

Writing a PhD Thesis in Counterpoint to its Traditional Map: Writing to and With Theories and Concepts Encountered in the Doing of Doctoral Studies

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Abstract

This article offers insights into challenges encountered in the landscaping of a doctoral thesis written in counterpoint with its traditional map. The inspiration behind the author's thesis is a sixteen-year-old withdrawn from an English Further Education college on her first day. Consequently, the thesis troubles seemingly rigid orthodox academic structures and writing conventions, which potentially act as a barrier to learning. Animating the (non)methodological approaches of a PhD thesis written for everyone denied the opportunity of fulfilling their academic potential, this paper engages with speculative and experimental approaches to research, asking not 'what *is*', but 'what *if*'.

Keywords: PhD thesis; writing; post qualitative inquiry; research-creation

[W]riting only really knows what it's after once it has begun to make its way into the world (Manning, 2016, p. ix).

A sixteen-year-old student withdrawn from her course on her first day at a Further Education college in England unknowingly inspired my PhD project. The institution, which traditionally offers second chances in Education, swiftly ended this young person's second chance before it had even begun. When my supervisors asked what had inspired me to do a PhD, I answered without hesitation, 'Chloe'.¹ Before my next supervision, I wrote two stories: the student's ('Chloe's Story')

¹ 'Chloe' is not the student's real name.

and the lecturer's ('Mad Mary's Story'), which unexpectedly ignited the whole becoming-thesis. With writing so often potentially posing an insurmountable barrier to achievement, the thesis tells the story of experimenting with writing which troubles those fixities and rigidities so often seeming to prevent students from learning. It writes about using nonmethodological approaches, which do not fix things into being one thing or another, but which enable speculation and inquiry, offering opportunities and glimmerings of the not-yet-known.

Structuring without a map

One of the aims of the thesis is to challenge the way students are taught by attempting to engage and interest them through encouraging diversity and creativity: by breaking away from the standard curriculum. Wanting to encourage different perspectives, an alertness towards notyetness and the not-yet-known, an alternative approach to the usual structuring of an academic thesis and methods employed in educational research was needed. And so, readers are invited to read the thesis by:

boarding aeroplanes² to 'landing sites'³ ... pausing ... wandering, jumping, standing, staring before taking off again, choosing another 'landing site' to visit, and another, and another ... Whether a conversation, a dream, a nightmare, an intra-lude, each 'landing site' is a challenge to perceived discursively constructed structures and writing conventions in academia ... And so, too, are the '[w]ander lines, lines thick with the vibrations of' (Manning, 2020, p. 159) classroom life enabling movement and flexibility running through them. 'Wander lines need no translation they make felt through the force of the line and the thickness of multiple layers of tracings, one on top of the other, how subjectivity is produced in the moving. There is no question here of separating individual from movement, or individual from world' (ibid.). 'Wander lines' thereby challenge fixities effecting and affecting learning by encouraging the crossing of thresholds such as those into educational institutions, which are not always welcoming spaces; by inviting readers to fly across thresholds, to act in the moment, to speculate, to ask 'how does this work?', or to simply let things happen, it is hoped to encourage different perspectives, an alertness towards notyetness ...

The aeroplanes mentioned above demonstrate that Post-Compulsory Education 'is not always adept at meeting those students' needs who do not move from beginning to end in the anticipated way, who do not achieve the prescribed learning outcomes at the expected time' (Garland, 2023, p. 30). Incidentally, the idea of aeroplanes was inspired by a class of sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds. Understandably bored with their comma worksheets, they made them into paper planes to fly around the classroom. Unfortunately, the collaborative and imaginative ways in which they worked together to make those planes went unnoticed at the time – lost in the teacher's terror at being in charge of an apparently out of control class.⁴ With Erin Manning (2013)

² Aeroplane icons appear in the thesis as hyperlinks to fly readers from one 'landing site' to another, and to take them to where that particular storyline continues.

³ The thesis is written in 'landing sites': see the next page for more on this.

⁴ Harney and Moten (2013), however, suggest that by 'refus[ing] to call [a class] to order, we are allowing study to continue' (p. 9). By letting students fly their paper planes, then, study was indeed continuing in the collaborative

positing that ‘a collaborative event [can be] orchestrated’ (p. 35), this event has come to be valued as an example of the classroom ‘assemblage’ ‘operat[ing] at the level of collective invention in the tense of the not-yet’ (ibid.). ‘Assemblage’ is used here in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense of all bodies – human and nonhuman – being part of always emerging always moving ‘assemblages’ with capacities to affect and to be affected by each other. It is no longer student and lecturer in a classroom who are important, but all bodies, all forces and intensities.

With paper aeroplanes an emerging motif in the thesis, ‘landing sites’ (adopted from Gins and Arakawa (2002)) were invaluable in structuring the thesis in that they provide somewhere for them to land. Since the ‘landing sites’ are not intended to be visited in any particular order, their use encourages readers to read in more than linear ways. These multiple entryways and exits are inspired by Ken Gale’s (2018) book, *Madness as Methodology*.⁵ With ‘landing sites’ replacing chapters in the thesis,⁶ literature, methodologies and ethics were imbricated in the writing, flowing freely through the thesis’s pages. And so it became impossible to follow the traditional map of the academic thesis. The ‘idea of no beginnings and no endings, but middles, each one connected, each [“landing site”] like a “watchtower” (Deleuze, 1995, 142) watching over the other, creating connecting “lines of flight” between them, [was to] convey[] ... a more general sense of lifelong learning, always in the middle, always-moving’ (Garland, 2023, p. 29). The aim was ‘to mirror students joining the Post-Compulsory Education (PCE) sector at different stages with their varying qualifications, experiences and different styles of learning’ (ibid.).

With paper planes and ‘landing sites’, it is natural that Deleuze and Guattari’s (2015a; 2015b) ‘plane of immanence’ insisted on coming into the thesis. This concept was difficult to grasp and my interpretations changed often, but I was attracted to ‘the plane of immanence [being] the single wave that rolls [concepts] up and unrolls them’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2015a, p. 36), and so enabling movement and creation with nothing staying the same. With the ‘plane of immanence’ also being a ‘plane of composition’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2015a), there is always a sense of emergence in the thesis. This is exemplified in the laying out of a ‘plane of immanence’ where the paper aeroplanes could fly.⁷

‘Chloe’

It was at the Further Education college where the paper planes flew that I met the sixteen-year-old, who later became the inspiration behind the thesis. ‘Chloe’ could be any student in any educational institution; the phrase ‘composite self’ is used to describe her, to destabilise thoughts of ‘real’ and ‘imagined’, and to stress fluidity and movement: ‘Chloe’ is a creation, not a fixed identity.

orchestration of those paper planes, in the flying of them, in the relationships forming between those students working together.

⁵ Written in plateaus, readers are encouraged to create their own connections as they read.

⁶ Chapters seemed too constraining for a thesis so full of movement.

⁷ The order of presentation of the texts in the thesis was decided by flying paper aeroplanes (each with the title of a different ‘landing site’ inside).

The shared event occurred on 'Chloe's' first day, and in my first class teaching sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds as a qualified lecturer. Realising that new student 'Chloe' simply did use the f-word in every sentence and deciding there was little harm in it since it was not directed at anyone, nothing was said. However, when her computer froze during an initial literacy assessment, and, asked if she were okay, she swore at me and flew out of the room, it was obvious too many lines had been crossed. In that moment, there was a real sense of 'movement-moving': all those bodies in the 'assemblage', including the shaking walls and the ruffled air particles, moving in relation to each other, affecting and being affected by invisible intensities passing through each other: unhappy years in schools, worries about what a lecturer *should* do, struggles to conform to draconian institutional regulations, a clapped-out computer crashing in the middle of an assessment, an over-stressed manager all combined to lead to 'Chloe's' withdrawal before her enrolment was even processed. Having been failed by several schools and then by the very institution which should have offered her a second chance, 'Chloe' epitomises the need for new ways of teaching and learning. As the inspiration for the thesis, her story precedes both the abstract and the introductory materials. 'Chloe's Story' introduces the context of Further Education alongside my version (as 'Chloe's' lecturer) of the same event in a way only a story could.

With 'Chloe's' computer also telling its version of the event in the introductory materials, there were times when I literally got 'cold feet' and started questioning whether this was doctoral level writing. Writing with Elizabeth St. Pierre (2017; 2019) and Manning (2016; 2020), however, I was no longer alone in being attuned to the many intensities and forces of encounter at play in a classroom.⁸ Gale (2021) writes about bodies 'engaging in Spinoza's dance between affecting and being affected' (p. 467). Animating Spinoza's question of what a body can do, Gale emphasises that what is important is:

what [a body's] affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body (Deleuze and Guattari, 2015b, p. 300).

Knowing this event was axiomatic in the *thesisising*,⁹ and having enjoyed writing 'Chloe's' and 'Mad Mary's' stories so much, I imagined a situation ten years later when they were reunited by chance: Mary is a PhD student and writing coach; 'Chloe', now calling herself 'Chlo', is a university student. When she responds to Mary's advert offering help with essay writing, Mary is offered a second chance to support her. Nonetheless, she finds it difficult to teach in such a rigid way now that she is engaging in different writing practices in her doctoral studies. As the two meet regularly, different writing practices are exemplified as is the difficult balance of motivating and supporting 'Chlo', whilst ensuring she can still meet the assessment criteria to pass the written assignments.

⁸ It is this attunement which encourages different ways of seeing and doing.

⁹ The concept *thesisising* emerged in the writing as the thesis told its own story, exemplifying a body of writing always on the move.

Becoming with Artfulness and Research-Creation

Like Helen Bowstead (2022, p. 176), 'I [had] been writing my PhD since I started my PhD'. Until encountering Laurel Richardson's (2000) work, however, I did not know that writing could be 'a method of inquiry'. I was taught to have a plan and a draft before beginning to write: to know exactly what the writing would be about. With Richardson (2000), and Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), I realised that writing could inquire; it didn't have to represent what was already known; writing could start without knowing what was going to be written. And, with that, my writing practice changed, and the thesis became

all about the writing. The act of writing.

The writing that refused to comply. The writing that took, takes, is taking on, a life of its own. The writing that doesn't care what the thesis is about. Or what it means. The art-ful, care-ful, force-ful writing, the writing that doesn't give a fig. Or a flying fuck, what the institution thinks (Bowstead, 2023, p. 10).

Manning (2016) writes that 'writing only really knows what it's after once it has begun to make its way into the world' (p. ix). Almost exactly a year before the thesis was submitted, ever having a thesis to submit seemed a remote possibility. With so much writing emerging, there were enough words for two theses. Instead of having an actual thesis, however, there appeared to be only an assortment of writing which had developed from writing, and from more writing: mostly inspired by a love of a particular paper, concept, theory or book, and so not necessarily (it seemed at the time) connecting with each other. I think of 'Chloe' as being what Ian Buchanan (2021) calls the 'beating heart' of the 'assemblage' (p. 61). Despite driving it, however, 'Chloe' did not appear to be holding it all together: there were Chloe/Chlo stories, and texts exemplifying different writing practices, with no apparent connections between them. Whilst putting a thesis together is never easy, having been writing in counterpoint to the map of a traditional academic thesis, I really did feel lost. If only I had known to simply trust my self to 'do the next thing, whatever it [was]—to experiment—and to keep moving' (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 605). With hindsight, this was simply part of the processual way in which I was writing the thesis and therefore it was inevitable that such a point would be reached. As the panic subsided, I engaged in 'writing to' (Wyatt and Gale, 2018) the 'problem'. With Wyatt and Gale, writing mobilises inquiry 'taking the writer and reader to the edges of the writing and beyond' (Garland, 2022, p. 247). By 'writing to', it is possible to plug in new concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 2015b), see how they might work, and how they might be used effectively.

Seeking inspiration, I reread Manning's (2016) 'artfulness' chapter and I am immediately drawn to

[a]rt, as *a way* of learning, act[ing] as a bridge toward new processes, new pathways. To speak of a "way" is to dwell on the process itself, on its manner of becoming. It is to emphasize that art is before all else a quality, a difference in kind, an operative process that maps the way toward a certain attunement of world and expression (p. 47).

I become fascinated by 'speculative pragmatism', which Manning (2016, p. 39) describes as balancing all the texts around the room so that they are touching each other and letting them

connect collaboratively with each other in any way they like. And so, I simply do the same. I take all of my writing out of the black cat box and balance it everywhere – bed, desk, chair, printer, bedside table, window ledge. Saffie, my little cat, comes in, steps on everything (twice!), altering the positioning of the texts. Since, ‘more than all else, [this process] depends on the human getting out of the way’ (Manning, 2016, p. 63), I sit as much out of the way as is possible to let the texts find their own connections.¹⁰ Whilst I had struggled to know what to do with all the texts, the writing, as Manning says it would, found its own way of coming into the world. I did not have a plan: there was no intention of balancing all the texts around a room, of not writing in chapters, of writing conversations, or of meeting ‘Chloe’ calling herself ‘Chlo’ a decade later (Garland, 2022; 2023). That these happened, and that the texts then came together to create a thesis, is, perhaps, the nature of post qualitative inquiry: it offers freedom, flexibility, a writing with the not-yet-known, not-yet-knowing what will emerge.¹¹

I felt the art of notyetness, writing into the not-yet-known, fitted with St. Pierre’s (2019) ontology of immanence. As the writing in the thesis developed, there was a sense of it challenging traditional writing conventions, wanting to see what else was possible. Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2014) suggest with ‘research-creation’ that writing is not only used to represent research. As Manning (2016) says, ‘writing is an act, alive with the rhythms of uncertainty and the openings of a speculative pragmatism that engages with the force of the milieu where transversality is at its most acute’ (p. 42).

Despite only encountering ‘research-creation’ towards the end of my doctoral studies, I think of the whole collection as ‘research-creation’ in that it hopefully:

generates new forms of experience; ... proposes concrete assemblages for rethinking the very question of what is at stake in pedagogy, in practice, and in collective experimentation. And, in so doing, it creates an opening for what Moten and Harney conceptualize as the undercommons: it creates the conditions for new ways of encountering study-forms and forces of intellectuality that cut across normative accounts of what it means to know (Manning, 2016, p. 27).

With research-creation encouraging speculative and experimental approaches in the classroom and beyond, the concept seems to have considerable potential in education for creating whole new processes, and forms of knowledge, requiring new assessment methods.

¹⁰ ‘Reading Harney and Moten (2013) later, [I was] drawn to the “undercommons” [being] a box, and if you open it you can enter into [their] world’ (p. 110). In many ways, ‘opening the black cat box [with all the writing in was] like opening the “undercommons”: a gateway “into [the] world” (ibid.) of the emerging thesis’ (Garland, 2023, 115).

¹¹ Engaging with different writing practices enables the writing to simply take over; there were definitely times when the writing was writing the thesis for me! (See Appendix Allegretto-Largo-Allegro (Garland, 2022)). So, ‘writing to’ the concepts I was reading about, experimenting with different ways of writing including ‘writing as inquiry’: instead of writing ‘what *is*’, I asked ‘what *if*’, ‘what can doing this *do*’, and, perhaps because it was a doctoral thesis, ‘*dare* I do this ...’.

Speculative and Experimental Writing Practices

Having disturbed the conventions of the traditional academic thesis, I thought of the becoming-thesis as a 'minor gesture' (Manning, 2016), which 'allied to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the minor, is the gestural force that opens experience to its potential variation. It does this from within experience itself, activating a shift in tone, a difference in quality' (p. 1). This was a way of becoming attuned to forces often overlooked, a way of playing with conventional constraints to see what else could happen. Inspired by Emma Macleod-Johnstone (2013), one of the ways I did this was to include conversations in the writing: with imaginary fellow PhD student 'Paula', I engaged in 'writing to' the concepts and theories I was reading about; with 'Chloe', I discussed the ethics of writing about her, and 'Chlo'. Multiple 'Marys' emerged in the *thesisising*; they come together with the original Mary (who fully intended to write a traditional academic thesis with chapters including a literature review, methodology and ethics) in 'playful intra-ludes' in which they argue against each other's preferred ways of writing, reading, doing, thinking.

These conversations made me realise that the thesis being inspired by a real event involving a real student was not the only ethical issue to consider. I changed the student's name and all other identifiable details and initially thought that was sufficient; the writing about the event was largely fictitious – when I looked back at my original reflective journal entries, they were almost unrecognisable: my memories had totally shifted over the years, which reassured me that I wasn't doing anything ethically wrong. What I had written about were my misremembered *versions* of a real event which once happened involving a student I once briefly taught. However, with the creation of other 'characters', 'Chloe' was not the only ethical consideration: there was also 'Paula' - the conversations between 'Paula' and Mary are always about Mary's research so that 'Paula' can be any PhD student; there were also imaginary meetings with my interpretations of characters in already published books; the ethics of writing an email that is never intended to be sent to, or read by (my version of), Erin Manning; the ethics of an imaginary viva (worried about the ethics of portraying even imaginary examiners so unprofessionally, I actually rewrote this very close to the submission deadline). Perhaps because I was attempting to engage in 'experimentation and creativity' (Gale and Wyatt, 2018, p. 203), not wanting it to 'wither and die' (*ibid.*), ethical considerations, like literature and methodologies, were just so imbricated in the writing that they could not be separated out for discussion in one particular place.¹² I consequently adopted Karen Barad's (2007) 'ethico-onto-epistem-olog[ical]' approach because of its 'appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being' (p. 185) since ethics is neither a separate issue, nor 'a geometrical calculation' (Barad, 2007, p. 179). With ethics, literature, methodologies, and nonmethodologies running through the thesis, it was possible to address ethical issues as they arose; it was also a way of challenging the format of the traditional academic thesis, of offering another way of presenting it.

As the thesis submission date approached, I worried more and more about how this collection of post qualitative inquiries could ever be collated for submission. Whilst more than one Mary now

¹² There is, however, 'A More Serious Intra-lude' (Garland, 2022; 2023) in which the Marys argue over some of the arising ethical issues.

wished she had the map of a traditional thesis to follow, there was something exciting about writing in counterpoint to that map and, of course, for ‘the post qualitative inquirer ... There is no recipe, no process’ (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604). And so ‘accept[ing] the risk of [writing] sprouting deviant’ (Massumi, 2002, p. 18), she

[t]ake[s] joy in [her] digressions. Because that is where the unexpected arises. That is the experimental aspect ... [and] let[s] [her]self get so caught up in the flow of [her] writing that it ceases at moments to be recognizable to [her] as [her] own (ibid.).

Knowing that ‘[l]earning is a fragile enterprise that can too easily be sidetracked by the encroachment of what is set up, in advance, as relevant or irrelevant’ (Manning, 2016, p. 9), letting the writing write without seeking to control it enabled the unexpected to occur. Exemplifying ‘writing to’ and ‘writing in immanence’ (Gale, 2020; 2023), the writing animated potential for intensities and becoming as the thesis itself epitomised the challenge to convention by being a non-conventional academic thesis in format, language, and in its *thesisising*. The concept of *thesisising* illuminated the process of landscaping a thesis, of writing a thesis always on the move: the reading, the thinking, the doing never finishing.

Once the texts had found their own way of coming together, the ‘intra-actions’ between the multiple ‘Marys’ helped lend the becoming-thesis a cohesive whole. To just delete their earlier thoughts, even though in some ways they were now ‘wrong’, seemed disloyal. With earlier thinking around concepts and theories showing development and, perhaps more importantly, exemplifying that ‘[c]oncepts are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies ... [but] must be invented, fabricated, or rather created and would be nothing without their creator’s signature’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2015a, p. 5), later ‘Marys’ ‘intra-act’ with earlier selves; this occurs in different ways – sometimes a dialogue on the page, or a comment in a text box, but perhaps most frequently in what came to be called *footnoting*. *Footnoting* is crucial to creating that elusive cohesive body of writing by connecting the inquiries, the developments in thinking, the always-moving concepts ... *Footnoting* is a way of ‘writing to’ and with and through previous writings and shows how writing practices such as ‘writing to’ and ‘writing as inquiry’ could work in practice. The story of the writing of the thesis is told, to a certain extent, in the footnotes, which both demonstrate the ‘in-formational’¹³ process and challenge the linearisation of thesis-making.

Afterwording

Doing a PhD, the process, *being* a PhD student, was almost a life-long dream of mine, but there was never any intention of doing a doctorate differently. I set out to enjoy the process and I never wanted it to end; I did not know then, that ‘after the story ends[, i]t goes on’ (Bowstead, 2023, p. 15). At the time, as my long-suffering supervisors reminded me, I was aware only that a PhD thesis has a deadline. Whilst that deadline forces focus (St. Pierre, 2019), as Wyatt (2019, p. 44) suggests, it also caused a writing-paralysis, which was difficult to overcome. At this stage, it would have

¹³ Gilbert Simondon’s process of ‘in-formation’ (as cited in Manning (2007)) is used here to indicate an always changing, never fully formed body of writing.

been easy to lose faith ... to doubt the whole thesis ... myself As I turned to my supervisors, to Manning, St. Pierre, Deleuze and Guattari and others, trust played a significant role. Doing something differently is not easy, but, with them beside me, I was not alone, and I was doing this for all those failed by education systems who needed a second chance. And to create those genuine second chances, it is clear that speculative and experimental approaches to education are needed, offering opportunities and glimmerings of the not-yet-known. And so, I ask readers not to judge this paper as a finished product, but to consider the process, because what the 'landing sites' and 'lines of flight' between them exemplify, is that it is in the *process* that learning, and glimmerings of the not-yet-known, take place.

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