

Incorporating 'non print-on-paper' creative material into research degree outputs: challenges, examination and access.

Rebecca Harris

Research Degrees Coordinator,
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Technology, Sydney.

ABSTRACT

This session considers the challenges and processes of incorporating creative material which is not print on paper into a non traditional thesis formats. Increasingly, higher research degrees in the Humanities and Social Sciences are embracing creative work as integral to demonstrating advanced learning at Masters and Doctoral level. Where this work can be reproduced in traditional printed formats there are relatively few technical challenges. However the inclusion of sound, visual, installation, exhibition and web-based material proves more difficult to accommodate. The author's conceptualization, providing access to the material, the cohesion of the components of the work, the response of examiners, and the final accessible format, all present a range of challenges to tertiary institutions. As an example of this process, a multimedia website produced as part of the examinable material of a non traditional doctoral thesis at the University of Technology, Sydney, is presented as a case study. The effects on the author, institution, examiners, and the issue of future access to the material are considered.

Keywords: creative content, multimedia, research degrees, non print on paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional theses in the Humanities and Social Sciences have typically incorporated large slabs of text – up to 100,000 words for doctoral work and up to 50,000 words for masters. While many theses of this nature still grace the shelves of research libraries there is a move towards different conceptualizations of the thesis itself in what is becoming known in some circles as a 'non-traditional' format. So while there are moves towards the digitization of traditional theses, non traditional theses present their own challenges for structure, storage, access and reproduction. This paper is not an academic treatise on the process or issues behind non-traditional research degree work but a case study of some of the challenges that have been encountered in the

production of a thesis that includes a non-traditional structure and material which is not readily or appropriately adaptable to print on paper.

2. NON-TRADITIONAL RESEARCH WORK

Scholars in the creative arts have commented on the integration of artistic pursuits like sculpture, painting and multimedia within the realm of scholarship in a range of areas (Elkins. 2004). Doctoral and Masters work in some areas now often involves creative practice at higher levels as well as advanced theoretical understanding of the disciplines that underpin creative work. At UTS it is common for creative writing, photography, film, multimedia, journalism and exhibition/installation work to form either a small part, or the majority of the work that is presented for examination and award of a higher level research degree. These non traditional formats are sometimes easy to incorporate – a published novel, a film on DVD – and sometimes present challenging new problems for the presentation of the work and its subsequent archiving and access.

To explore some of these challenges, this paper presents a case study. The thesis work revolves around a substantive dissertation of about 60,000 words and a multimedia website that provides illustration of the ideas generated through the theoretical work of the thesis. This case study will concentrate on the challenges associated with bringing the multimedia component to examination and negotiations around how this component should exist as a part of the permanent digital collection of the library and the Electronic Thesis Register.

The idea behind the thesis was to create both visual and aural artworks that reflected the textual component of the thesis. The intention was to use this creative material to reflexively illustrate a response to individual experiences of a city site. Through this dual presentation the thesis explores notions of the self and the other from an interior and exterior perspective. Without going into any detail of the arguments contained within the thesis itself and how its central concepts are theorized, this paper explores some of the practical dimensions of integrating artistic and creative ideas into a body of work.

The author's original conceptualization was to use artistic and creative components in a multimedia website where the art exemplifies a response to her theoretical material. Examples of the website (see reference list Streader 2004) show the construction of a multilayered, multi component site that navigates through text, moving images, static randomised images and soundscapes.

When the thesis came to submission point, the Faculty, University Graduate School and Library were presented with the challenge of trying to find a solution to how to present this component as part of the thesis as a whole. Normally for a non-traditional thesis the text and accompanying material – photos, CD, DVD, published novel – would be packaged and sent to examiners, leaving the viewing or reading up to them. Because these items are relatively easy to bundle together as a unit, previous theses did not really present a problem as their non-traditional elements could be dealt with through traditional means. In this case the site existed as a live interaction and could not be downloaded to portable media for traditional delivery. It had to be accessed through the world wide web as its contribution to the work was to unfold a series of relational components related to the text.

Weisser and Walker have written about the issues that effect the digitization of theses and dissertations (1997). They raise points regarding the changes in writing practice, access and

distribution, archiving and storage, and copyright and publication issues. This case exemplifies some of their issues below.

3. ISSUES OF EXAMINATION AND ACCESS

While it was easy enough to provide a website address URL as part of the body of the thesis, doing this proved unreliable and raises certain questions about the integrity of the work. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, one examiner had constant problems accessing the website. This disadvantages the candidate and can also lead to frustration on the part of the examiner – a situation which should be avoided at all costs. The website was under the direct control of the author, rather than residing on a university based and managed site. Consequently it was difficult to organize appropriate guidance for the examiner as the candidate should not have any contact with examiners during the examination process. Therefore, she could not instruct the examiner of how to access the material effectively. In this case, the guidance to the examiner was managed through the principal supervisor and was ultimately resolved. However it was a less than ideal situation. Luckily the supervisor had the technical expertise to perform this function, and this cannot always be relied upon. To avoid any technical problems and to provide appropriate support to examiners there should be a University or library resource to facilitate this interaction. However this carries its own problems. Permission to change areas of the website, maintenance and other functions may compromise the integrity of the creative component and also introduces yet another set of participants into the examination process.

Secondly, there is the possibility that because the URL exists in the thesis as effectively just an address, it fractures the continuity between the text and artistic material. Because they must by necessity exist in a different geographical and electronic 'spaces' the problem arises of seeing them as somehow separate rather than an integrated whole. Perhaps this is an argument for different solutions to the digitization of the text itself so the disparity between the exegetical material and artistic material can be lessened. It poses a challenge to authors and technicians to think through how material in different media can be coalesced into a more readable integrated unit for the purposes of examination.

Other technical problems were encountered through the examination process. Components were sometimes either missing or key links had dropped out. Plug ins (or lack of them to be more precise) made viewing and sound problematic from time to time when examiners re-visited the site. This too raises the technical capabilities and management of the site which during the examination process is as crucial as there being appropriate structure and spelling or editing and proofing for a text-alone document, or text that is part of the written component of the thesis. In this case, despite the diligence of the author, problems still occurred and because of the compulsory lack of contact (as mentioned above), it was some time before the errors could be rectified, leading to longer examination time and lack of available material to examine. Also, the site itself and its workability depends to some extent on the examiners' technical expertise and the standard of their equipment. An examiner may be competent in a disciplinary field or in an artistic genre, but have little or no technical capability or inadequate technology to use to view the material. These components add yet another dimension of difficulty to an already complicated process of thesis examination in higher degrees.

The next set of challenges will come with the archiving of the thesis. While it's easy enough to turn the text component of the thesis into a format suitable to electronic archiving, how does an interactive website become part of the Electronic Thesis Register? In this case, the creative work was not suitable to burn to portable media because the live links would have been too much to contain on any available media, so it needs to be contained as a website. Other issues such as

where it is hosted and how, programming language and version, total size – perhaps with the imposition of limits – number of pages to be stored and continuing maintenance, still need to be thoroughly explored. Also, when considering how the creative and artistic component is conceptualized it is necessarily different to conceive of something as a CD/DVD or as a website. There are implications about exactly ‘what’ is being created and this affects the outcomes and processes of creative practice. Decisions about whether these types of theses should exist as a snapshot in time to reflect when and where they were created or presented, or whether they should maintain the full interactivity they were intended to represent, are also interesting questions to pose. Essentially it is important that creative and artistic work exists in the form and media which has been selected by the artist, not archived in a form that might ‘suit the library’, as many protocols advise regarding the submission of work for storage in a permanent collection. It presents ongoing challenges to maintain the integrity of artistic work if Universities are serious about accepting creative practice as doctoral and higher degree content.

4. CONTINUING CHALLENGES.

UTS is continuing to support Masters and Doctoral level creative practice. While some Universities like UTS are fairly unspecific about the way non-traditional work is conceived and submitted (eg., Macquarie University, 2003, UNC 2003), some are much more detailed about the process of creation and submission (McGill 2003). Some issues that have been covered in other institutions include the availability of technical resources for reasons of student equity if a thesis must be submitted electronically; the training in, and use of, standardised style sheets and specialized software; presentation format and enforcement of single or preferred formats; and conversion services for theses produced in alternative formats (McGill, 2003). Another issue that has been raised at McGill University in Montreal addresses software obsolescence – what happens to theses produced with a software that may be widespread and popular at one time but obsolete five or ten years from then? Do libraries build in planned updates? If these questions aren’t considered there are long term viability and access issues to permanent electronic collections.

There are at least two other theses in progress in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences that will include interactive web-based components as an integral part of the material to be examined. The creative nature of this work is an integral part of the research and practice nexus and the examination process, not just a technical luxury or electronic embellishment to be accommodated in the storage of the work as part of a collection. Hopefully there will be wider discussion between institutions here and internationally about how to most effectively resolve some of the issues that present themselves as part of research work in this area.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Bronwyn Streader, PhD student in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, UTS, for permission to use a description and extracts of her doctoral work for this paper

5. REFERENCES

Elkins, J. 2004. The Three Configurations of Practice Bases PhD’s. Printed Project. Issue 4.

Streader, B. 2004. Tokyo Indigested. Retrieved September 19, 2005 from <http://www.mypukunui.com/tokyo-indigested/>

Macquarie University. 2003. NTTPolicy, Submission of a non-traditional thesis. Retrieved September 5, 2005 from <http://www.mq.edu.au/mupra/NTTPolicy.pdf>

McGill University, CGPS Working Group on Electronic Dissertations. 2003. Final Report and Recommendations. Retrieved September 5, 2005 from <http://upload.mcgill.ca/gps/cgps0355.pdf>

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC). 2003. Masters Advising Handbook. Retrieved September 5, 2005. from <http://www.jomc.unc.edu/academicprograms/graduate/mastershandbook/thesisoptions.html>

Weisser, C. R. & Walker, J. R. 1997. Electronic Theses and Dissertations: Digitizing Scholarship for its own sake. Journal of Electronic Publishing, Vol 3 Number 2. Retrieved September 6 2005 from <http://www.press.umich.edu/jep/03-02/etd.html>