

26 June 2014

Dear Dr. Decision-Maker,

Attached please find my proposal to create a fully-digital dissertation instead of a traditional paper dissertation. You will find within the proposal a detailed justification for the proposed format, examples of contemporary digital dissertations and institutional work toward acceptance of digital dissertations, potential contributions to the fields of inquiry methodology and education policy, and anticipated technical issues.

Please note that I have already submitted a dissertation proposal to my dissertation research committee, and it has been approved. My committee has approved a digital dissertation format alongside two publishable manuscripts, essentially fulfilling requirements for a two-article dissertation format. Although it will not appear like a traditional, paper-based dissertation with distinct chapters and other conventions, it will include all the content and rigor expected. If you would like to receive a copy of my dissertation proposal I can forward it to you.

Lastly, my committee chairs and I believe that this format will be even more challenging than a traditional, paper-based dissertation because it requires that I push the boundaries of traditional scholarship toward more cutting edge approaches that have the potential to build equity inside and outside of The Ivory Tower. I look forward to this work.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this proposal. I look forward to speaking with you about this possibility.

Best regards,

Meagan Call-Cummings

PROPOSAL FOR BORN-DIGITAL DISSERTATION

I want to change the world. At the risk of sounding overly simplistic, this is a large goal – impossible, some may say. I have struggled with how I can accomplish this goal in many stages of my life, but especially during the time I have worked on my doctoral degree here at Indiana University’s School of Education. However, over the past two years I have come closer to figuring out how I might change the world as a scholar-activist.

The approach is an activist-oriented methodological one called Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR). Essentially, CPAR practitioners enter the field open-minded, with a desire to help a community solve a problem or address a concern that is important to them. Community members become co-researchers, in that they are critical members of a team of researchers, a collective that includes but does not put on a pedestal the university-based researcher, who all work together to identify a problem or concern, make decisions about how to gather data, analyze said data, and take steps to present the findings to key stakeholders, decision makers, and policy makers, working toward positive social change.

At its core, CPAR seeks to both confront and dismantle status quo systems of social inequity by redistributing the power that so often privileges historically dominant or hegemonic groups and individuals that take part in the research process. CPAR researchers share “the understanding that people – especially those who have experienced historic oppression – hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations” of research (Torre and Fine, 2006, p. 458; see also Guishard 2009; Tuck 2009; Torre 2009; Cahill 2007; Ayala 2009; Torre et al 2008; Cammarota and Fine 2008). A part of this understanding, then, is a non-traditional definition of validity; CPAR researchers argue that ethics are interwoven with how the validity of the research is put forth and how it should be assessed (see Lather 1986). This means that ethical decisions are inherently validity decisions as well. Therefore, how valid a study is is directly related to how ethically it was conducted. According to Torre and Fine (2006), those ethics have everything to do with the participation of community members involved in the research process.

CPAR practitioners believe that some traditional methods can have unintended consequences of making secondary – or even unheard – the will or needs of a community. This can lead to “solutions” that may not be in the best interests of the community we as researchers are seeking to serve. This directly relates to my life goal of changing the world.

Right now education in the United States – and throughout the world – is at a critical point. We see trends of growing inequity throughout the world. Some have sought to address this through movements like Occupy Wall Street. Education has the potential to either positively or negatively impact this inequity. As a university-based researcher, I am in a key position to help craft these equity-building policies. By using approaches like CPAR I may be able to more effectively understand and work for policies that address the actual needs of populations referred to as “at-risk.”

WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE DIGITAL?

Because democratic participation, equity, and equal access are all basic tenets of a CPAR approach, it has been and continues to be not only important but also essential to me to carry those tenets through the entire process of my dissertation. I worked to make sure these were enacted in every step of the research process, from the moment I entered the classroom where I was engaged with undocumented Latino students for over 18 months, to moments where we collectively gathered and analyzed data, to moments when we shared our findings with others at their school.

But now I am required to share the process and product as a dissertation. A dissertation is, by definition, an individual endeavor, and highly self-serving. As doctoral students we create and submit dissertations to graduate and, hopefully, get a job. I want to push back a bit on this. I want to do what I can to speak to and include both scholarly and community audiences as I share what our research collective achieved in the time we worked together. I would be going against everything I stand for both methodologically and ethically as a CPAR practitioner if I were to create a traditional, paper-based dissertation. I would essentially be acting alone, as if the collective, participatory nature of the research process were somehow complete, as if I checked that box and now I could do what I want – alone, as if I somehow owned the research, the analysis, and the findings.

A paper-based dissertation would not be in keeping with the underlying participatory ethics of CPAR, which means it would also not be valid (see Cohn and Kottkamp 1993; Park et al 1993; Roof and Weigman 1995; Guishard 2009; Torre et al 2012 for discussions on how ethics and validity are inextricably linked in CPAR). In short, in order for my dissertation research to be considered valid by scholars who will examine my work, it must be participatory from beginning to end. A digital format is the best and only way I see to accomplish this.

A completely digital presentation of this research is imperative because it would allow greater access not only for the students and teachers who were actually involved in the process, but it would allow greater access for *any* students, teachers, school administrators, policy makers, and other scholars who are interested in the discussions our group had about equity, racism and policies that seek to address inequity in schools.

Of course one might argue that paper dissertations are completely accessible and available online. One could go to ProQuest and look any dissertation up and download it quite easily. To a certain extent, this is true. Dissertations are available. However, one need only think honestly about a high school teacher, who works 12-hour days, or an undocumented Latino high school student, who has to work every evening to help pay bills, or a school administrator who has way too much on her plate – do we honestly believe they could or would take the time to figure out how to find my dissertation, let alone sit down and read 300 pages of text? On the other hand, might they use their phone or tablet to peruse a website, which has some text, but also videos, pictures, and other multimodal aspects to it? A website that allows one to focus on what they are interested in, and skip things that might not be so pertinent to their lives or work? Clearly a digital presentation of my dissertation, which at its core seeks to “make the world a better place” by identifying, analyzing, and crafting more equitable education policies, would be in and of itself more equitable and more accessible.

From both methodological and policy standpoints I believe that the case is clear for me to create a wholly digital dissertation. Ethically and methodologically, the presentation of my dissertation must be participatory, equitable, and accessible. From a policy perspective, it makes sense to make the dissertation more accessible to those making, those researching, and those affected by policies discussed in the dissertation.

Another important reason for this dissertation to be digital is because this is where I plan to situate myself as a scholar. In order to plant myself firmly in cutting edge ground, and in order to claim expertise as a scholar focused on participatory methodologies of equity, I need to demonstrate that expertise through my dissertation. I cannot accomplish that through a traditional, paper-based dissertation. A paper-based dissertation will not capture the attention of future employers; it will not pique future students' interests; and it will not make the contribution to the fields of methodology and education policy that I think are highly important at this time.

EXAMPLES OF DIGITAL DISSERTATIONS AND ADVANCES TOWARD INSTITUTIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF DIGITAL WORK

Within the field of digital publishing there has been significant discussion over the past ten years or so about the possibilities and challenges surrounding digital dissertations. One of the biggest challenges has historically been the fact that not all institutions are as progressive as others. However, many doctoral students and institutions have been able to work with or even solve this challenge as they have pushed the boundaries with digital dissertations:

- In 1998, Christine Boese successfully defended her fully online dissertation, *The Ballad of the Internet Nutball: Chaining Rhetorical Visions from the Margins of the Margins to the Mainstream in the Xenaverse*, which she defended at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI).
- Bulbul Tiwari created a digital dissertation at the University of Chicago (in East Asian studies), which she has since revised during a fellowship at Stanford and made [publicly available](#).
- IU's own Justin Hodgson (professor in the English Department) successfully defended his digital dissertation, *Rhetorical Inventions/Inventional Rhetorics: Opening Possibilities*, at Clemson University. I have met with Dr. Hodgson and he has agreed to act as a resource and champion for my digital work when and if necessary, even offering to speak with my committee. I am sure he would be open to speaking with you, if desired.
- Dwayne Dixon, PhD (Duke University), recently defended his dissertation, *Endless Questions: Youth Becomings and the Anti-Crisis of Kids in Global Japan*, using the Scalar platform, which was developed by the University of Southern California (USC) for the primary purpose of creating digital dissertations. His dissertation is found here: <http://scalar.usc.edu/students/endlessquestion/index>
- Amanda Visconti, a doctoral student at University of Maryland, is currently working on her own digital dissertation, *Infinite Ulysses*. Her blog, which incorporates aspects of her ongoing digital dissertation work, is located here: <http://www.literaturegeek.com/2014/04/20/my-digital-dissertation-update/>

- Liza Potts and Katherine Gossett (Michigan State University) co-directed an NEH-funded project called "Building an Open-Source Archive for Born-Digital Dissertations," a three-day workshop to explore relevant issues and identify requirements for the development of an archive for the preservation of dissertations that incorporate interactive or dynamic digital media. You may view their white paper on the NEH website: <https://securegrants.neh.gov/publicquery/main.aspx?f=1&gn=HD-51561-12>
- Virginia Kuhn, now at USC, was one of the first to successfully defend a fully-digital dissertation. She now weighs in on cases where institutions find it difficult to accept digital dissertations. She wrote to me that she recently published the lead article in *Academe* (the magazine of the AAUP) for this very reason: to give would-be digital dissertators a published precedent to invoke in such cases: http://www.aaup.org/article/embrace-and-ambivalence#.UYr_vaVdhnG She also wrote that she did an invited post on the Academe blog so that she could offer more precedents and include some screen shots: <http://academeblog.org/2013/01/29/the-early-days-of-the-digital-dissertation/>. She discusses many examples of successful digital dissertations on these two pages.
- The CUNY Graduate Center, which, coincidentally, houses one of the most prestigious centers for CPAR work, shines in its support of doctoral student efforts to incorporate digital technologies into their dissertations. A number of students who have worked or are currently working at the GC's New Media Lab on digital research projects are working to incorporate various digital formats into their final, filed dissertations. CUNY GC has the active support of their library staff, which has expanded the digital formats that can be included in filed dissertations. CUNY GC indicates that ProQuest seems quite willing to incorporate a range of digital formats into the dissertations it ingests into its system. Also, to encourage increased use of digital technologies in students' doctoral research work, the New Media Lab offers competitive awards, which are granted at various stages of doctoral dissertation work to students whose dissertation projects include digital components.

As illustrated above, numerous individuals, organizations, and institutions are working for and financially and institutionally supporting the advancement of digital publishing and digital dissertation work. I hope that my own digital dissertation, if approved, will be part of Indiana University's advances in this field.

GENERALIZABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO METHODOLOGY AND POLICY

As a double major in Inquiry Methodology and Education Policy, I am keenly aware of my responsibility to make significant scholarly contributions through my dissertation to both fields. As an education policy methodologist, then, *I seek to essentially problematize the role of the researcher*. This contribution extends beyond this CPAR methodology, even beyond qualitative approaches. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes of the decolonization of methodologies in general, and says that it demands "a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values that inform research practices" (p. 20). I share this commitment to criticism of assumptions and motivations that inform not only the research practice but knowledge production in general. This commitment forms the basis of this proposal to a digital dissertation format.

Because it will be presented in a digital format, every aspect of my dissertation will prompt readers to ask themselves questions like, “Who am I as a researcher?” “Who am I in this process?” “Who are my ‘subjects’ and how does my research treat them?” “How visible or invisible am I, really, and what does that mean for my study’s participants? For my analysis? For my findings? For the study’s applications?” “How accessible is my research? What might that mean for the decisions and policies that use my findings?” These are important questions related to ethics, validity, and substantive findings of research that too often go unanswered – even unasked.

ANTICIPATED TECHNICAL ISSUES

One of the issues that has come to my attention has been a question of permanency. How long might a digital dissertation be available? Any dissertation must be available in perpetuity – it must not be ephemeral. I have reached out to IU ScholarWorks and they have indicated to me that they are excited about the possibility of hosting my digital dissertation on their system. This will allow them to be responsible for all the dissertation content – including media files – and would also allow the dissertation to be catalogued and referenced more easily. As mentioned above, ProQuest will now ingest websites and other non-traditional file formats, including audio and video formats. I will work with IU Libraries, IU ScholarWorks and ProQuest to make sure this can work.

CONCLUSIONS

Indiana University has a long history of pushing the boundaries through its research. For example, it is the home of the Kinsey Institute, famous for pushing the boundaries of what research is and what it does. My hope is that this project can contribute to that history of moving research forward and changing the world – even in small ways.

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