

Assignments, Information and Learning: the Postgraduate Student Experience

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the experiences of postgraduate coursework students 'doing' an assignment. Assessment is well recognised as a driving force in students' learning and many university faculties still make extensive use of essay or report-style assignments. These may be the only form of assessment for postgraduates, so they are crucial to their learning, academic success and progress. Drawing on theoretical foundations in the fields of information behaviour and student learning, the research revealed considerable variation in aspects of information seeking and use, in the context of preparing an assessed report.

This small scale, phenomenographically-based study, was focused around one research-based assignment in a program for aspiring Information and Knowledge Management professionals. Six volunteer postgraduate students participated in a series of conversational interviews conducted over the timescale of the assignment and marking. All of the volunteers were found to be high achievers. Two were subsequently chosen as subjects of case studies to provide an in-depth perspective of their individual experiences over the timeframe of the assignment. Analysis of the interviews featured intensive use of audio recordings, supplemented by verbatim transcripts.

The findings are presented in three parts. Firstly, the set of processes experienced by the postgraduates, collectively labelled **Assignment Information Processes (AIP)**, are described as six qualitatively different categories that are hierarchically related. These range from shaping the task towards completion, to radically changing their views about information in the world. Secondly, the thesis presents five qualitatively different categories of experiences of **Enough** that the postgraduates were found to balance when completing an assignment. These ranged from maintaining control and getting done, to generating a creative development process. They depict Enough as far richer than simply a decision to stop. The thesis also describes patterns of change in the experiences of AIP and Enough over the timeframe of the assignment. A third major component of the thesis is based on two in-depth case studies. The case studies give insights into how the different categories of AIP and Enough are experienced by individuals as opposed to the collective experience more typically reported in phenomenographically-based work. In addition, the case studies give a vivid demonstration of the **Affective** aspects of student experiences during an assignment, allowing analysis of this often neglected aspect of information behaviour and student learning.

This finely grained exploration provides new perspectives on the postgraduate experience of assignments. It demonstrates that considerable variation can exist even amongst apparently similar students. Traditional research report style assessment can have a valuable role in complex and enriching learning experiences. Although significant parts of postgraduates' experiences were at levels associated with a 'surface approach' to learning, they nonetheless engaged in their work in meaningful and effective ways. It also suggests that the students' highly dynamic individual experiences are not only situational, but also 'micro contextual'. The impact of affective aspects of information use and assessment is highlighted and needs to be considered by higher educators to improve the holistic learning experiences of all students.