

Innovation in PhD Training in the Interdisciplinary Research Institute

Authors : B. Shaw, K. Doherty

Abstract : The Cultural Communication and Computing Research Institute (C3RI) is a diverse multidisciplinary research institute including art, design, media production, communication studies, computing and engineering. Across these disciplines it can seem like there are enormous differences of research practice and convention, including differing positions on objectivity and subjectivity, certainty and evidence, and different political and ethical parameters. These differences sit within, often unacknowledged, histories, codes, and communication styles of specific disciplines, and it is all these aspects that can make understanding of research practice across disciplines difficult. To explore this, a one day event was orchestrated, testing how a PhD community might communicate and share research in progress in a multi-disciplinary context. Instead of presenting results at a conference, research students were tasked to articulate their method of inquiry. A working party of students from across disciplines had to design a conference call, visual identity and an event framework that would work for students across all disciplines. The process of establishing the shape and identity of the conference was revealing. Even finding a linguistic frame that would meet the expectations of different disciplines for the conference call was challenging. The first abstracts submitted either resorted to reporting findings, or only described method briefly. It took several weeks of supported intervention for research students to get 'inside' their method and to understand their research practice as a process rich with philosophical and practical decisions and implications. In response to the abstracts the conference committee generated key methodological categories for conference sessions, including sampling, capturing 'experience', 'making models', researcher identities, and 'constructing data'. Each session involved presentations by visual artists, communications students and computing researchers with inter-disciplinary dialogue, facilitated by alumni Chairs. The apparently simple focus on method illuminated research process as a site of creativity, innovation and discovery, and also built epistemological awareness, drawing attention to what is being researched and how it can be known. It was surprisingly difficult to limit students to discussing method, and it was apparent that the vocabulary available for method is sometimes limited. However, by focusing on method rather than results, the genuine process of research, rather than one constructed for approval, could be captured. In unlocking the twists and turns of planning and implementing research, and the impact of circumstance and contingency, students had to reflect frankly on successes and failures. This level of self - and public- critique emphasised the degree of critical thinking and rigour required in executing research and demonstrated that honest reportage of research, faults and all, is good valid research. The process also revealed the degree that disciplines can learn from each other- the computing students gained insights from the sensitive social contextualizing generated by communications and art and design students, and art and design students gained understanding from the greater 'distance' and emphasis on application that computing students applied to their subjects. Finding the means to develop dialogue across disciplines makes researchers better equipped to devise and tackle research problems across disciplines, potentially laying the ground for more effective collaboration.

Keywords : interdisciplinary, method, research student, training

Conference Title : ICCVAD 2015 : International Conference on Communication, Visual Arts and Design

Conference Location : Barcelona, Spain

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