Harnessing our rivers of knowledge: time to improve nursing’s engagement with Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Knowledge on the move

In 2009, India mandated that all theses and dissertations from its universities would be required to be submitted electronically to a new national repository called Shodhganga: http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in. Combining Shodh, the Sanskrit word for research and discovery, with Ganga, the name of the country’s longest and holiest river, produced the striking metaphor of a national river of doctoral and masters knowledge. Although the database is more conservatively billed by its custodians as a reservoir, it is hard for the deskbound academic to resist the splendid vision of a nation’s theses and dissertations, now in electronic formats, rolling forward as a mighty unified force to feed into the global ocean of scholarship.

India is not alone in such activity. During the past 10 years Australia, the UK and many other countries have harvested theses and dissertations in electronic formats from the Institutional Repositories (IRs) of individual universities to create excellent national web portals for scholars from all disciplines. Importantly, a guiding principle has been to make these works openly available in full text format whenever possible. In turn there are now several international web portals such as the Networked Digital Library for Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) that harvest these scholarly works. So, in a relatively short time we have come a long way from the use of white gloves for the single copy unpublished thesis, or the use of microfiche and magnifying glass.

Nursing’s status and stasis

Given this global transformation in the availability of theses and dissertations (Copeland 2010), it would be reasonable to assume that an international discipline like nursing would not only contribute its outputs, but also develop, harness and exploit the many new opportunities being presented. Sadly, the little we know about nursing’s engagement with Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) suggests that we remain largely oblivious to the potential power of these developments. Review of the literature seems to indicate a complete absence of empirical studies in this field apart from our own initial review, scoping and evaluation work up to 2011 (e.g. see Goodfellow 2004, 2009, Macduff 2009).

Accordingly, during the past 4 years, we have carried out two interlinked studies of nursing scholars’ engagement with ETDs. The aim of the first study (Goodfellow et al. 2012) was to gauge the awareness and use of ETDs and ETD digital libraries among faculty, current graduate students, and alumni of graduate programs in nursing in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the USA. Using an online survey, we focused on schools that appeared to be in the vanguard of nursing ETD development, as manifested in ETD output and statutory submission requirements. However, less than half (44%) of respondents knew how to access an ETD from their institutions’ digital library and less than a quarter (18%) knew how to do so through a relevant national or international database. There were few significant differences among the participating countries. Our more recent follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of this group showed the widespread need for awareness raising and educational initiatives in this area, and the benefits that could accrue from instant access to full text theses. Prominent among these was the access to in-depth exemplars of methodology and its application. Nevertheless, there was little sense of electronic theses and dissertations changing conceptions of the design, nature, and scope of theses in a more fundamental way.

Possibilities for progress

The latter points are important because they touch on some of the transformative potential that electronic formatting can bring. The opportunity to make methodological detail explicit in an open and auditable way that many others can learn from is fundamental to the goals of scientific enquiry.
In effect, the full text open access ETD is like a virtual guest house (Macduff 2008) or, staying with the river metaphor, a virtual vessel. Students building such constructions benefit from in-depth study of other exemplars in terms of design, content and format. Without these there is the risk that students focus so closely on individual building blocks (e.g. journal articles with their reductionist summarizing) that they lose sight of the whole enterprise. Indeed ETDs can also reduce the need for words by offering the possibility to incorporate dynamic visuals such as film clips and dynamic audio material, which in the process can make reader engagement much more varied and interesting. However, we have found very few nursing ETDs to date that have exploited these possibilities.

Process and product, quality and quantity

It is essential to ask why ETDs seem to be so roundly ignored in nursing. From our experiences, many students and their supervisors seem to view electronic submission as merely an administrative process and an end in itself. This is to ignore the fact that the thesis or dissertation so often now becomes a product with a sustained life on the World Wide Web. There is much generic evidence of the huge increase in episodes of access to theses and dissertations since this became the case (e.g. Virginia Tech Digital Library and Archives 2011). However, with the exception of an evaluation of the dissemination of one particular thesis (Macduff 2009), it seems very little of this evidence comes from nursing.

It may be that this focus on process reflects a wider conception of the research degree as a self-contained process of apprenticeship. In this view, the life of the product beyond examination and award is of little importance. There is an interesting historical parallel here with certain trades like cabinet making where apprentice pieces (scaled down and lesser quality versions of the real thing) were made during the apprenticeship and tended to be relegated to storerooms once time had been served. If we buy into the apprenticeship model for research degrees, then ironically the students’ products (often fashioned in the time-honoured shape and form of the supervisors’ own products) could be seen as gigantic and imperfect versions of the real thing. If research assessment exercises are to be believed, the real thing is clearly high quality journal articles, representing the ideal incarnation of research.

Of course we would argue that theses and journal articles are simply different, somewhat like novels and short stories. To the connoisseur, a very good thesis (and there are many around) blends exemplary science, reasoned argument and narrative craft to become a work of art in its own right. We make the point as we think that one of the reasons that ETDs have been largely ignored in nursing is an inherent belief among some academics that they are not only unwieldy but vary widely in quality and are thus usually inferior to peer reviewed articles in journals. As Clark and Thompson (2015) point out, we all have to make decisions about quantity versus quality issues in nursing research and dissemination.

In this context, we often hear that the best material from the best theses and dissertations will be published in high quality journals anyway. However, we are unaware of any studies that demonstrate such a linkage. Comparisons between the quality of theses and journal articles are necessarily fraught as some of the criteria are different (e.g. journal articles may not necessarily have to make an original contribution to knowledge). Both, although, are peer reviewed. In the case of doctoral theses in many countries this will involve two or three doctorally qualified experts specifically appointed through a university committee. In the case of research journals there may be two or three reviewers and an expert editor, but what do we know of the quality of the reviewers? We cannot be alone in having a submitted article comprehensively rejected, only to be swiftly followed by a kind invitation to act as a reviewer for the same journal.

What the above considerations highlight is that, after more than 10 years of our theses and dissertations being made widely available in electronic formats, we still have very little systematic knowledge about their nature, scope, use and utility. Our studies across four countries suggest that the river of ETD knowledge in nursing seems to run on by or stagnate, largely unobserved, undiscovered and untapped. While the need for studies in other countries around the world is strongly highlighted, it seems that for many western countries ETDs, and related digital libraries, remain a much under-utilized resource in nursing. Therefore, concerted educational efforts are required within and across countries to open nurse scholars’ minds to their benefits and possibilities.

INETDIN: a new initiative to promote nursing’s engagement with ETDs

Having waited in vain for something substantive to be done about this, we have recently decided to initiate the International Network for Electronic Theses and Dissertations in Nursing (INETDIN). This network has been
founded by our collaboration of nursing academics and academic librarians from three universities (Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK; Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA and Curtin University, Perth, Australia). The main aim of INETDIN is to build an innovative global community of users and developers of ETDs in nursing. It seeks to do so through the following objectives:

- To raise awareness of nursing’s diverse repositories of open access electronic theses and dissertations, advocating for these internationally
- To act as a conduit to relevant Institutional Repositories (IRs), national portals and international portals housing these resources
- To build a formative, foundational international network of doctoral supervisors and students sharing knowledge and usage of ETDs within and across particular cognate areas
- To foster relevant skills and knowledge more widely among nurses in clinical practice and academia to enable increased access and use of ETDs
- To foster innovative formatting and content of nursing theses and dissertations, realizing the explanatory benefits of relevant electronic media
- To undertake relevant national and international research to build nursing’s knowledge base in this area
- To raise awareness of the activities of our key partner organizations

To this end we have developed a new website (www.inetdin.net) which aims to be a first point of reference, or ‘one-stop shop’ for nursing scholars engaging with ETDs. The website explains how to best begin to access ETDs, giving links to key IRs, national portals and international portals of relevance to nurse scholars. It also challenges potential authors to imagine and conceptualize their ETD at an early stage and offers models for this, while explaining related benefits and challenges, and giving answers to a range of frequently asked questions about preparing an ETD for publication. Links to award-winning ETDs from a range of disciplines are provided as inspiring exemplars and we seek to highlight innovative nursing ETDs. The evidence base to date on ETDs is summarized along with links to organizations sharing a similar vision, such as the Royal College of Nursing and the International Network for Doctoral Education in Nursing. Finally our ETD Student and Supervisor Community section seeks to foster discussion of current issues and sharing of information.

It is hoped that the network will grow well beyond the countries involved in the initial research studies to harness and promote global developments. Already we have had interest from India and other Asian countries. The initiative is formative, but is a long overdue first step towards nursing locating, harnessing and more fully exploiting our rivers of ETD knowledge. We warmly invite you to step on board with us on this journey.

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