

Practice-based dissertations: Exploring the relationship between practice and writing

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University of the Arts, London (UAL) Context

**'We're a community of makers, thinkers,
pioneers and storytellers redesigning the future'**

[UAL Homepage]

- 1. London College of Fashion (LCF)**
- 2. London College of Communication (LCC)**
- 3. Central Saint Martins (CSM)**
- 4. Camberwell College of Arts**
- 5. Chelsea College of Arts**
- 6. Wimbledon College of Arts**



Language Provision Across UAL: 'Embedded'

- **Weekly classes with individual courses;**
- **Additional stand-alone workshops;**
- **Tutorials**
 - **Helping students to do the things they want/need to do on their courses with and through language**



Academic Language

- ‘...no simple definition of what academic language is...[there is] no single academic language, just as there is no single British English, but rather a number of varieties that share certain core features...[however it] is continually evolving as the sciences, disciplines, and sub-disciplines themselves evolve.’ (Halliday, 1993 in Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 112)
- ‘... a complex, open and emergent social system that can change’ (Molinari, 2021, p. 49)
- ‘...the modern-day imaginary of what makes writing ‘academic’ celebrates objectivity, linearity, some linguistic standards rather than others, prose and impersonality at the expense of other epistemic virtues, such as creativity, public and popular engagement (to democratize knowledge), recursiveness and composition, multilingualism and multimodality’ (Molinari, 2022, p. 57)



Dissertations: Patterns



Dissertations: Genre/Organisation Patterns

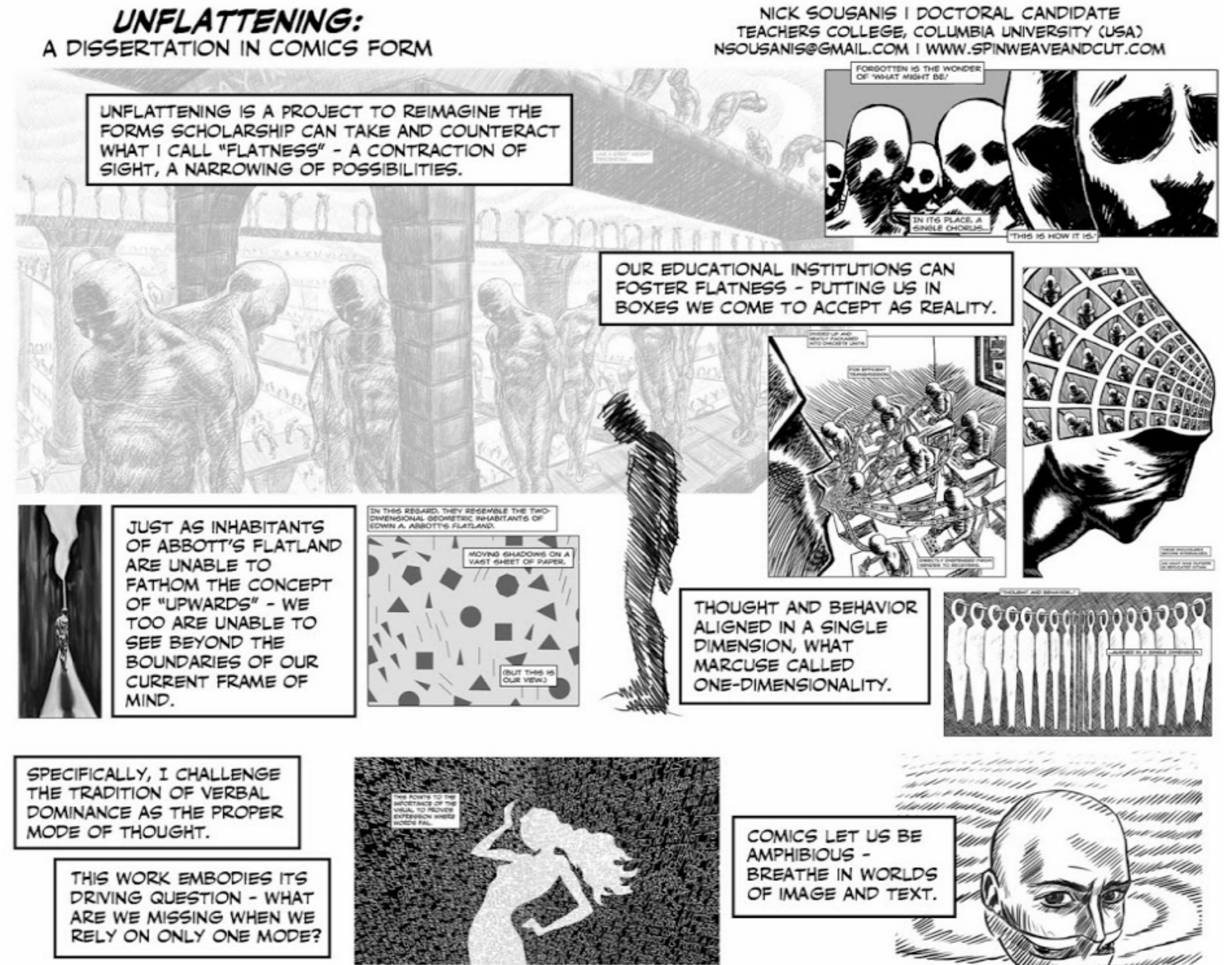
- Paltridge, et al. (2012, p. 337) examined organisation patterns of dissertation macrostructures

Main categories of dissertation macrostructures (adapted from [Paltridge, 2002](#)).

Simple conventional	Complex conventional	Topic-based
Reports on a single empirical study Macrostructure: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction• Review of literature• Materials & methods• Results• Discussion• Conclusions	Reports on several empirical studies Macrostructure: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction• Review of literature• (Materials & methods)• Study 1• Study 2• Study 3 (etc.)• General/overall conclusions	Explores different aspects of a topic Macrostructure: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction• Topic 1• Topic 2• Topic 3 (etc.)• Conclusions

Dissertations: 'Re-imagining/Shifting'

- '(Non)-traditional' and '(Un)conventional' (Paltridge & Starfield, 2024)
- 'Re-imagining' (Molinari, 2022)
 - Sousannis (2014) 'Unflattening' [Columbia University]
 - Harron (2016) PhD in Mathematics [Princeton University]



Sousannis (2014)



Practice-based Research



Practice-based Research

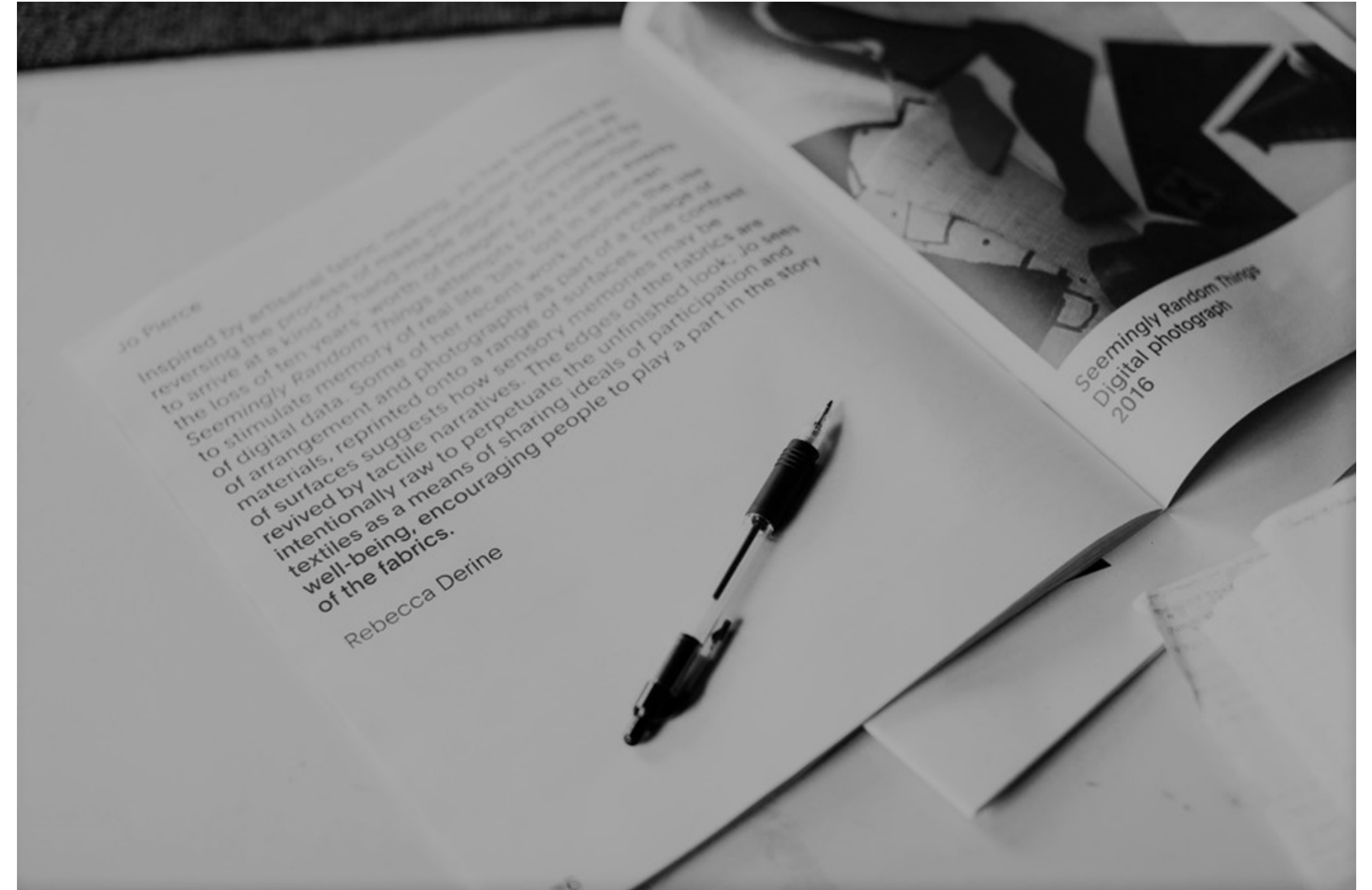
- ‘an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice’ (Candy, 2006, p. 1)
- ‘a principled approach to research by means of practice in which the research and the practice operate as interdependent and complementary processes leading to new and original forms of knowledge’ (Candy, Edmonds & Vear, 2021)
- Research that takes the nature of practice as its central focus is called ‘practice-based’ or ‘practice-led’ research. It is carried out by practitioners, such as artists, designers, curators, writers, musicians, teachers and others... (Candy, 2006, p. 2)
 1. If a creative artifact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based.
 2. If the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice, it is practice-led.

(Candy & Edmonds, 2018, p. 64)

Practice-based Dissertations: Writing (Exegesis)

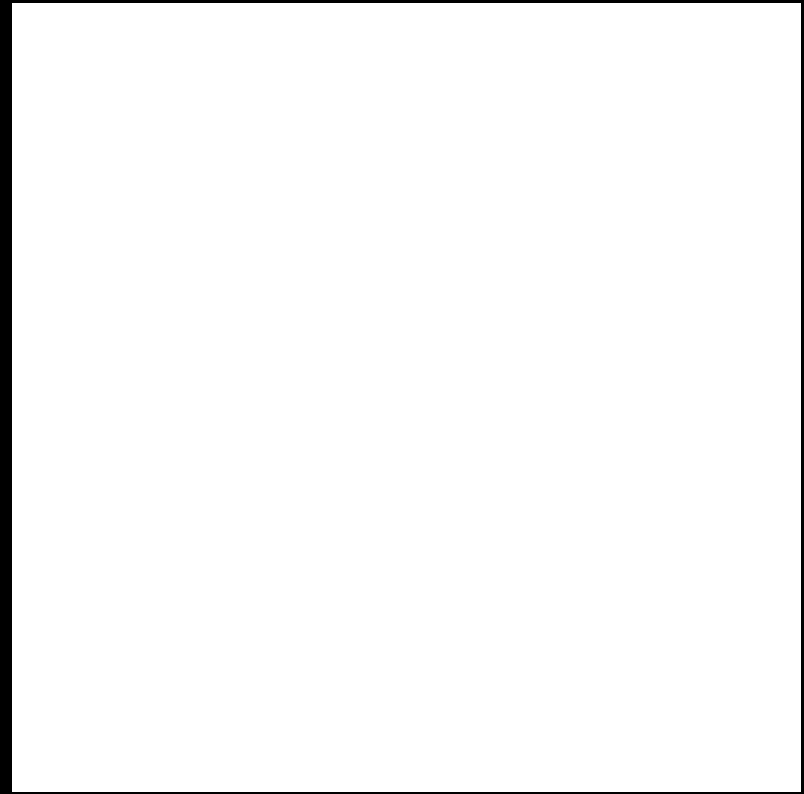
Two main components: the practice and the writing (Exegesis)

- ‘...the exegesis provides a vehicle through which the work of art can find a discursive form’
- ‘The task of the exegesis is not just to explain or contextualise practice, but rather is to produce movement in thought itself’ (Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p. 33)

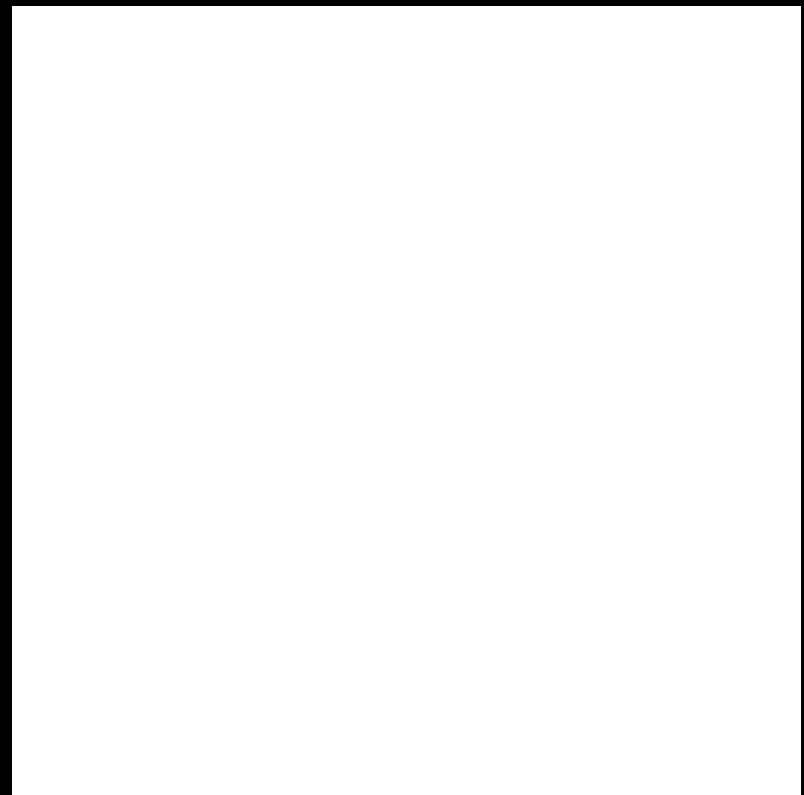


Practice-based Dissertations: Challenges (Writing)

- '[implicit] assumption that verbal/written language 'represents the highest order of thought production' and fail to acknowledge 'artistic creation as a legitimate method of knowledge advancement in its own right' (van Leeuwen (2020), in Álvarez, 2024, p. 91)
- '[students] encountered persistent **uncertainty** about the role, form and function of writing within practice-based doctoral theses' (Álvarez, 2024, p. 88)
- The relationship between the written and artistic work [...] is often **ambiguous**, leaving the student to **languish** as they navigate ambiguous expectations tied to a **daunting** ideal of '**scholarly writing**' they feel **pressured** to meet, **uncertain** about its purpose in relation to their artistic practice' (Álvarez, 2024, p. 88)
- '...is generally **viewed negatively**, being seen to construe the written work as a commentary upon the creative with **little connection** between the two' (Ravelli, Starfield & Paltridge, 2021, p. 219)



The Study



Aims & Objectives

Overall Aims

1. To discover more about the language practices involved in the construction of the writing in practice-based Masters

Objectives

1. To explore the relationship between the written and practice components
2. To unpack the construct of academic writing in this context (What does it 'do' in these contexts?)
3. To reflect on my own teaching practices in order to inform future materials development

MA Final Projects: Components

- 1. The practice (e.g. collection; artefact; film; audio; digital work; a combination)**
- 2. The writing (commentary)**
- 3. Portfolio (further description of process; visual document but each course has variations)**



Student Writing Context

1. 15-month PG course (3 Terms)
2. Average class size: 18-25 [High numbers of overseas students with English as a second/additional language]
3. Different experiences/requirements of writing:
 - i. Reflections; evaluations; literature reviews; manifestos; essays; descriptions; portfolios; research proposal
4. Final project acts as culmination of studies (Independent research project)
5. Different methodologies but all have some form of practice-based outcome
 - i. Physical and/or digital formats; Apps; Garments; Audio; Stories; Films; Line-ups; Show
6. Word count: Negotiated; Choice is inclusive
 - i. 4,000 words (plus 1,000 critical evaluation)
 - ii. 10,000 words (plus 1,000 critical evaluation)
 - iii. 17,000 words (plus 1,000 critical evaluation)

Methodology

Design

- Exploratory (Part 1)
- Emic perspective (staff/student voice)
- Ethnographic approach ('exploration [of] cultures, processes, and experiences of academic writing' (Paltridge & Starfield, 2012))

Participants

- 14 MA students [Hindi; English; Mandarin; Cantonese; French; Lithuanian; Italian; Spanish]
- 10 Teachers/Supervisors [English; Korean]
- 6 different courses

Data Collection

- Part 1: January-July 2024
- Course documents (assignment briefs/handbooks)
- Semi-structured interviews [Audio-recorded/transcribed]

Analysis

- Grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014);
- Iterative process (Baralt, 2012) - Emergent themes

Word Count Choices (Students)

4,000 words (11 students)

1. Fear of writing
2. Not good at writing
3. Appropriate for subject (Both 4K and 10K)
4. Want to do the practice/Future employment
 - 'Although we do have the choice, it feels a bit hypocritical to do the 10,000 words essay, even though it could actually be something useful. But mainly because of what we study and where... we think that the production ... could also be more beneficial for us in terms of future potential collaborations ...'
[Student 5]

10,000 words (3 students)

1. Worried about grade
 - 'in hindsight I realised that I didn't have enough confidence in my practise-based outcome to go in for the 4000 word...'
[Student 12]

Word Count Choices: Staff

1. Lack confidence in writing
2. Students don't like writing
3. The work decides:
 - i. Students change as 'they realise [4K] is actually quite restrictive' **[Teacher 2]**
 - ii. Can develop design identity more in longer form (i.e.10K) **[Teacher 5]**
4. The discipline decides:
 - i. 4K is not enough **[Teacher 3]**
 - ii. Students have never chosen the 10K option (teacher was actually unsure what it would look like) as it would affect what the students are making **[Teacher 4]**



Initial Findings



Initial Themes (Writing)

- 1. Written component**
- 2. Academic writing**
3. Writing process
4. Being critical
5. Use of other languages
6. Use of AI

1. Written Component: Students

1. Develop Thinking (practice; theory; research)

- i. Generate ideas
- ii. Justify choices
- iii. Evaluate; offer insight into practice
- iv. Organise thinking

2. Communication

- i. Audience needs it
- ii. Clarify making process
- iii. Findings
- iv. Promote work

1. Written Component: Student Comments

1. Develop Thinking

- ‘...because I wouldn't have made...if I didn't have to write that much, I wouldn't have made that much research’ **[Student 4]**
- ‘when I do the practise [it is] easy for me to remind what I have done’ **[Student 2]**
- ‘when I was trying to write, it organises...how I process my...projects’ **[Student 10]**
- ‘I'm also very interested in writing itself because it helps condense my own thoughts **[Student 12]**
- ‘The writing will help me to make the practise part more logical’ **[Student 11]**

2. Communication

- ‘But if I don't write...how can I present my work or my findings? So it's not just the product, it's not just the final thing ... because if ...[it's] just the practice [then] only I will know what I found. But if I want to share what I found with others, then I have to write it.’ **[Student 14]**
- ‘I do feel like without a verbal commentary or written commentary... how are you communicating to the assessor or the reader what the thought process was and what were the connections that you were making’

[Student 12]

1. Written Component: Staff

1. What is this kind of writing?

- i. Describe creative process; analyse; evaluate; (critically) reflect; contextualise
- ii. Fluid (Change over time)
- iii. Different from other forms

2. What does it do?

- i. Necessary
- ii. Legitimise (methodology; MA)
- iii. Justify (practice)
- iv. Demonstrate thinking
- v. Articulates design

3. Communication

- i. Different audiences (e.g. work)
- ual language centre

1. Written Component: Staff Examples (i)

What is this kind of writing?

- ‘The commentary articulates their design journey really and allows them to be reflective on their processes.’ **[Teacher 4]**
- ‘...because you need to talk about your methodologies and what you're doing and what you found and what that means. So I think that's pretty standard, but I would say it's a lot less weighty if you've got physical garments or things... If you are a subject like history or psychology or something like that, I would expect... you'd be doing a lot more writing and researching and be on a higher level than we are.’ **[Teacher 5]**
- ‘I guess...the [writing] which is basically kind of then the actual practise itself when they discuss that and ...so, the way they write it here is slightly unusual. It's a commentary and a critical evaluation’ **[Teacher 7]**
- ‘...a reflective piece of writing, but it takes you through, as a commentary, it takes you through the process and it allows them to evaluate that process. Analytically, using the results of their work to then form the conclusions...’ **[Teacher 8]**
- ‘but I think there's a movement in education now, particularly in art and design education where we basically focus on practise-based research...So how we write about how we make and how we design continues to be a growing area’ **[Teacher 2]**

1. Written Component: Staff Examples (ii)

Why this kind of writing?

- '[No writing] For us, it would be a different course completely it would be a more commercial course, I think more product oriented...and less about contributing new design output. So the writing helps **[Teacher 4]**
- '...also justifying, kind of, what it is that you're saying in the industry, the new person, what are you bringing to differentiate yourself and the rest of the industry...' **[Teacher 9]**
- 'I don't think it would be a Master's without [writing]...it kind of grounds [discipline] in a more serious context, not just a frivolous, a frivolous bit of this and that, you know, 'Oh, and I'll make this'... that you're actually grounding it in...making change, making a difference, discussion' **[Teacher 9]**

Communicates/Situates ideas

- 'Yeah, it helps communicate to an outside audience, but I think it also helps the designer situate themselves within a wider industry and within wider discourses, politically and social **[Teacher 4]**
- '...this is a practical course, but it's also an academic qualification. Therefore, it's not just about making; you need to be able to justify what you're doing. You need to be able to articulate it' **[Teacher 10]**
- 'We want them to be creative, but in a way that it is... captured and that can be read and understood by other people very precisely. It's gotta' have a balance' **[Teacher 5]**

2. Academic Writing: Challenges (Students i)

- Reading into writing
- Communicating in clear way
- Using others' work
- Structuring the writing
- Explaining concepts from L1 to English
- Learn all the rules ('academic gaming')
- Moving between different forms of writing
- Using correct terminology
- Developing own voice
- Lack confidence ('don't feel part of academic world')
- Using third person
- Overusing quotes
- Organising concepts
- Editing
- Finding/Using sources (new topic)
- Contextualising the writing
- Overly descriptive

2. Academic Writing: Challenges (Students ii)

New Language

- 'I would describe it... it's a bit dramatic to say... as a completely new language... it's a new skill' **[Student 4]**

Voice

- 'You look at papers written by people that have a statue and you get information from them and we try to copy their way of writing... I guess [there is not enough time] to get your own academic writing style' **[Student 4]**
- [unable to] 'influence the reader... you need your statement [to be] really reasonable and logical' **[Student 11]**
- 'Everything's already hard, and then you've got to write not how you speak...it becomes less personal in that sort of sense' **[Student 6]**

Style

- 'Academic style is difficult - 'I'm the art student, not the academic student' **[Student 9]**

Third person

- '...but if you're an artist, you are the work...it's quite hard not to say 'I' and how it relates to me in some context' **[Student 6]**

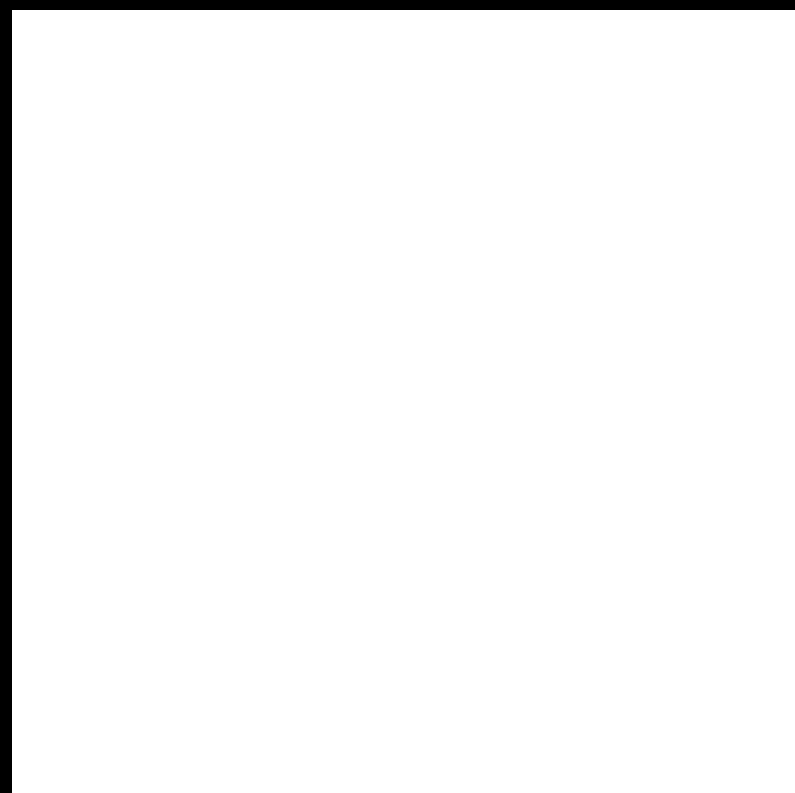
2. Academic Writing: Challenges (Teachers)

- ‘...a student where English is her second language and, or at least, not her first language, and you know, ...the grammar is not perfect...But her meaning is always completely clear. I know exactly what she's trying to say’ **[Teacher 1]**
- ‘I'm looking for...a robust piece of research... I don't really care if the language isn't great usually’ **[Teacher 3]**
- ‘But I think particularly international students, I wouldn't pull them down for grammar or things like that.’ **[Teacher 5]**
- ‘but just instinctively what I look for, I guess is not not a standardised way of expressing, but like something that has clarity...and definitely I'm not bothered with those things [grammatical errors]. I don't think that's relevant for art and design practitioners...as long as it's understandable. I celebrate backwards...turns of phrases and...there's no right and wrong in grammar...’ **[Teacher 4]**
- ‘I possibly wouldn't, but as I said, they've got dyslexic tutors so they get away with a lot with me. So there's a lot that I probably don't pick up on as well.’ **[Teacher 7]**
- ‘It doesn't have to be like really fancy or really like complicated. If you can't describe it in English, you can easily draw it and then write it from the drawing’ **[Teacher 6]**
- ‘I don't think they would lose marks for poor academic writing, but they would potentially gain marks...particularly sort of strong, articulate, well-structured piece of academic writing.’ **[Teacher 10]**

2. Academic Writing: Challenges (Teachers ii)

Lack of confidence in teaching writing

- ‘I was uncomfortable with the fact that I knew I couldn't deliver that [information about writing]...it was needed because [students] coming and asking me questions about how to write it. I thought, I don't know what they're talking about because they were more advanced in terms of their education around theory and research practise than my own experience’
[Teacher 2]
- ‘A lot of [colleagues] are scared about it and they don't really know what to do. And in my team...we'd do benchmarking and I'll give examples of the kind of things to write but they're not confident in knowing what to write and they're not confident in teaching it. And they're good staff; but it's like ...they're used to technical [work] and doing these things... **[Teacher 5]**
- I don't come from a background of intellectual research, you know, academic research...understanding how to talk about making, how to talk about thinking through your ideas, create a transformation and translation, yes. But writing it, talking about in terms of research methods, I find that really intimidating **[Teacher 2]**



Initial Thoughts



Initial Thoughts

Role of Writing

1. Legitimise the methodology around practice-based research
2. Acts as a way of creating/developing knowledge ('writing as method' (Álvarez, 2024)?)
3. Not viewed as separate but as part of their practice/work (assessment)
4. Not viewed as fixed ('a complex, open and emergent social system that can change' (Molinari, 2021, p. 49))

Academic writing: Barriers

1. Students and staff both worried about having to learn/teach 'academic language'
 - i. Use student challenges as syllabus outline (e.g. Students find it difficult to develop voice)
 - ii. Use staff challenges to create (collaborative) workshops

Academic writing: Gaps

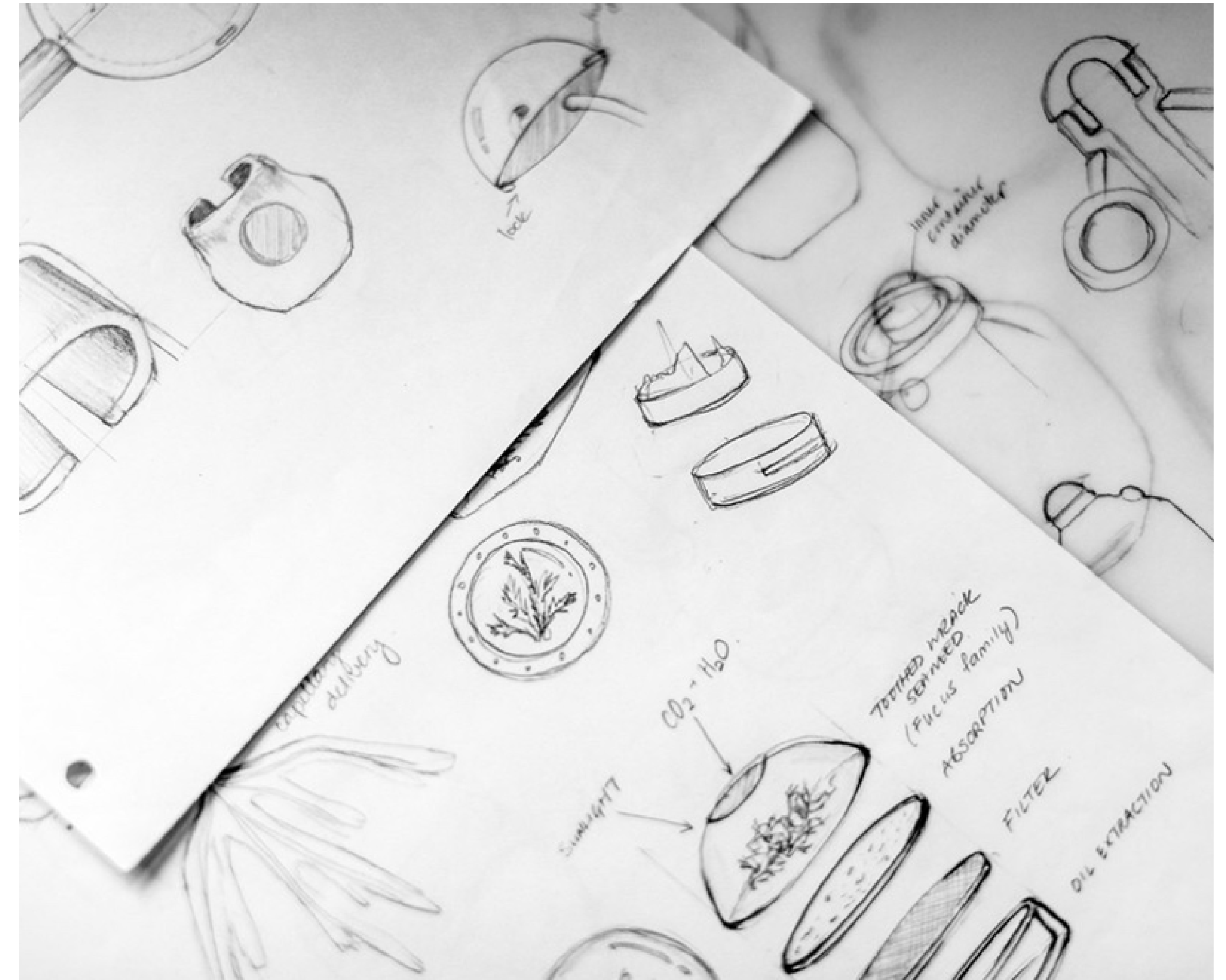
1. Students & staff don't always agree on academic writing (format; formality; structure; 'rules')
 - i. Where do student & staff ideas about academic writing come from?

Nature of (academic) written component

1. What does it mean to write in an 'academic' way?
 - i. Drop the term 'academic'? [e.g. Language to communicate ideas/practice?]

Next Steps

- Step 1: Exploratory study
- Step 2: Further 'exploring [of] cultures, processes, and experiences of academic writing' (Paltridge & Starfield, 2012)
 - Textography: a way of seeing how texts have been put together (adopting discourse analysis and elements of ethnography)(Paltridge & Starfield, 2024)
- Further investigate disciplinary/genre differences
- Develop more tailored materials (language to communicate)
- Staff development around writing in their discipline
- Continue to question my own assumptions about what constitutes academic writing (in different contexts)



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Thank you

Questions?