

Phd proposal writing | contributing to knowledge



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

To define an original contribution to knowledge in the context of PhD studies is complicated. In one sense, it can be seen as something which someone else has not done before and requires a large amount of innovation and commitment from the researcher. Gall et al. (1996: 47) noted that “ the imagination and insight that goes into defining the research problem usually determines the ultimate value of a research study more than any other factor”. This definition however may be construed as too broad and can be complimented by the reasoning given by Grix (2001) who says that a ‘ substantial contribution to knowledge’ means “ you must have produced original research on a given topic and embedded it firmly in the ‘ received wisdom’ of a particular field”

To pin point a definition for an original contribution to knowledge is difficult. However, Madsen (1983: 25) offers the following as a possible start:

“” Original” means “ the potential to do at least one of the following: uncover new facts or principles, suggest relationships that were previously unrecognized, challenge existing truths or assumptions, afford new insights into little-understood phenomena, or suggest new interpretations of known facts that can alter man’s perception of the world around him.”

It is widely agreed within academic fields that a contribution to knowledge may be achieved through a number of ways. Frances (1976) pinpoints eight ways in which originality can be achieved. However, Estelle and Derek (2010) only concur with six of these points which are as follows:

Setting down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time;

Continuing a previously original piece of work;

Carrying out original work designed by the supervisor;

Providing a single original technique, observation, or result in an otherwise unoriginal but competent piece of research;

Having many original ideas, methods, and interpretations all performed by others under the direction of the postgraduate;

Showing originality in testing somebody else's ideas.

Fundamentally, an original contribution to knowledge can be seen as an ambiguous statement or process as it can be interpreted by different people in a variety of ways. Dunleavy (2003) expresses concerns regarding overstating the originality of the research and emphasises the need to balance innovation against the subject context. He goes on to suggest that the best way to proceed in research is to think of the contribution as 'value-added'. He clarifies this by saying, " Focusing on your own ' value added' means keeping a critical eye on the extent to which you have transformed or enhanced or differentiated the starting materials of your analysis." He also goes on to say that, " It also means retaining strong relational patterns of argument in which you appropriately acknowledge the extent to which you draw on the existing literature."

The importance of reading literature in the chosen area of research cannot be over emphasised. Without this fundamental grounding of knowledge, a serious student cannot begin to propose an original contribution to knowledge. Without having a working understanding of the literature in their

<https://assignbuster.com/phd-proposal-writing-contributing-to-knowledge/>

field, it is made more difficult for students to refine a researchable topic and then subsequently contribute original knowledge. Knowledge of the field is critical and includes knowing what has already been done, what the current hot topics are and projected issues and trends. Ultimately, researchers need to understand what has already been accomplished before attempting to add their own contribution to the field.

Consideration must be given to any personal relevancy the proposed topic holds for the student and what area of their study would represent the biggest contributions of their work. When researching the literature, it is important to keep in mind such questions as: Is there any controversy or inconsistencies in the research or data? Does a deficiency appear in the literature on a particular topic? From a historical perspective, how has the field arrived at its present level of understanding the phenomenon that is being pursued?

“ Broader topics are probably more helpful because the broader the topic is, the more numerous are the kinds of research questions that can be asked” (Crowl, 1996: 20).

During the processes of PhD studies and writings, students can only make initial proposals as to what they perceive as original contributions. However, as time progresses and more literature is explored, these initial proposals will change if it is discovered that there has already been some research of a similar nature, and therefore if the initial proposals do not adapt, new ones are created in their place.

Put succinctly, it means not just passively following the author's train of thought but more importantly, it means anticipating where the author's line of argument leads, considering alternative extensions and constructing your own framework that covers these possibilities. ...Some of the best ideas are born this way. (Krathwohl, 1994: 29)

Relating this contextually, my PhD research is in the area of Dyslexia in the public and private sectors and its affect on policy making and implementation. The topic chosen is still broad in terms of the area I may investigate. However the focus of my research is narrowing as more literature is read and evaluated. After discussions with my Supervisor who is a specialist in Diversity and Equalities, my research will also attempt to grasp what the perceptions are of dyslexia in the public and private sectors and will see how these mind sets influence the decisions of various departments and relationships within the business and public sectors. An area I am also keen to investigate is the education of staff and the general public through schooling and awareness programmes and other media.

From the literature that I have reviewed to date, I know that there has been little research undertaken with regards to dyslexia policies in the educational sector. What has been researched quite extensively is the educational policies which relate primarily to primary and secondary education. There has been little discussion relating to dyslexia during college and university participation. Therefore, I know that any theories I have surrounding higher education and any research I wish to initiate will most likely result in an original contribution to knowledge.

There has been next to no academic writing about dyslexia policies in the private sector which gives me, as a researcher, a good opportunity to offer some original contribution to knowledge to this field. What has been written in this field focuses primarily on what is required to comply with national legislation and European law. Drake (1999) summarises policies and laws simply by stating, "... prevailing norms and values reflect the interests of the majority and may subordinate those of the minority." I agree with this statement but wish to find out just how much this holds true in the context of public and private sectors.

What has generally been written about dyslexia in the public and private sector areas has been more from a social sciences view stemming from definitions of dyslexia as opposed to stemming from the more business minded and practical view which focuses more on a person's ability to do jobs and the influence this has on company and or educational policies. Therefore, in an area which has been under explored and scrutinised, the research I propose to carry out will be original as it will produce new theories as to why dyslexia is barely acknowledge in these areas, along with new insights into how the current policy systems are produced and operated and possibly where new systems and legislation would be beneficial.

There will be an obvious flourish of new ideas and arguments which accompany any original contribution, as well as an opportunity to apply any existing ideas in general literature to the new area of study. This is important in my field, as dyslexia in itself, as a form of disability can be controversial and any new ideas and hypothesis made will be cause for debate and allow past discussions to be revisited. This is also important in the development of

<https://assignbuster.com/phd-proposal-writing-contributing-to-knowledge/>

original contributions as this will allow any theories created to adapt and grow.

Apart from my own literature search, by speaking with other academics in my specific field, I can gain access to a whole new level of expertise and academic knowledge. This will give me the opportunity to test their knowledge of my chosen area of diversity and tap into their resources. Additionally, they will also be able to aide in identifying if my chosen topic has been previously mentioned in any literature that they have read. Academics will not be the only resource I will be able to tap throughout my investigations, as I will also have access to many other resources such as peers, advisors, supervisors, university staff and government offices. Other resources will follow as my research develops.

Despite the obvious views of original contributions to knowledge, other questions still remain. One example of this is when a student continues a previously original piece of work, is it truly original? The answer would be in the affirmative in the following cases; for example, if the direct result were to produce new theoretical interpretation to an already given state; to extend, qualify, elaborate existing work; or even create a new research design and/or methodology for research. The latter example would clearly have an impact on any work that I was to produce. This form of original contribution to knowledge is popular when covering an already highly researched area. This allows the researcher to explore areas which have already been explored but have the possibilities to be interpreted in different ways. Also, when a theoretical model is brought from one discipline and applied to another discipline, it can create many interesting results.

<https://assignbuster.com/phd-proposal-writing-contributing-to-knowledge/>

In the context of my research, there has been one author who has looked generally on policies surrounding disabilities, all be it more substantially from a political (government) viewpoint. However he does not go into detail on dyslexia specifically as this is not the focus of his research when making the general link to companies. What he has passingly touched on in the case of dyslexia would be something I would like to investigate further in my own research. The specific case is the reactions of the managers in companies towards disabled employees. In my research however, I would more specifically want to look at dyslexics.

Another area of interest in my chosen topic has been that indirectly covered by wildlife experts. There have been many links made regarding the relationship that exists between mankind and animals, and I believe there are still many more links to be made. For example, if one animal is perceived to be different, then it is often excluded from the group or pack. This link can be made with people. When someone is perceived as different, they can often be persecuted directly or indirectly. This may involve a lowering of self worth or esteem and lead to social exclusion. There can be many assumptions as to why this is, and there are already existing theories with regards to animal behaviour. Therefore I would like to use these theories in a different field/context which again substantiates an original contribution to knowledge.

Other areas of originality can be highlighted with fresh data which can lead directly into critical appraisal of previous work. Care needs to be taken not to re-create previous works, or have something which is too closely associated with a previous research specimen. A whole new stance needs to be taken.

<https://assignbuster.com/phd-proposal-writing-contributing-to-knowledge/>

When a student, using fresh data, undertakes further research of a topic previously covered ten years earlier, there is a strong chance that the results now would differ. This could tentatively lead on to a new theory being uncovered as to the reason behind the change and would thus be considered as another original contribution to knowledge.

If during my research I find that an area I wish to explore has already been covered, and yet I find myself disagreeing with the outcomes from the findings I have made, I would gather more data, if time permitted, which would allow me to critically appraise that piece of work with new findings. For example, if twenty years ago research formulated a theory covering manager's reactions to disabled people in the banking industry, I would have no hesitation in contemplating further research in this area considering the drastic change in law, disability policies and banking practices over the intervening years.

However, if all the work presented is relatively recent, yet I find myself disagreeing with the analysis, my original contribution could be a new analysis and new outcome from the existing data. This in turn could lead onto a fresh theoretical interpretation and even prompt a new analysis and new results derived from the old data.

No matter how a research student deduces whether or not they have made an original contribution to knowledge, what matters is that there is a support structure in place to help and guide them. Mauch and Birch (1989) constructed a series of questions to guide researchers when trying to determine the relative strength of research topics, which in my opinion goes

hand in hand with original knowledge contribution. Some of the questions highlighted by Mauch and Birch are as follows:

1. Is there current interest in this topic in your field?
2. Is there a gap in knowledge that work on this topic could fill?
3. Is it possible to focus on a small enough segment of this particular topic to make it manageable?
4. Can you envision a way to study the topic that will allow conclusions to be drawn with substantial objectivity?
5. Is the data collection (i. e., test, questionnaire, interviews, etc.) acceptable to your advisor and in your department?
6. Is there a body of literature relevant to the topic?
7. Is a search of the topic manageable?
8. Are there large problems to be surmounted in working in this topic? Can you handle them? Do you want to handle them?
9. Are the needed data easily accessible? Will you have control of the data?

Placing the above in context, I can determine whether or not my own research ticks the boxes of this checklist and therefore can ascertain, in another way, whether or not my own work can be considered an original contribution to knowledge.

In the instance of the first question, this is irrelevant to an original contribution. However, it does help make the process of PhD writing easier if there is interest and it is therefore a good starting point for a structure. The answer is yes. Interest in disabilities, although diminishing into the background of public awareness over recent years, is still there in the academic world.

The second question is vital to original contributions to knowledge as previously discussed. Again, the answer is yes. The area of research I have chosen has been under researched and is therefore a treasure trove waiting to be explored further.

Questions 3 to 5 along with 7 and 9 are more focused in and around managing the actual research and data collection. Although not immediately linked to the original contribution to knowledge, they do play a factor in deciding whether or not an area should be further investigated.

Question 6 focuses on literature which we have established as being paramount to ascertaining an original contribution to knowledge. In my context, there is literature surrounding dyslexia but more from a sociological perspective. So far in my literature investigations I have not uncovered anything alluding to the subject area I wish to investigate.

The final relevant question, number 8, can challenge a researcher when confronted with an original contribution to knowledge in a controversial area. Is it something a first time researcher wants to investigate or is it best left until another opportunity arises in the future? Not only is this an issue, this question also raises further questions about other issues. For example,
<https://assignbuster.com/phd-proposal-writing-contributing-to-knowledge/>

ethical issues. When thinking about an original contribution to knowledge, a researcher must also take other factors into consideration.

Ultimately, the topics surrounding “ What is an original contribution to knowledge” are still quite broad and all encompassing, but with guidance from supervisors and the numerous books available, researchers, including myself, should not have any serious difficulty finding an original contribution to knowledge.

A succinct summary for the process of thinking about an original contribution to knowledge is nicely stated by Rojewski in Farmer, E. I., & Rojewski, J. W. (2001), “ It’s been almost two weeks now. You spend what seems like, every waking moment thinking about it. And yet, still nothing. In a cruel twist of fate, it seems that the more time you spend thinking about it the more elusive the answer becomes. Why can’t someone just give it to you already and then you can be done with it!”