

# Slaying The Beast: Writing, Learning, Experiencing in A Post-Dissertation World

## *Identifying The Beast*

The DISSERTATION looms large in the experiences of undergraduates on design courses. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that design students understandably find the task of producing an extended piece of research-led writing daunting; however, fear, dread and dismay are also common responses that [this author has/ have](#) regularly encountered when working with final year students – the dissertation is to be endured, a rite of passage, a hoop one must jump through in order to gain the full honours award.

Yet design students must write; writing communicates, writing explores, writing conceptualizes, writing contextualizes, writing empowers. Writing imparts real transferrable skills and, as Erik Borg suggests, for students writing around art and design-led themes digital technologies mean that *'the easy ability to integrate graphic elements with text has changed the nature of writing in almost every area'* (Borg 2012 [p.170](#)). So there is a continuing rationale for design students to write in terms of developing their own critical and professional skills and, further, the ability to synthesize text and image in fluid and creative ways offers approaches to writing that lie close to the studio experience and, perhaps more instinctive and familiar modes of creative production.

Richard Winter succinctly lays out what he sees as the problems of formal academic writing for student learning – that such projects are deadlined towards the latter stages of study; that they only highlight difficulties after the event; that students tend to frame work around subjects they already feel familiar with; the inherently 'alien' style of academic writing; the unrealistic demand that students write as if 'masters' of a topic (Winter 2003; [see also English 2011](#)). The above accurately reflect the problems [this author has/ have](#) encountered when working with fashion, textiles and footwear design students on their final year dissertation and which have in turn led to a complete re-think of how to integrate text-based learning into practice-led study.

This paper will map out how and why new modes of engaging with research and writing have been developed for students studying fashion, textiles and footwear design at the University of Northampton and how this has led to the removal of the set piece, long-form dissertation from the level 6 award map.

## *Taking Aim*

The journey that has led to the removal of the dissertation from the fashion, textiles and footwear undergraduate programmes at the University of Northampton began in a rather uncoordinated series of actions that were attempts to introduce an element of choice into those areas of study. In 2007 it was decided to give final year students options in terms of their 'theory' pathways on entry to level 6. From that start point a simple two route pathway model was devised consisting of an 'Option A,' forty credit, ten thousand-word dissertation, or, an 'Option B', twenty credit, five thousand-word extended essay, with a further twenty credits delivered through a series of short professional practice tasks. The removal of the 'D' word in the second option and its replacement with the phrase *'extended essay'* was meant to help demystify the idea of a research-led, independently written assignment. This can now be viewed as our first attempt to create a dissertation-free

learning environment for undergraduates on the fashion, textiles, footwear and accessories programmes at the University of Northampton.

With some minor tweaking and the use of the word 'journal' instead of 'extended essay' to describe the five thousand-word text, the amended A and B option pathways were run out over the next six years. However, this element of choice in the final year programmes began to throw up successive and, in the end, insurmountable problems, problems that would eventually lead to the total removal of the long-form dissertation in this subject area.

### ***The Misery of Choice***

A point of concern that quickly began to emerge was the practical application of 'choice' when students decided which route to follow. The key driver for developing a two-option award map was to create modules that did not work against a student's interests, a poor dissertation, heavily laden with forty credits, had/has the very real potential to bring down an otherwise good degree award. So the thinking behind the twenty-credit option, with a lighter writing load and weighting, would be that those students who were less confident in this area of study would have an improved chance of gaining a good award. The professional practice elements within the Option B pathway were intended to help prepare students in terms of workplace skills and knowledge. The forty-credit pathway, as it was envisaged, would attract those students who specifically wanted to develop research skills and who may be considering further post-graduate study – though neither pathway was meant to be rigid and/or deterministic in any way, rather they were attempts to be sympathetic to a variety of student needs.

It became apparent that students were agonizing over choices and approaching their options in completely unforeseen ways. Instead of removing unnecessary stress for some students (many viewed the dissertation in terms of an incubus, a nightmarish part of their final year) the options merely replaced one point of anguish with another. Despite attempts to brief and prepare each ascending cohort regarding their final year choices we were faced with students who, come September, could not decide which way to jump. In some cases, this indecision was immobilizing to the point of stasis; the fear of making the 'wrong' choice and the misery this then caused was something completely unforeseen when the pathway options were devised. A lesson from this is not to assume students are informed and confident consumers of educational product, but rather that study constantly presents the new, the unknown, the unforeseen, and in what for students is a very high stakes environment – such moments are often negotiated with a 'win or lose' shake of the dice; a snakes and ladders response only heightened by student loan anxiety.

The new lightly weighted theory pathway threw up other problems too and one that should have been recognized from the outset was the impact of poorly written and presented documentation. Often a student would choose the long-form dissertation when the Option B pathway would clearly have benefitted their studies. When discussing the options students would regularly allude to the fact that the module literature presented, as they read it, a myriad of sub-tasks and outcomes to complete, whereas the long-form dissertation appeared to be a simpler route – *'I only have one thing to do if I take this option'* became a prevailing mindset. From this we learnt two obvious lessons; first, a document overhaul and re-write was needed, and second there had to be a rationalization of tasks in the accompanying professional practice elements - piling on too many small elements of study in the hope that they somehow add up to a rigorous programme had resulted in further confusion.

### ***To B or Not to B***

The reorganization of the final year theory programme was producing a series of unexpected student responses and a gap in perception quickly became evident. It was felt that the changes would create a more rational and inclusive learning experience, one in which an element of *choice* would confer a greater sense of ownership and that the pathway options were more in keeping with a modern curriculum and student expectations. However, it appeared that for some students the pathway choices presented them with uncertainties and potential pitfalls that were troubling and/or a distraction. This was made evident in a belief that gained traction with alarming rapidity around the perceived status of the long-form dissertation.

It was felt a good balance in terms of the number of students on each pathway would be approximately one third taking the long-form Option A and two thirds the more practice-led Option B. This was based on an assumption that in any given cohort the upper percentile in terms of grade histories would opt for the long-form dissertation – in retrospect it now seems hopelessly naïve to have put faith in an ill-defined process of self-selection. In fact, year on year far larger numbers of students than anticipated opted for the long-form dissertation route and in truth some of these subsequently struggled to produce good quality work. As staff we were frustrated, concerned and somewhat confused; why weren't students behaving as we hoped and making, as we saw it, the rational choices we felt they should? This was a real problem with the two-pathway model, contrary to all advice and guidance students were making what seemed to us to be 'irrational' decisions with regard their options. Or were they?

What we had not factored into our thinking was that many students perceived the traditional 10,000-word dissertation as being somehow superior in status to the shorter form option and thus choosing what they felt as the 'lesser' pathway was for many not an option at all. The studio rumour mill further fueled this perception and significant myths began to accrue around the dissertation:

- One could not apply to the RCA without having completed a 10,000-word dissertation
- One could not progress onto an MA without completing a 10,000-word dissertation
- One could not gain a post graduate teaching qualification without having first completed a 10,000-word undergraduate dissertation
- The 10,000-word dissertation was for 'elite' students - therefore Option B was viewed by many as the 'loser's' option

On a personal note these matters came to a head with a distressing telephone call from a very concerned parent who could not understand why their daughter was not taking the long-form dissertation option and was this 'because she wasn't good enough?'

It seemed as if despite all efforts to create a varied, responsive, modernistic third year theory programme, one that sought to break away, in part, from the traditions and confines of the set-piece 10,000-word dissertation, we were creating more problems than we were solving.

### ***Taking Down the Beast***

And so to 2015 and after conversations with our students, External Examiners, the staff on the fashion, textiles and footwear course and with colleagues from other schools within the University of Northampton we are about to begin the next academic year without a formal dissertation. The former Option B, re-written, re-jigged, re-focused, is now simply the only pathway for our students. After six years of trial and error we have taken the plunge, re-calibrated our award map and confined the dissertation to history.

So what do students now receive and how is this an improvement on what had gone before?

The first and perhaps most significant outcome has not been to simply take the dissertation off the award map, but to remove the uncertainty that 'choice' had delivered. As discussed earlier the provision of options, from our perspective, was seen as a way that new dimensions and possibilities could be brought to a particular strand of third year study. Further, that the action of 'choosing' in itself underlined a sense of democracy and ownership, it was felt, for the student. What in fact the pathway choices delivered was uncertainty and a sense that one could make a 'wrong choice' and therefore compromise all that had been achieved on the way to gaining an honours award. It was also raised that if a student felt they had made a wrong choice and that their studies had then been in some way compromised by that decision, the onus would fall on teaching staff and the advice, or not, that student had been given regarding their options. Thankfully that did not come [to](#) pass, but in an increasingly litigious HE sector this was/is a very real concern.

Second, we have reduced the word count for the journal to 3,000 words and ask that students use the text to write-up the research that underpins their degree show work/collections. Now the text has a very explicit role in the final year and is not just a word count that has to be achieved, but is a part of a fully blended study programme that links theory with practice. As already discussed [Richard Winter](#) identified some of the problems of formal academic writing and how those were echoed in our own dissertation programme, now, by contrast, the student is responding to a broader landscape of research that is personal/pertinent [to](#) their work and interests. Also the text is being 'built' alongside the studio work they are engaged in and thus is not deadlined at the end of the process, but in fact is a snapshot of the process. Finally, the closeness of the research and investigation to the student's own practice gives the confidence to explore and explain in their own words and to resist what Winter sees as the temptation to 'write as if masters of a topic' ([Winter, The Guardian 10th June 2003](#)).

Thirdly, and building on Erik Borg's *Writing Differently in Art and Design: Innovative Approaches to Writing Tasks*, we have re-constituted the professional practice elements (the other 20 credits in the old Option B pathway) and built these around tasks that link together in a more cohesive manner whilst still offering profession-based skills and experiences. Here the onus has been on using digital technologies to blend image and text together in:

- a weekly blog that asks students to reflect on key themes and approaches delivered over the course of a twelve-week lecture/seminar programme
- the production of a 'glossy' publication that introduces the student, their research interests and their work – this is intended to be part of the industry-interview portfolio of work a student leaves the course with

Both of the above elements of study require students to think, read, identify, research and, crucially, write, but in ways that are more natural, more instinctive, more portfolio-based and more appropriate for the twenty first century design graduate.

## **Conclusion** *Burying the Beast*

Dissatisfaction from both students and staff with the formal dissertation had grown over many years on the fashion, textiles and footwear undergraduate programmes at the University of Northampton and we were faced with two options; carry on as before and try to reinforce belief in this stalwart of HE teaching and learning, or, re-think entirely our approaches to this area of study. The initial attempts, those first faltering steps, though well intentioned and thought through to the best of our then available knowledge, did not work – the variety of seemingly unconnected tasks, asking students to make informed choices at a particularly fraught stage in their studies and an incoherent module programme all served to undermine everyone's best efforts and intentions. The removal of the dissertation altogether and its replacement with a multi-stranded, graduate-facing module that requires students to reflect on their own interests and practice within the framework of a series of short, sharp and applied tasks, appears to be both popular and successful. The depressive stress cloud that hangs over many students all the way through to the dissertation hand-in date has now dissipated – there is a palpable sense of relief amongst final year students on our fashion, textiles and footwear programmes. As we move forward the challenge now is to fully utilize this moment and seek to show design students the personal and professional benefits of writing and engaging with text-led learning. Whilst the appropriation of the formal dissertation within art and design education was essential to the gaining of degree status in our subject areas, its usefulness may now have passed and we should face the future confident that practice-led study can start shaping new and exciting ways to engage with research and writing.

## **Coda** *Looking Back on the Quest*

The events described above occurred three years ago, indeed an entire fashion/textiles/footwear design intake have now progressed and are themselves completing their final year studies without the dissertation awaiting them. [Design, Context, Communication](#), The module that has replaced the former dissertation project, [Design, Context, Communication](#) carries a 40 credit weighting and continues to evolve. Students are now required to produce a variety of researched and written responses; from the objectivity of the considered, research-led 3,000-word reflective essay, to shorter, 'snappier' pieces of text that explore influences, motivations and aspirations. Also students are creatively synthesizing word and image through the maintenance of a blog journal, that records immediate responses to research processes, and through the production of their own 'glossy' brochure – here visual research is allowed to dominate and the student can now support imagery with word; something that appears to have a liberating effect on our students. The production of the brochure necessitates the use of design and layout software packages and so furthering the range of experiences, both practical and theoretical, a final year student ~~s now~~ negotiates as they complete their studies. They now leave not with a bound, gold embossed 'book', the old signifier of the achievement of honours, but a self-produced introduction to themselves and their practice – a truly functioning commodity!

Finally, the removal of the formal 10,000-word dissertation has encouraged us as a teaching team to take on a far more flexible approach to what theoretical engagement with design practice can actually look like. It has allowed us to open up all sorts of possibilities, approaches and outcomes that students may now explore in order to achieve their full potential.

## **References**

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