

THETA

The Higher Education Technology Agenda

Designing Academic Posters: an online resource to develop communication skills of doctoral candidates

Much debate surrounds the role of doctoral training and last decade has seen a greater emphasis placed on candidates enhancing their professional skills (Mowbray & Halse, 2010). Communication skills frequently appear in lists of generic skills to be developed as part of a PhD programme in the UK, Australia and US. (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner, & Whitehouse, 2004). At the University of Auckland, New Zealand, according to the Graduate profile, doctoral graduates should have obtained the following communication attributes:

2. Effective communication

(a) An advanced capacity to communicate ideas effectively in suitable formats to a range of audiences inside the field of study or discipline and to the wider community.

(b) An advanced ability to communicate effectively using written and spoken English and/or Māori, or where appropriate, other languages.

(University of Auckland, 2009, p.2)

The University of Auckland offers doctoral candidates several opportunities to communicate their research “to a range of audiences” (University of Auckland, 2009, p.2). The annual Exposure competition challenges students to communicate their research to the wider community and candidates receive funding to present their research at national and international conferences to specialist audiences. Two forms of communicating research at these forums are oral and poster presentations.

Poster presentations offer a medium where doctoral candidates can develop both their written and oral communication skills. During poster sessions, candidates can practise answering questions and receiving feedback about their research in preparation for their oral

defence. Candidates can discuss their research with experts, who could be future employers or collaborators. In addition, candidates attending conferences represent the University of Auckland and advertise the research conducted to potential students, collaborators and employees. Hence, producing effective and professional posters is both beneficial to the student and to the university.

However, good poster design is a challenge and many candidates struggle with understanding and using the medium effectively. Posters constrain the amount of information candidates can present, so they must learn to write concisely, use visuals to enrich their message and distill the most important parts of their research. Therefore, we have developed an online resource to assist students in developing the skills to produce professional and successful posters.

The online resource allows material taught in our poster workshops to reach a wider range of doctoral candidates, be accessible off-campus and be available as required by the candidates. Workshops run during the year, but the diverse nature of doctoral research means the timings may not coincide with conference attendance, work schedules and candidate location.

The resource was created using CourseBuilder (an in-house tool for online course development) and addresses several, problems identified with poster design:

1. Unsuited for the target audience
2. Key message obstructed by too much information
3. Excessive text
4. Poor design (Silyn-Roberts, 2013, p. 154)

Here we present the online resource through the digital poster medium so that delegates can explore the interactive resource at their convenience.

The 'Designing Academic Posters' resource is divided into four sections: planning, design, examples and software.

The resource takes candidates through the planning stages of their poster and encourages thought about who they are communicating to and the message they wish to convey. Candidates are asked to extract the important information from their research and record their research question, notable results and significance of their research. Next, candidates investigate interactive examples of good and bad design. They are challenged to use visual elements that enhance and support their message, rather than distract from it. Then, candidates can evaluate real examples of posters for different audiences. Hovering the mouse over different parts of these posters reveals annotations about what makes the posters effective. Finally, candidates are presented with information and some online tutorials about different software for constructing their posters.

Feedback on the resource from staff and students has been positive and it has been especially promoted by library staff in the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences. The Post-Graduate Student Association promoted the online resource in the lead-up to the



annual Exposure competition. It was especially useful for candidates from Faculties in which poster presentations are uncommon and who lack confidence about promoting their research through this medium.

Over the coming year, we hope to gain permission from current students to add their posters to the example gallery, as this a valuable aspect of the workshop that we would like to reproduce online. Also, we would like to include a new section on digital posters as the poster medium is evolving and the digital format offers a more in-depth experience. Finally, we envision that the resource could be adapted for specific faculties or modified for postgraduate courses that have poster assessments, to accommodate specific course requirements.

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