutions that are encouraging intranet organisation and access to electronic data. A number of academic institutions, including the ENS Constantine, are providing communication platforms and servers to help both graduates and postgraduates use modern ICT services and electronic

resources centres. The contribution of teachers and postgraduate students to this process is of capital importance.

However, distance supervision and electronic / internet follow up is not always so easy to administer and maintain regularly and continuously. It represents primarily a huge task for the supervisor who has to keep abreast with new developments and progress with every candidate's research project. As every candidate expects feedback, the supervisor has to manage time and energy to focus on particular details by consulting the candidate's portfolio and administer the adequate advice; with a few particular cases the candidate is invited to meet the supervisor for discussion sessions.

At particular periods of the process, internet connection failures may hinder the flow of communication or stop the download of some files. Furthermore, virus infection of data may cause severe troubles to both software and hardware equipment. Some academic institutions do not provide e-space at all or limit its access to the members of staff. In these cases printing the documents / files seems to be necessary and consequently personal meetings are arranged for the candidates.

The use of electronic resources does not go without risks of failure at the level of research ethics. In very few cases, unintentional plagiarism has been noticed and corrected. Although the internet websites provide a huge amount of information that candidates can download and use, the internet web services also provide plagiarism check whenever necessary. Contrary to the presumed idea that internet encourages plagiarism; its services can help to check the authenticity of every piece of discourse. This operation represents another huge task and responsibility for the supervisor.

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