



Student voice

## Online learning and writing

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Currently I am in that limbo when having completed my PhD thesis the awful wait begins for the date to be announced for my viva exam. This oral exam will decide whether I become a doctor of philosophy or have to undertake any editorial changes or worse 'revisions.' Having completed the text and agreed all the particulars of university regulations for typescript, referencing, quality of paper, etc. now comes the ominous wait for what happens next. After three years of intensive study having to wait for the examiner's verdict seems harder in some ways than the writing process itself.

Writing was for me, at times fascinating and other times intensely difficult, as impenetrable texts wouldn't yield their secrets. When writing slowed to a standstill other strategies had to be employed. It was these downtimes that became an opportunity to look for secondary sources so as to 'read around' a particular block. It was at this point that online learning was a real help. To begin with the discovery of google scholar was of use. I would place a title in the search page and wait to see what came up. However sometimes a title would appear that would not allow any download. The problem will be familiar to anyone who has tried to access an article from the web without having 'authorization.' Without authorization links to many journals become a dead end.

As I was a student at the University of Auckland having the correct passwords available meant that I could access databases in the university library. Here a search could be undertaken with a bit more sense of certainty. A helpful visit to the philosophy librarian onsite allowed me to look at how to use 'Expanded Academic.' I was also introduced to a number of specialist journals that were only available online. The searches however, even with the philosophy librarian, sometimes ran dry as they would end with 'printed edition only' appearing on screen. This problem of journal access one assumes will be a thing of the past in a few years time as copyright and other issues are overcome.

As my work was in the philosophy of music the next visit was to the music library. The librarian in music put me onto MUSE, a specialist music search engine. This tool and Expanded Academic were a help but personal preference led me in another direction. Finding myself neither in the world of musicology (study of music scores) or pure philosophy, meant that my favourite search engine became Journals Storage otherwise known as JSTOR. It was this database that allowed me to not only access journal articles on philosophy and music but related areas of music education, education and anthropology. Tracking down some journals was still hard and while Expanded Academic could give me an abstract it meant that I still had to visit 'Interloans' to get photocopies of some articles.

As my writing progressed I decided to submit an article for an academic journal. The journal that I chose was the online publication Action Criticism and Theory (ACT). I had often wondered if I could aspire to this journal that



to me represented the zenith in my field of philosophy of music education. I wrote a tentative 5,000 words and emailed it off thinking that the rest would be 'silence', in the words of Hamlet. To my amazement back came the reply that the editors, all of whom I held in high regard, wanted a finished article for the next edition. This was to be quite a learning curve for me, as writing something then receiving back copy that had been 'tracked' to be re-edited and sent back within a tight deadline was a new and exhilarating experience. Although I was downhearted by some of the reviews of my article I persevered even when I was obliged to cut a whole area that I had worked at for several months. Somehow I got everything completed by the deadline. An article I had originally submitted more in the hope of being put in an electronic queue was now included in the next edition ACT.

Following on from the experience of writing for an online journal came the process of proofing. As August 2007 approached, my deadline for completion and submission of the PhD was at hand. My big decision was whether to persevere with the proof reading on my own or whether to use another to assist. I decided I'd use an Oxford postgraduate student, who was advertising on the net, to undertake my final proof reading. After a few emails the PhD text was dispatched to England over the net. Within a week a tracked copy returned. The experience of working with the online journal paid off. When my text returned covered with a mass of commands and recommendations to 'delete' or re-word I didn't reel in horror. Even seeing many thousands of words disappear wasn't so bad. After a few re-writes and re-proofing the email exchanges tailed off and the finished product lay on the desk.

Reflecting on the process of online scholarship what lessons might be drawn from my experience? The impact of the online facility in the university library and at home was something that I found a great help to me, even though as a PhD student original source texts had to be found. Each student has their own preference and for me JSTOR proved the most productive. Writing for an online journal taught me a lot about how to improve my writing and scholarship. The cuts recommended to me during the journal writing influenced the shape of my final thesis so it can have a profound effect sharing ideas with the experts in your field. The journal writing was also a useful preparation to the proof reading stage. All in all, learning how to become accustomed and practiced in using online scholarship taught me how to access information and then how to use the online environment for proof reading and enhancing the quality of my writing. Now that's in the past, reality strikes, and here I am, back to the waiting game...

See the ACT article on:  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/php/archives\\_v5.php#5\\_2](http://act.maydaygroup.org/php/archives_v5.php#5_2)