

Digital Story: Jaja Choktanasiri, MA Digital Technologies, Communication and Education, 2024-25



About me

Hello, my name is Jaja, and I really struggle to introduce myself. I often say: "I do bits and pieces here and there". Therefore, I decided to ask ChatGPT to help.

According to ChatGPT: Jaja Choktanasiri (also known as Pornchanit "Jaja" Choktanasiri) is a Thai educator, neurodivergent self-advocate, and actor who centres inclusive education and autism awareness in their work. Having studied at the University of Manchester on a BSc in Education as an international student, Jaja openly reflects on their experience as a neurodivergent learner navigating higher education. They hold roles in education support and advocacy, leveraging their lived experience of autism to support inclusive practices and amplify marginalised voices.

Jaja's work spans teaching assistance, speaking engagements, and creative projects aimed at widening understanding of neurodiversity and inclusive learning environments.

Not bad, right? However, for this mini-blog, reading Chat's voice would really be a bore. Therefore, I decided to give you a much more authentic encounter of my dissertation journey as an MA Digital Technologies, Communication and Education student.

Introduction

One of the reasons I feel so inclined to contribute to this project on *sharing students' dissertation journeys* is how lonely the dissertation process can be – and how little we often talk about this sense of loneliness. For me, the research process can sometimes feel isolating because each person's story is so unique, and we don't always share enough with each other about what we're doing as researchers.

My research journey has always been deeply personal. I talk about autism as an autistic person. I talk about staff and student voice as a student ambassador. I talk about marginalised voices of the global majority because I am part of the global majority. I talk about technology because it enables me to live as a Disabled student.

The collage above shows the different elements of completing an MA dissertation – gathering resources, deepening my understanding of my worldview, sharing my personal story, reading others' personal stories (highly recommend Ashley Shew's), sitting in cafés and buying overpriced tea, praying for good grades, starting a new job abroad, trying to stabilise my mental health – the list goes on. It's one thing to sit and read research, and another thing entirely when your life becomes intertwined with it.

Still, to make sure I don't spin this article into a sentimental diary that ends up locked away at mom's, I want to highlight three key moments in my MA dissertation journey — and share some advice for folks who might just be starting. In short, here are three key tips for anyone beginning their dissertation journey.

The beginning

I was afraid of the research gap – those wide, impossible-to-fill gaps that make people tell you you're too ambitious. But you also don't want to do a “me too” project, asking the same question as the person before you, just to secure a sweet distinction. And then there's the fact

that if you're from a marginalised group, you'll often be nudged toward more "palatable" research areas - and it's not always obvious that this suggestion is being made.

Here's where I say: research is resistance. Yes, recognise your limitations, your timeframe, and the barriers in research. Be sensible - trying to fly to Mars to test the thickness of moon clay might not be achievable, but there are horizons you can push, and you absolutely should.

So my first piece of advice is this: if a topic feels like the tag on an itchy sweatshirt, or a pebble in your shoe, it's probably the thing you need to research. That's how I found my peace. And trust me, I changed my topic three times before I settled – but ultimately, I got there. And so will you.

In the thick of it

About three months into my dissertation (and definitely more than three mental breakdowns), I started questioning whether my little master's project would ever make any real impact - other than making my supervisor's life a pinch more difficult. The truth is, it's easy to feel like your dissertation is just a box-ticking exercise to graduate. However, it can be more than that.

To make your research journey feel worthwhile, get out there with it. Talk about your research. Conferences are great spaces for this, but they don't have to be research-specific – you can create your own spaces. About two-thirds of the way through my dissertation, a group of colleagues and I made a small forum on accessibility. I was able to discuss parts of my literature review and how we could apply them in practice. Afterwards, with the same group of geniuses, we joined a STEM hackathon to create portable tap-and-go, NFC-chip, student support plans.

So my second piece of advice is: if there isn't already a space where you feel less alone, you can create one. There's a lot of support available at the University of Manchester. Don't know where to start? Get in touch with the Sharing Students' Project team or your academic advisor – their job naturally means they care about this kind of thing.

The new beginning

Towards the end of my dissertation, I was also preparing to move abroad to Vietnam for a new job. I was relieved that my dissertation journey was wrapping up – or so I thought. What I didn't realise was that the research journey never really ends, at least not in the way we imagine the word "end." It's more of a new beginning.

When I took part in the PGT Education Students' Conference, it really struck me – all of us were about to start new journeys. And on those journeys, we'd be carrying our research and experiences. The research journey doesn't *end*; it just restarts in new ways. For some, that might mean a PhD. For others, it's a more organic kind of research, sparked by a new job or a new "pebble in their shoe" – another topic to explore.

So my final tip is this: never shut any doors. Once you've embarked on the research journey, your mentality as a researcher never really goes away – and you should always share it with the world.