

Indigenous and queer *ways of knowing* versus the colonial heritage and legacy of “the thesis”

Report

Introduction - what is the report about and where does your positionality sit within the review?

In this document I will reflect back on my PhD thesis (and particularly the first chapter of it) and in what way it embodies my practice, research and remit of advancement of inclusive practices within a) the context of higher education, as well as b) within the domain of “digital innovation” and c) the politics of research. Being a person with multiple marginal identity factors myself (visible and invisible) this comes from a perspective of embodied knowledge, peer knowledge as well as more conventional forms of (academic) knowing.

Whilst the normalizing affordances of HE have been covered in-depth in the unit and further research (see. Diversity, Employability prospects, Race and Grade correlation, Disability, Faith, ...) I have further problematized this with 1) the particular difficulties of innovation, investment and disruption-driven values which are frequently embraced within tech-innovation; and 2) the challenging and biased practices within contemporary research culture(s) such as publish-or-perish, 3) the pressures of REF/TEF/KEF, funding-pressures, and 4) overall challenging workloads across the sector.

Being suspended at the intersection of all these elements and holding an intersectional identity therein, my work and my lens seem to be a valuable position to write from and reflect through.

Context – which course/department are you engaged with and why would this intervention be an important one?

UAL and therein CCI consider themselves to be an activist and actively anti-racist institution, spearheading the movement to decolonize and more than that, be a leader in inclusive learning.

The course I am teaching on (MA Internet Equalities) as well as Shades of Noir and the Decolonizing Arts Institute are listed on the UAL websites as examples how this commitment is met.

At the same time, reflecting critically-pedagogically on this, I can't but consider my positionality when juxtaposing these engagements with the writings of Tuck and Young (2012) or other scholars who expressed their concerns about Institutions (and especially universities, [w]estern ones, [b]ritish ones(!)) to ever be able to do this, and challenging whether they should.

My intervention explicitly explores this space of hesitance; a radical counterpoint to the otherwise forward-oriented thinking and values that are otherwise cherished and celebrated within tech and innovation.

Ambivalence and nuance,
hesitant optimism and well-justified mistrust, then,
are the foundation of my work;
and at the same time
my thesis and practice explore
how to nonetheless continue to remain
productive-whilst-within...
without becoming
complicit-or-culled.

Non-participation in technology (or capitalism) are illusionary ideals (cf Braidotti) – and in absence of any alternative, we are left with the challenges of how to make amends with the 'realpolitische' limitations of this paradox we find ourselves in.

Inclusive learning theory - why is your work important within the Academy?

My work/artefact is my PhD thesis (Chapter1) which is an externalization of the problematic space that opens up at the intersection of marginalization, research, digital technologies and the doctoral ritual.

I explore how the PhD process is badly fit, or outright fully unsuitable to accommodate forms of knowledge and experiences that go beyond a narrow set of methods that are quantitative/observational. These generally unchallenged assumptions reify narrow forms of empiricism (especially within the computing “sciences”). Yet, the inception and politics of digital innovation includes more than empirical (and measurable) dimensions: alternative knowledges such as dis/ability, madness, indigenous epistemologies, artistic practice, trauma, spirituality, tacit knowledge, ancestry and more.

Knowledge-bearers who enter the academy with perspectives that deviate from the default then either need to expend energies to re-learn and mimic/echo the narratives and epistemes of their ~~white~~ default peers; or alternatively expend large amounts of additional energies to legitimize their perspective, experiences, standpoints, and methods. Either systematically and inherently disadvantages individuals holding subaltern knowledges/experiences when trying to “make it” within the academy.

The realization of this systematic epistemic injustice meant for my professional context that I dedicated my full research career to exploring/mitigating/rectifying this injustice.

Reflection - what were the considerations as to your process of deciding on the artefact and a description of the artefact?

Having just completed my PhD, I was keen to turn my research into a transformative tool of activism as it was intended. Striving to create a conceptual space within computing, in which the conditions for epistemic pluralism can be created within the doctoral ritual is at the core mission of my work. Being keenly aware of the somewhat narrow episto-methodological framework and extremely regrettable lack of diversity in much of tech innovation, this artefact seemed like a worthwhile study endeavour/object.

It seemed like a sensible example of me demonstrating keen awareness of critical pedagogical practice and reflexive research methods deployment in a manner that seems very reconcilable with the course contents of the Unit. Whilst the course emphasized Freire and hooks, the theorists I engaged with were more recent and more Indigeneity-, madness- queer- and epistemology-focused.

In this sense I seek to transfer the learnings from the class into my own domain of relevance, that being epistemic pluralism into the context of this unit.

I am excited to have the chance to reflect on the further potentials for of my work (beyond granting me the privileges of my new degree) and rather exclusively focus how my labour can be *of service* rather than accumulation.

Action - How would this artefact be used/has/would be used and what does this mean to your practices?

My text explicitly strives to be more-than-a-thesis. Instead I want my thesis to be a self-containing artefact that merely through its existence makes a political change to the PhD process of future doctorands. The work does not only make a valid case for necessity and imperative of epistemic pluralism and inclusive research methodology driven by embodiment, madness, queerness, Blackness/Indigeneity/Ethnicity, heritage, trauma, gender, dis/ability and more - ; the thesis makes the argument in a performative manner. It does not “reason” with the reader – it demonstrates what such a thesis may bring forward and what unbridled knowing may look and feel like.

This thesis wants to be a precedent.

It is an institutional artefact that disrupts the institution and creates space for marginal ways of knowing to assert their uniqueness and value.

Thus, by being admitted as a valid thesis, I create a precedent for other supervisors and PhD students to put forward to their gatekeepers – and they can utilize my writings to legitimize their own.

The value of my work – to me – is not primarily in the contents of the text, but above-all in its existence.

My work is grounded in intersectional ways of knowing and counters narratives of decontextualized facts and assumptions of objectivity. The artefact questions the assumptions of equality and diversity within technology education and exposes the myth of meritocracy. The artefact explores the political affordances of art and the creative space as a means to foster inclusivity and non-normative knowing.

My work opens up the gates for other marginal forms of knowing and how they are important and valuable assets to academia, and it supports anybody who may want to rely on my work to assertively commodify their biography/positionality as valid and meaningful methodology – if they deem this necessary.

Evaluation of your process – how successful was it, what you learned and how would/could you do things differently?

Within a narrow but clear remit I consider my artefact to have had its desired effect (and will continue to do so for the immediate and intermediate future, until my research is outdated). It slowly but effectively makes a strong case for epistemic pluralism and the legitimacy of more-than-rational ways of knowing and the need to admit these in the innovation and computing sciences, cybersecurity and any aspects of digital innovation. Given the wide reach of these technologies, and the values they carry along, it is essential to take into account the pluralism of destinations, lives, cultures, circumstances and biographies that these technologies will affect.

I have been told that my work has been used by supervisors to transform the writings of their own PhD students. I have been told that PhD students feel invigorated by my work and transformed in their writing and research style to make space for their own epistemes and become explicit about the need to broaden the intellectual landscape of digital innovation.

As far as the aims I had in mind for a simple PhD thesis, I believe that the impact I sought is on a positive track. With the wisdom of hindsight and considering how to transform my work to make it better, - I think I would have encouraged myself to work less hard; finish sooner and accept to produce a lower-quality piece of work, abandon perfectionism; or rather – not engage in the process at all.

A PhD thesis is no small feat, but it is also not a world-changing object. Yet, it is the best I could do to ameliorate a situation I was and remain passionate about – and continue to strive to ameliorate; even if this happens at personal expense, exhaustion and exasperation.

Conclusion - what are your key findings, observations and reflections regarding this process and your practices?

My colleagues appreciated my work. I didn't write it for them. I didn't even necessarily write it for myself; I wrote it for people *like me*. It is the work that I hoped to find when I started.

Despite my own marginal identity factors, I am aware that I also hold power, privilege and opportunities that other haven't. Despite these assets, - having looked around my faculty - , the departments, seminar rooms, classrooms, and reading lists looked "mighty white (et al)". How much privilege must one occupy to compensate for queerness, madness, trans*, dis/ability, BAMEness, etc when they occur at once.

The (unspoken) "promise" of academia is one that argument and rigour ought to determine success; not happenstance and capital(s). Yet, in reality, the praxis could hardly be further from the truth.

When then, after the death of my mum I realized that writing her Eulogy was something I was able to complete without much effort, and the crafting of the thesis was -by comparison- a mammoth task,

I lost my patience with "the thesis" and I no longer want to accept its fundamental brokenness.

In this, my artefact, practice, and pedagogy for my research students, seeks to support them in their endeavors, and defend them, create a space of protection for them, as to they then can let their work be free; unbridled by outdated imaginations of rigor that delegitimize those candidates holding those kind of knowledges that we are desperately lacking in the space of digital innovation and overall Academia.

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