ABSTRACT

THOROUGHLY MODERN THESES

Exploring the phenomenon\(^1\) of theses with multiple forms of media

Modern technologies have changed the way doctoral candidates create theses and present knowledge. The traditional thesis has evolved to include a range of dynamic components. Inroads made by technologies and multiple forms of media provide for “a dazzling array of research and scholarly possibilities for emerging Ph.D.s” (Lang, 2002, p.681). This activity forms a new research paradigm of research literacies and identities in knowledge production and a unique research epistemology.

In order to create knowledge about such ‘thoroughly modern theses’, this qualitative study explores the experiences of fourteen candidates from Australian universities. Literature scarcely publishes the voice of those who take unconventional approaches to creating their theses, so this explorative study uses phenomenology to seek enlightenment and understanding by asking in what ways candidates’ experiences reveal the phenomenon of media theses. ‘Media theses’ is the term used in this thesis to describe those which include narratives, poetry, multimedia, artworks, etc.

Candidates’ individual accounts are represented in case studies using narrative, verse, prose, participants’ voices, and reflection and insight. The exploration found that in most cases, candidates’ boundary pushing endeavours led to successful outcomes. Some considered their enterprising, courageous and inspirational journeys were ‘life-affirming’. Other candidates encountered challenges which reflected their choice of thesis construction. Primarily, these related to unclear guidelines for using media in theses, finding appropriate supervisors and examiners, justifying the inclusion of media elements to research boards, being misunderstood and accessing technological training and expertise. These circumstances sometimes led to candidates’ feelings of insecurity and isolation, and hindered the development of their theses.

To learn what was occurring in this social research activity from a wider perspective, the study also asks how the experiences of academic staff enhance understanding of the phenomenon of media theses. This phase of the research is an interpretive exploration of ten academic staff members’ experiences, opinions and attitudes. They discussed the qualities of media theses and the new languages they brought to research. They shed light on issues relating to supervision and examination and technological skills development. They offered advice to candidates and discussed their ideas for the future of research. There was often consistency of attitude and consensus that the way of the future involved media theses. However, inconsistencies of thought and an underestimation of what was

possible and of what was occurring could prove to be detrimental for media thesis candidates and the creation of dissertations.

This investigation found that media theses offer more potential for authentic presentation of thesis content. They create the need for amended thesis submission policies and guidelines. They alter candidature and supervisory practices and need specific examination criteria. They also transcend conventional modes of knowledge categories. Based on its evidence, the study suggests advice for candidates and makes recommendations for supervisors, examiners and universities.

This dissertation leads to understanding about candidates’ experiences with their media theses and how academic staff and universities contribute to their support. This exploration should benefit doctoral candidates and supervisors who are involved in creating a media thesis. It should contribute to innovative research practices by providing research communities insight into the phenomenon of theses with multiple forms of media and their impact on knowledge creation.


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Bronte Somerset, EdD, UTS, 2008