

Creating digital stories for impact: a new take on the academic poster

Jennifer Warburton¹

Jennifer Warburton¹, Christina Ward²

¹University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, jwarb@unimelb.edu.au

²University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, christina.ward@unimelb.edu.au

THE INTERNATIONAL VISUALISE YOUR THESIS COMPETITION

The ability to present your research ideas clearly, succinctly and dynamically to engage broad audiences is an essential engagement skill for the connected researcher. Public engagement can be an enjoyable and motivational experience and can raise the profile of both the researcher and the research being undertaken, and developing these skills may lead to more success in grant writing, gaining tenure, and building industry connections.

This paper will briefly outline Visualise Your Thesis (VYT) competition as a vehicle for building graduate researchers' research communication skills, and transferable digital capabilities, and taking the poster format to the next level.

The genesis of the Visualise Your Thesis competition came out of a frustration with the traditional, printed academic conference poster. The authors challenge the effectiveness of traditional posters for knowledge transfer. All too often conference posters present overwhelming amounts of new knowledge, undeveloped aesthetics and with little design regard to assist visual information processing. Conference posters typically have a short life-span and limited audience. The Visualise Your Thesis competition seeks to change the poster culture and give entrants an opportunity to develop the capabilities to push their messages beyond the traditional audience.

ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC DIALOGUE

Seeking to engage broader audiences and find opportunities for research communication beyond the traditional academic cohort is a key skill that the VYT competition aims to develop. The VYT competition challenges graduate research students to tell their research story in in a minute. Entrants are tasked with producing an attractive and informative 60-second digital presentation that introduces their complex research, its significance and potential benefits, to non-specialist audiences. A completed, stand-alone presentation provides a succinct, discoverable, shareable 'explainer' product that can be linked to, embedded in profiles and signatures, can be hosted on digital channels, social platforms, given a DOI, and used to engage with the general public, potential collaborators, the academic community, industry, and employers.

CAPABILITIES AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

VYT provides entrants with both essential skills and structure to produce engaging presentations while letting them control their narrative and representation. As both producers and consumers of the completed videos, graduate researchers gain real insight into selecting and using appropriate creation tools, navigate complex copyright and intellectual property considerations (both property of others as well as protecting material of their own). Creation of a durable digital product gives early researchers an opportunity to test engagement strategies and platforms, and receive insight into their efforts through engagement metrics.

Past VYT entrants have told us that the task of synthesising complex research concepts and research benefits and packaging into a short narrative with meaningful graphics, helps them refocus and re-engage with their research projects. The competition provides an opportunity for interim rewards during the long research process as they see the effects of sharing their progress widely, which many find motivating. The process and outcome are fun, but not frivolous.

The skills required to produce these digital objects are not necessarily provided in graduate research training. From experience we note that VYT entrants including 'digital natives' have a wide-ranging digital capabilities, research communication experience and present with diverse training needs.

INCREASING COPYRIGHT LITERACY

The number one training requirement identified from the 2018 'National' VYT competition which ran at 12 institutions, was copyright literacy training. Copyright awareness is an essential skill for scholarly communication and key to open practices in research, however many VYT entrants needed support with understanding copyright in the digital environment. In particular, awareness around third-party created materials: licensed content, creative commons licences, and usage of content created with 'free' online tools. A suite of VYT and Copyright videos were produced to support the 2019 contestants. In turn, this increased awareness helps participants make informed choices around future use of their own creations.

TECHNICAL DELIVERY AND DESIGN

VYT competition administrators at the different institutions variously provided technical training, videos, workshops, drop-in support and testing sessions to support their entrants. Entrants are provided with a pre-formatted "bookend slides", which frame the individual entries, and are exposed to ways of using the presentation tool that go far beyond traditional slide decks. The presentation tool was chosen as the platform of choice - ubiquitous in all universities, thereby available to all students, and also powerful and adaptive enough to let researchers capture and present their ideas exactly as they want to. VYT competitors are provoked into thinking creatively about research communication.

Most researchers aren't trained in graphic design and benefit from introduction to key design elements such as layout and typography, and are interested in learning about easy tools for creating data visualisations and infographics. At a

number of VYT-participating institutions, workshops with design professionals were held to provide insight into creating well-designed visuals for effectively conveying research questions, data and research results.

The VYT competition brings together all of the skill-sets described above and submissions are judged on their visual impact, use of technology, appropriate content pitched at the right level to effectively present the research, and scholarly citizenship (including copyright compliance). The competition's structure and support materials encourage participation from all disciplines, and stages of graduate candidature, allowing for differing levels of skill, creativity, interactivity and interpretation. Candidates familiar with the culture of poster presentations are encouraged to extend their skills, students from disciplines that don't typically produce research posters are given the resources to participate on even footing.

Graduate researchers can benefit from research communication opportunities like VYT. The competition supports the development of crucial digital capabilities and communication skills, which enables them to successfully share their research stories in a crowded information and time-poor marketplace. The benefits extend to institutions as well. The competition entries as standalone objects can easily be incorporated into a range of online environments and shared widely - showcasing the breadth and relevance of inspiring graduate research in progress at their institutions.

REFERENCES

1. Visualise Your Thesis. Available from: <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/visualiseyourthesis>, accessed 21 June 2019.