

Reflections on building an online resource for doctoral studies in art and design

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Abstract

Doctoral programmes in art and design operate in a considerably different environment than they did only a decade ago. Over this period there has been a steady but consistent expansion in research student numbers, and the debate about the nature and purpose of doctorates generally, has been matched by the debate within the sector about the particularities of the art and design doctorate. One key focus of debate has been research training. This paper reports on one aspect of the Research Training Initiative (RTI) project, which has been running during this period. The paper reflects on the development and re-design of the RTI website as an online resource centre for research students and supervisors, and the response it embodies to the rapidly maturing research environment for doctoral students in art and design.

Introduction

This paper describes and reflects on the latest phase in the Research Training Initiative (RTI) – a long-standing project that has sought to develop and publish research training resources for doctoral students in art and design. The environment in which students undertake research degrees in art and design has changed quite considerably since the project started in 1995. My aim in the paper, therefore, is, first, to briefly set out this changing context; and, second, to explain the thinking behind the project, and how it articulates with the current environment for doctoral research in art and design. Although much of the evidence I have cited here refers specifically to the UK, it is clear that the development of research and research training in art and design is a topic of international debate (Durling and Friedman 2000; Gaede 2002; Pizzocaro 2002). A further theme running through the project is the development of electronic forms of publishing, and the opportunities they offer for providing resources to support doctoral students.

The changing context for research in art and design

Although it is still regarded, rightly, as an emerging research field, research degrees in art and design are no longer the novelty they once were. In the United Kingdom many institutions have increased their number of research students, some quite considerably. For example, according to the data provided by the 2001 UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), one of the largest providers of art and design education, The London Institute, has increased full-time student numbers from 11 in 1996 to 38 in 2001, and part-time student numbers from 4 in 1996 to 45 in 2001 (see <http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/> for all data relating to RAE 2001).

The growing demand for doctoral education in art and design internationally is an important factor, nevertheless, a number of institutions have also made a strategic decision to invest in research degrees by funding research studentships directly. This might be taken as evidence of a strong commitment to the development of research and researchers in the subject. Research degree provision is also seen as a key issue for the future development of the subject area nationally, as was signalled by the 2001 UK RAE art and design panel chair in the subject overview:

The panel noted that in order to ensure the future academic viability of the sector, the research environment and infrastructures for the support of research degree students need to be strengthened and further opportunities for funding made available. (Starszakowna 2001)

The training and support of research students is therefore a key issue. However, doctoral studies in art and design have not developed in a vacuum. Over the past few years considerable effort has been expended across all subject areas to identify the range of transferable skills that one might expect students at research degree level to have acquired (see for example Becher, Henkel and Kogan 1994; Burgess 1994; Collinson 1998). This debate has also begun to take place in design (Durling 2002). As I have discussed the broader research training debate at greater length elsewhere (Newbury 2002), I only wish to make one main point here. It is my contention that there is now a robust framework against which one can judge research training provision (see for example Research Councils' Graduate Schools Programme 2001). There are areas of contestation and debate. Issues have been raised about the applicability of all skills to all students; for example, research career development issues are unlikely to be relevant to the mature student pursuing a PhD out of personal interest, in the way that they are to someone pursuing an academic career (UKCGE

1999: 20). Arguably, the nature of these concerns only confirms the overall validity of the framework at the generic level.

Nevertheless, generic research training frameworks do not in themselves provide a full answer to the question of how to develop doctoral education. There are two issues here. First, the question of how such programmes are implemented in particular subject areas. To talk of generic research skills is to abstract them from the specific contexts in which they are acquired. Second, if research practice is to develop at the subject level, an engagement with the specific ideas, issues and methods with which researchers are working is necessary. There is perhaps a danger in a relatively new field of research such as art and design, that an emphasis on transferable research skills obscures, or is seen to provide an answer to, more intellectually significant and interesting questions about the direction of research in the subject. The UK Council for Graduate Education working party (2001) on research training in the creative and performing arts and design, refer to a “needs-based” approach. In relation to a menu of generic research skills this is welcome, but if we see research education as one means by which the subject moves forward, it begs the question of who is defining what is needed and how?

It is in this context that the website project, described in the rest of this paper, seeks to make a contribution, not by providing simple answers, but by providing a focus for thinking about generic research skills training in the subject context, and a forum for publication.

A brief history of the Research Training Initiative

The Research Training Initiative project was initiated in 1995 as a response to the needs of the emerging community of research students in art and design. It has developed and published research training resources for research students and supervisors, not just at its host institution, but also nationally and internationally. In 1998, we set up the original RTI website, which included case studies of completed research degree projects, guidance on literature and information searching, links to electronic resources, as well as electronic versions of the research guides published in 1996, and now out of print (Nankivell and Newbury 1999; Newbury 1999).

On a number of measures the website can be counted a success. The database of registered users numbered well over a thousand, and the site was accessed by researchers in South Africa, South America, and the Far East, as well as Europe and the US. Nevertheless, since the website first went online a lot of things have changed, both in art and design research, and in the world of electronic publishing. By 2001, it was clear that the site was in need of a radical overhaul. Some of the ideas that had seemed important in the initial website, such as introducing researchers to basic internet research skills, were rapidly becoming redundant at postgraduate level. Other ideas had become unrealistic. For example, when reviewing the site it no longer seemed feasible, as it had done three years earlier, to provide a listing of links to websites useful to researchers. The responsibility for the latter now seemed more sensibly placed within the realm of electronic library services, for generic resources, and with individual research students, for specialist resources on their topics.

The key aims of the project, however, remain important:

- To facilitate the sharing of information about research training and doctoral programmes in art and design
- To assist students conducting doctoral research both through the direct provision of resources and through linking to resources already available via the web.
- To foster a community of research students and supervisors
- To stimulate debate about the practice of research and research training in art and design

It was these aims, and what we had learnt from several years of operating the original website that we took forward into the re-development of the site. The changes were much more than cosmetic, and are intended as a response to the changing environment for doctoral education that I have outlined. We also sought to exploit the opportunities offered by electronic publishing.

Rationale

In a recent survey of research training provision in art and design in the UK, 45% of responding institutions had fewer than 11 research students (UKCGE 2001: 19). Although the sector has seen an increase in doctoral students over recent years there are still comparatively small numbers of research students in many institutions. Setting aside the debates about what constitutes a sufficient critical mass of research students, in this context, networking and sharing good practice across institutions offers some important benefits. While it would be a mistake to think they are anything approaching a complete answer, web-based resources arguably have an important role to play in supporting doctoral students. A key aim of the RTI website, therefore, is to provide research training resources, and to share information about doctoral programmes nationally and internationally.

The design of the site is also informed by the following ideas. First, that unlike the previous version it should seek to draw in more contributions from outside of the project. The site is intended as a vehicle for publishing reviews, case studies, and papers that reflect the breadth of art and design research. Importantly, we see research students, as well as more experienced researchers, as potential contributors. Second, we recognise that the success of electronic publishing depends on regularly updated content; the intention of the model we have adopted is to make this a realistic possibility. Third, that the site should make effective use of visual material. To this end the site now incorporates video clips and still images. Through the archiving of material, the site has some features of the kind of document delivery system that is becoming a dominant model in academic electronic publishing, but it is also our intention to offer online a rich combination of text and visual material.

Perhaps most important, however, is the aim that the website should contribute to the development of the research methods curriculum at the level of the subject. As I have argued, the robust framework for generic research skills that is now available means that our attention can shift to the development and contextualisation of research skills and approaches within the subject field.

An online resource centre

The website is divided into three main sections:

- The Research Training Resource Centre
- Research Degree Case Studies
- Research Issues in Art, Design and Media

Research Training Resource Centre

This part of the website brings together a range of resources that will be useful to new and potential research students, as well as those already embarked on their studies.

Resource reviews

Reviews of new books, websites and conferences relevant to research training in art and design. In addition to providing students with information on new literature this section is also intended as an opportunity for contributions *from* research students, providing an opportunity to develop academic writing skills and experience, and fostering active involvement in a research environment.

Database of research training and doctoral programmes in art and design

The site invites those who run research training courses and/or doctoral programmes in art and design to enter brief details into an online database. Details entered into the database are then available on-screen for users to view. If it is successful, this facility will serve two purposes: first, it will enable research students (and potential students) and supervisors to find out about existing research training and doctoral programmes; second, it will also provide a means of tracking the provision of research training as it develops.

Art and design research bibliography

The debates around research training and research in art and design have generated a considerable literature in recent years. The site contains an extensive bibliography on these subjects, which we aim to update periodically. Although this may be of less interest to research students, it will be valuable for supervisors. For new students the website provides a short reading list on studying for a research degree.

Research Training Archive

One of the virtues of internet publishing is the ease of electronic archiving. The website therefore has an electronic archive of research guides and published papers. Informal feedback on the original site suggested that although we considered some of the material to be out of date, there were still some visitors to the site making use of it. We therefore decided to archive some parts of the original website alongside the original printed research guides and published papers generated by the project.

In addition to these main components, the Resource Centre also contains links to electronic journals. Although we dropped the idea from the previous version of providing an extensive list of links to relevant web-based resources, the growth in the number of online journals was something we felt able to capture and make available to researchers using the site.

Research Degree Case studies

The publication of research degree case studies has been a consistent feature of the RTI project. The rationale for this lies in the emerging nature of art and design as a research field. Doctoral students often have access to very few examples of completed PhDs; in some institutions there are

literally only a handful of these available in the library. While this is less true now than it was a few years ago, there is still in our view a valid argument for making case examples accessible in this way. This view is endorsed by the recent report of the UKCGE working party on research training in the sector, which states that “the working group sees value in the assembling of a resource of Creative and Performing Arts and Design research exemplars and models” (UKCGE 2001: 45).

The website now contains 21 case examples of completed research degrees dating from 1988 to 2002. The case studies are not offered as examples of best practice to be followed, but simply as real examples of how particular projects have been structured. Ideally these should provide a basis for critical reflection and discussion amongst students and supervisors. Where students have been willing to compose post-PhD reflections on the process these provide an additional insight into the experience of research degree study.

Research Issues in Art, Design and Media (RIADM)

The development of dialogue and debate about how research is done in art and design, and related fields, is important to the development of the research education curriculum. RIADM is intended as a forum for the publication of methodological papers, discussions of current topics in research, as well as position papers. The emphasis is on research taking place in art, design and media contexts and the distinctive issues this raises rather than any a priori commitment to the distinctiveness of research in art, design, media itself. It was launched in 2001 as a separate website, which has now been integrated into the new RTI website format. Although not a full journal, it embodies a model of electronic publishing that we believe will be useful to researchers in these related fields. We also want to encourage research students to submit papers.



Figure 1: The new Research Training Initiative website (<http://www.biad.uce.ac.uk/research/rti/>)

At the time of writing the website has just gone online, and we are beginning a process of testing

and evaluation, which will involve feedback from students and supervisors, in addition to expert review of the site. However, it will only be over the medium term that we will really be able to assess whether or not we have achieved our aims. A key test for this will be the extent to which research students and supervisors do not just visit the site, but actually begin to see it as an important part of their research environment, and wish to contribute content to the site themselves.

Conclusion

What do research students need to know? This question underlies any attempt to construct a research training programme. As I stated earlier, I think the generic research skills frameworks now established provide a partial answer, but only a partial answer. Beyond this, in art and design at least, there are considerable differences of opinion. Some commentators draw ever wider circles in terms of potentially relevant research perspectives and methods, rightly noting that the context for design knowledge can encompass everything from ergonomics and product semantics to ecology and world history (Friedman 2000: 10). Others have argued for a stress on the development of art and design specific methods (Gray and Pirie 1995). I want to argue against both of these approaches.

The former, whilst admirable in its desire to map the potential connections of design research to other fields of knowledge, does not provide a position from which to develop the research curriculum. Whilst broad reading and understanding of the development of human knowledge across many fields is welcome, students cannot be expected to master all of the possible approaches prior to embarking on a research study. The latter I suggest presents us with a false choice between the creation of field-specific art/design research methods and the imposition of 'alien' methods from outside of the discipline. This is to mistake research for a more technical process than it really is; the tools and techniques of research do not come ready made. Doing research *always* involves the design, rather than merely the implementation, of research methods for the particular study at hand.

There is as yet no clear consensus on what should be included and what excluded from the research methods curriculum in art and design. This is perhaps unsurprising. Art and design is not a research discipline like physics or history, it is more like education, an area of practice and study, which is methodologically open. The interdisciplinary engagements particular researchers or groups of researchers choose to make will play an important role in shaping the research methods agenda.

What is important at this point therefore is the development of opportunities for dialogue and exchange between active researchers and research students in the subject area. It is in this respect, by providing a focus for publication, dialogue and exchange, that the RTI project can make a useful contribution to the development of research education and training in art and design. And it is through the internet that we can hope to support as wide a constituency of doctoral students as possible.

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