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EDITORIAL: THE PHD THESIS AS A VIRTUAL GUEST HOUSE

PhD theses. Who reads them? Within UK nursing, the answer is: hardly anybody, save a few PhD supervisors, students and enamoured academics. Since the millenium, the Royal College of Nursing's Steinberg Collection of over 1000 hard bound theses has seen around 250-300 episodes of access each year. This low level of thesis usage is also characteristic of university libraries in the UK (Copeland and Penman 2004), where processes for accessing these tombstone-like tomes are often tortuous.

However, libraries throughout the world are increasingly making electronically formatted theses (e-theses) freely accessible on-line via web based Institutional Repositories (Copeland et al 2005). This offers an opportunity to transform PhD access and use. North America, Australia, Sweden, Germany and the UK have been in the vanguard of development. Following a slow start, UK nursing is gradually waking up to this opportunity. At time of writing, within Scotland, there are five nursing PhD theses available electronically. This article draws on recent experience of actively disseminating a new nursing PhD electronically, and on many nights spent in guest houses¹ during academic research work.

To make this conjunction more explicit: it is possible to view the PhD thesis as a guest house. Specifically, the "traditional" hard-bound PhD thesis can be seen as a large, dark, one bedroom guest house located in an exclusive area. The ardent academic suitor who wishes to use it as a base for exploring the local cognate area first has to negotiate the briars of the borrowing procedures. Then, with luck, the assignation can take place and the pale sleeping beauty within will be brought to life again by the light of curious eyes and the warm touch of a hand. Less happily, it may be that no life is left within.

Either way, the combination of the world wide web and the e-thesis is transforming this process. In Australia there is a suburban sport known as "sticky beaking" where aspirant house owners and nosey parkers regularly go to view houses that are on the market. It is now possible and productive for those with an interest in research to do the same with nursing e-theses. With a click or two of the mouse you can be at, then in, your chosen virtual guest house.

So what are you likely to find there? At present, these nursing constructions are either new-build or refurbished intellectual property, but most recycle the structure, format and content of the "traditional" nursing PhD (i.e. chaptered words leavened with tables and illustrations). In order to take a fresh look at the nursing thesis as we know it, we can use the virtual guest house analogy. Come along now for a "sticky beak".

A virtual tour using the guest house analogy

The abstract is the doorway to the thesis, but in nursing (and other disciplines) this front door is usually small, formal in aspect, and seldom inviting. After a deep breath, we can step into the hallway. The introduction to the thesis is crucial for giving orientation and setting the atmosphere. A warm confident greeting for the reader and turning on a few lights is always good in Chapter 1. If, like the examining inspectors, we are interested in foundations, bricks and methodological mortar we are sometimes invited to view these next in the methods chapter.

Perhaps more often we are initially led through for the time honoured ritual of literature reviewing. This chapter can be seen as the kitchen-diner or the toilet of the thesis. Often it seems to involve moving quickly between both.

In the best guest houses we are invited into the kitchen to dine. The host first explains the necessary ingredients, and why and how they were selected. After a look at the recipe book, something appetising, digestible and sustaining is then synthesised before our very eyes. A bit of flair and garnish will yield bonus stars.

Unfortunately, more often the host is preoccupied with the ingredients to such an extent that he/she labours endlessly only to produce an agglutinated lump. For the visiting guest, this inevitably entails time in the toilet of the thesis. For the exhausted host, there is often little energy left to invest in the production of further courses. This tendency for the literature review to become dysfunctional and disabling, especially in relation to later theory generation, has been highlighted by Parahoo (2005).

Variants on the above experience also occur. In one scenario the reader-as-guest is presented with a dish made up of re-heated, pre-cooked ingredients. Although often sourced from reputable systematic reviewers, these ready-meals are seldom enough in themselves to sustain a prolonged stay.

Usually it is a relief to be led along to the sitting room that is the results/findings chapter. Often our host will point us in the right direction and leave us with the remote control to view this chapter as desired. On a good evening the rewind feature can be enjoyed, but fast forwarding is often hard to resist.

After this the best hosts lead us upstairs to a room on a higher level, with views out over the surrounding area. The best discussions involve the host explaining the relationship between where we are now and what we can now see outside. Ideally we are asked to think again about why we have come here and what we have brought with us. At this point the astute host will leave us in the upstairs bedroom to ponder on these thoughts.

Sometimes, unfortunately, we never get up there. The host has gone back to the ingredients and recipe book but is slumped asleep in the kitchen. We close the door quietly on the discussion chapter and make the best of the ground floor sofa.

No matter how the stay has been, it is always a joy to see morning light falling on the face of the last chapter. Our five star host leads us up, beyond, to the very top storey where we enjoy an energising concluding meal while taking in new enlightened vistas. We resolve to return here soon and to tell others. Alternatively, our Level 1 host strikes up a breezy morning discussion while leading us out to the decking at the back for a final fry up of the left-overs.

What improvements can e-thesis developments offer?

And so, our tour concludes. As we emerge blinking into the sunlight, what do we take with us? And how will the clicking mouse change things?

Firstly, it can be argued that every PhD and every guest house is a story. In this analogy, a story needs storeys. If you find yourself visiting a bungalow, click away again. Too many nursing PhD's struggle to get to the stage where critical and creative thinking combine to produce new knowledge, especially substantive theory.

As highlighted above, the way the traditional PhD is often approached seems to sap creative energy well before the end of the thesis. In this regard, the e-thesis may have much to offer. More creative ways of presenting may lighten the process. For instance, incorporation of a succinct video clip of an interview or a physiological process may say more than thousands of words. This could have benefits for the writer/creator/host and the reader/visitor. Indeed the e-thesis format has the potential to be more welcoming and to invite more engagement than the traditional PhD format. In turn this should attract a more diverse visitor profile.

However, it is not only the Doctor of Philosophy degree which may produce bed and breakfast bungalows or trailer parks. As Kirkman et al (2007) warn, the rise of professional and taught doctorates carry risks as well as opportunities. One of the risks is that the thesis part of such doctorates does not afford enough scope and stimulus to encourage the production of new higher level knowledge (see Ellis 2005).

A second key point that has become much more tangible through the process of disseminating an e-thesis is that easy access makes standards of final output much more visible and public. While the International Network for Doctoral Education in Nursing has published criteria for the quality of doctoral programs and their *processes* (Kim, McKenna & Ketefian 2006), comparison of PhD *outputs* within nursing have received less attention. Returning to the guest house analogy, in effect local and national/international inspectors combine at examination to quality assure such output at a certain level. However, as many PhD examiners will testify, the level is often anything but certain or clearly articulated by the host institution. The Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen has tried to address this problem in recent years with criteria that span all disciplines (<http://www.rgu.ac.uk/research/degrees/page.cfm?pge=27387>).

Although many caveats will be raised about comparisons between and across disciplines, the advent of the e-thesis makes such comparisons inevitable. In this web-enabled prospectus, outputs from the newer universities will take their place alongside those from longer established institutions. This development is to be welcomed for the learning potential that it can offer for all parties. Exemplars may be very helpful for clinical nurses choosing their doctorate (see Jolley 2007). Indeed the web medium can do away with the “one visitor – one bedroom at a time” requirement of traditional PhD borrowing, so that many visitors can browse, stay and even talk to each other about what they are finding.

In extending this welcome, however, one must be mindful of the cautionary words of that doyen of all hosts, Basil Fawlty, the dysfunctional hotel manager in the BBC series *Fawlty Towers*. When, after leading his guest to the upstairs bedroom of his establishment, Fawlty is confronted by a complaint about the nature of the view, he helpfully points out: “*That is Torquay, madam... ..May I ask what you were expecting to see out of a Torquay hotel bedroom window? The Sydney Opera House? The hanging gardens of Babylon? Herds of wildebeest sweeping majestically... (etc)...*”

With this in mind, and to give an example of one approach to framing and presenting an e-thesis, the reader is invited to visit a recently established guest house in Aberdeen at <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/nursing/research/page.cfm?pge=27219> . Admission is free and you can stay as long as you want. Your comments in the visitors’ book are most welcome.

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