Disseminating dissertations: reducing inaccessibility to research findings

Maree Gruppetta
School of Education, University of Western Sydney.

ABSTRACT:

For many researchers theses and dissertations offer an original perspective on their topic area. It is also the most honest research available, as generally Honours, Masters and Doctoral students do not answer to external funding bodies, and therefore are unlikely to compromise their findings to appease financiers. Yet many theses and dissertations remain inaccessible to other researchers as they are permanently lodged within their own college or university, with little dissemination to the wider research community. Unless a paper is published, the research remains largely unknown and difficult for other researchers to locate or access. Although it is acknowledged that intellectual property issues, and the risk of plagiarism, conflict with the notion that all theses and dissertations should be available via electronic databases, the quandary of access remains.

As a beginning doctoral student it becomes incredibly frustrating to locate an abstract for a thesis or dissertation, know the research is pertinent, if not integral to your own study, and then be tortured by the knowledge that the thesis/dissertation is completely unavailable. Expanding the existing body of research can prove difficult when a researcher must waste time and resources repeating research within their field, simply because the original study cannot be accessed. Furthermore for those challenged by technology, with only basic computer skills, even the access to electronic dissertations is limited. There is a need to disseminate theses and dissertations to a wider audience. The issues of inaccessibility need to be reduced in order to ensure existing research can be located, cited, and expanded toward creating a richer research community.

KEYWORDS: electronic dissertations; gatekeeping; access; research literature

1.   INTRODUCTION

When students begin their dissertations they are told to research their passion, or at least a topic they are passionate about (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Yet, at some point they are also told 'not to try and change the world' (Gollin, 2005), that the completion of a dissertation is merely a 'gate-keeping exercise' (Gollin, 2005; Yates, 2004) to prove that they can research effectively at this level. Students are also told to 'consider their audience' (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001; Burns, 1997; Gollin, 2005) when writing, yet in reality their audience is quite small, just the markers, their supervisors, and maybe a few enterprising students somewhere in the future who manage to locate a copy on a dusty shelf.

This paper explores the issues regarding the difficulties in accessing the research literature, particularly dissertations. There are the complications of corporate funding, plagiarism concerns, and the issues of cost and computer literacy within electronic access, versus the frustration of locating those dissertations that are not available electronically.

For those who have already completed their dissertations consider for a moment where your dissertation currently resides: Is it available to all via electronic format? Do readers have to pay for access? Or are there only a few copies in existence which are hidden away on the shelves of your supervisors, markers, and the library of your old college or university? What did your dissertation actually contribute to the research literature, and how many people know? In truth, unless you published a paper summarizing your work, the only purpose your dissertation served was to get your degree. Its place in the research literature was quite small and reserved for a minute audience.

2.   ACCESS TO THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

As a student, this realization is disheartening, without wider publication of dissertations how can one really contribute to the research literature? And how can one be sure that the same research has not been already been conducted? An Honours or Doctoral dissertation is of necessity based on an original idea, but there is little way to ensure your research is not repetitive and merely a reproduction of that which has been done before. Research instruments that may be of use, and have already been developed, tried and tested, may exist but there is no way to access them, unless they are readily available in electronic format. Even then, a published paper contains only a summary of the work, and lacks the detailed methodology of the original dissertation.

Apart from the obvious literature review component, my own research required a Likert scale for the characteristics of gifted and talented adults. After eighteen months of searching it seemed there would be no choice other than to develop my own, and then I was fortunate enough to stumble upon a dissertation by Margaret Macy (1996). Macy (1996) developed, tested and justified a Likert scale for the characteristics of gifted and talented adults, but it took her entire dissertation to do it. It was horrifying to realize that my own dissertation could have been eaten away by repeating the same research, that all I intended to do would be lost in the construction of the basic research instrument. How many other dissertations achieve only this type of stagnation, where saturation point is maintained by the constant need to 're-invent the wheel', and research never moves beyond the development of similar test instrumentation ad infinitum? How are students and other researchers to stand on the 'shoulders of giants' if the research of the budding giants within our fields are never published?

3.   CORPORATE FUNDING

Until recently, most dissertations were strongly independent as doctoral students in particular were applauded for their original research. Therefore, it may well be claimed as the most honest research available. However it is becoming increasingly common for students to be involved in a larger commercially funded research project, and therefore their findings require approval before dissemination. The abolishment of scholarships and encouragement of a user pays system in many universities have seen PhD enrolments decrease to a deficit since 1988 (Hirst, 1988), with PhD enrolments down a further 20% since 1993 (Augustine & Richeter, 2005). Much of the reason given relates to lack of research funding, hence the need for corporate sponsorship (Augustine & Richeter, 2005; Downie, 2005).

Downie (2005) contends that much of the issue with research publications is a result of conflicts of interest between researchers and their corporate sponsors. Whilst the delay in publication can be attributed to the need to apply for patents and/or establish copyright (Downie, 2005), it is also often necessary to negotiate the presentation of results with the corporate sponsor prior to final publication (Downie, 2005). This current practice puts researchers in the same circumstances as artists trying to appease those that commission their work (Crichton, 2005).

4. PLAGIARISM

The arguments against wider dissemination of research material seem to be two-fold. The first aspect is the corporate world's concern regarding the theft of corporate material and intellectual property. The second, more pertinent to academia, is the risk of plagiarism. Historically it was enough to be the first published; authors then acknowledged your original idea within their work and built from there. Yet, wider dissemination would actually prevent plagiarism. Consider the location of many dissertations, where only a few copies exist and only a few people have read them. How would anyone know if someone copied a few pages? By adding the dissertation databases to plagiarism software programs (ELEUM, 2004), such theft of ideas and research would be virtually impossible. Wider dissemination through electronic databases would actually increase the chance of getting caught!

5. THE DIGITAL THESIS

Universities are now often requiring completing students to lodge both the traditional bound copy of the thesis – and an electronic copy (Harwood, 2005). Within Australia students submit their electronic dissertation to the Australian Digital Theses (ADT) database. Although theses published in Australia are available in full text and free of charge, it is still limited to those recently published and only abstracts are available for less current work. Harwood (2005) contends it is interesting to ponder the skills that may be required for more elaborate electronic productions of digital dissertations. Yet it is an issue that is far less pressing when desperately trying to get hold a thesis from overseas that was not available electronically (Harwood, 2005). Interestingly, Harwood (2005) also notes that when the thesis finally arrives, after all this waiting, she will really appreciate the opportunity to read it. Another point to ponder - do we become jaded with our ease of access? Do we fail to appreciate the time and effort it took to complete the dissertation, simply because we can call it up on our screens in a second? Rothenberg (1998:60) contends the Web is actually destroying student research, that papers now consist of "summaries of summaries". Perhaps this is because the original research is not accessible, forcing students to use the summarized papers or worse still, cite only the abstract.

Technically this paper proves Rothenberg's (1998) point, the dissertations cited within the reference list were accessed through the Proquest database dissertation facility, which permits one to access the first 25 pages for free. Unfortunately, within many theses the first 25 pages are often taken up with dedications and other material, but some contain enough information within the summary to be infinitely quotable, although one risks the quote being entirely out of context to the completed research.

6. GAINING ACCESS

Despite these issues, Harwood's (2005) point regarding the frustration of searching for a thesis that is not available electronically is apt. Although many recent theses are available electronically through overseas databases, it comes at a cost few students can afford. A Pdf file will cost between $29 - $34.00, and a paper copy anywhere from $47-$71.00 depending on the data base. However, often only the abstract is available, and if the terms are ambiguous or little information is supplied within that abstract, it is difficult to decide whether to risk the funds on the chance that dissertation may be the one you need. Equally it is incredibly frustrating to locate an abstract for a thesis or dissertation, know the research is pertinent, if not integral to your own study, and then be tortured by the knowledge that the thesis/dissertation is completely unavailable.

The quest to obtain a copy of a thesis is actually harder in Australia, unless published through the ADT database. Within many American colleges you have the option of contacting the Alumni, whereas within Australia it can be very difficult to contact a student once they have left that particular University. If a thesis is not available electronically within Australia, you must firstly locate the supervisor, and then negotiate with them for access to the student in order to request a copy of the dissertation. Thus far I have had little luck with this route, the supervisor is not listed with the abstract, nor is there usually any mention of the school or department, making it difficult to even contact the correct division within the University that holds the thesis.

This type of access additionally assumes that a person is computer literate, yet many mature age students are not. Unlike the younger generations that have learnt technology through school, many older academics and students are simply not 'computer savvy'. Walker (1999) refers to the changes to literacy due to technology as the 'gates to hell', and makes the point that regardless of the ease of access to the World Wide Web, many more mature age researchers still need to 'print it out' and read the document on paper. The 'have-nots', those in rural or lower socio-economic areas, particularly those in minority groups or over the age of 55, are least likely to have access to computers , therefore least likely to have the skills to use them (Brown, Barram & Irving, 1995).

Database searches are often impeded by ambiguous jargon and subjective terminology. One often needs to use a thesaurus and try every alternative version of a word simply to search for information. Sometimes the computer jargon used to formulate the search is the problem, and sometimes it is simply the colourful titles, invented phrases, words and terminology invented by many authors to ensure originality, which hampers the search. The creators of such database facilities need to make databases simpler, more accessible, and include a 'keyword' facility – one which uses the commonly known words in plain speech for that research area. Blackwell (1996:135) notes "the faster the technology grows, the more important it is to be well-grounded in the underlying concepts". The underlying concept is communication! Database designers can ensure equitable access which permits the communication of research to all interested parties.

7. GATEKEEPING AND PHD COMPLETION

In order to reach the inner workings of academia, the student must appease the gatekeepers by completing a dissertation that proves they should be permitted to enter

into the shared monopoly of power (Morley, Leonard & David, 2003). "A PhD is a form of accreditation that certifies that the holder has proved himself or herself as a researcher and warrants admission to the community of licensed academics or competent scholarly independent researchers" (Yates, 2004, p. 61). Corra (2002) contends that gatekeeping takes the form of ordering a new structural power condition. If a gatekeeper cannot monopolise their own position they must organise a shared monopoly to control access to benefits they do not actually own (Corra, 2002). This shared monopoly within academia includes many stakeholders within the University administration, all designed to ensure the student cannot obtain an academic position before proving their worth. Indeed even the functions of the 'supervisor' contain an element of 'gatekeeping' (Lyle, 1999).

While some students do obtain academic positions before their PhD is completed (Wilson, 1997), many more never finish their PhD. O'Bara (1993) noted the reasons that only some students finished their PhD. Although many factors were of influence in completion or non completion, such as supervisory relationships; financial, familial and/or peer support, the most important reason for completion was self-fulfillment. The findings further indicated that many students gave up completing their doctorate because they were unable to integrate all the aspects of their learning into a final product (O'Bara, 1993). Perhaps others failed to see the purpose of their final product, if the only place it would reside is on a dusty shelf. The advent of the ADT database has provided a forum for completed dissertations, which will increase in range and number as time goes on, however much research remains inaccessible until such time as all completed dissertations are required to be lodged electronically.

8.   CONCLUSION – HOPE

This paper explores the enormity of the problem of accessing the research community. There is often speculation as to why dissertations remain unfinished, why research is not wider, yet students have little hope that they can contribute to the research literature, that their research even matters. Although the ADT database will eventually address this concern and ensure that such research becomes more than a mere gatekeeping exercise, the attitudes of some academic staff need to support the notion that this type of research is important and a valuable contribution to the research literature. Equally the research journey is made unnecessarily difficult due to the inaccessibility of previously completed studies. Dissertations must be disseminated more widely, to make the research accessible to a wider audience, and ultimately make such research responsible for more than just achieving a degree!

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