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ISSUE REACTION: HONORS THESES IN THE CREATIVE AND PERFORMING ARTS

JOANNE RUTKOWSKI

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ABSTRACT

This 'Issue Reaction' focuses on describing the meaning of an 'honors thesis' in the creative and performing arts and defining appropriate approaches for guiding students on their thesis work in these fields. In general, a 'project' complements the thesis (the work of art) and is the written reflective component. The process for completing the project and written work will vary according to the nature of the work and student. One approach is to establish why the project is important and should be undertaken, how it will be completed or approached, and who will be involved or what the outcome will be. For this approach, students often keep a journal to reflect on the project during its formation. In another approach, students complete the artistic work and then reflect, analyze, and critique. Both approaches are equally valid and each requires the faculty advisor to play a critical role in ensuring the inclusion of a reflective component.

DISCUSSION

The issue reaction takes shape around two questions: What is a thesis in the creative and performing arts? What process is most appropriate for students in completing a thesis?

The experience of the authors is that projects tend to be interdisciplinary. For example, one thesis may be in musical theater while another includes a sociological perspective of Bob Marley with a focus on a study of his lyrics (Greer). Some expose students to equipment and require students to participate in workshop sessions or to extend the thesis projects over two semesters (Hartley). Finally, some projects are traditional and are conducted along the social and behavioral sciences; however, even in those cases there is a developmental process that students undertake in selecting their topics. For example, one student left for the summer with a project identified but got involved in another project over the summer. When the student returned she apologized for not working on her thesis. In fact, she had, it was just a different thesis topic! One view is that the work of art, or project, stands alone as a thesis. The other view is that the work of art, or project, is an important part of the thesis but students must be able to reflect on their work and write about it. Hartley summed up the value of the latter by stating, "Because these are undergraduates, they must not only create but also take the time to make it conscious." And while the reflection on the work does not need to be long, it is a critical component.

Two approaches emerged for the thesis documentation. One approach is similar to that of other theses. Students first make decisions about the project before it is undertaken. Questions such as why, how, who, and what are answered through the written work prior to undertaking the project. In this approach, students often maintain a journal as they work to reflect during the process. The other approach is the opposite. Students complete their project

first, then go back and reflect, analyze, and critique. Both these approaches are valid and are usually determined by the nature of the project and the student's individual approach to his/her work. As Greer concluded, "There are different modes of approaching art: synthetic, analytic. They aren't always complementary. There are different ways of incorporating the two."

Finally, the term "project" tends to be more appropriate for the reflective works than "thesis". Regardless of the approach, selecting a faculty advisor who has particular expertise in the field is critical.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joanne Rutkowski specializes in music for children aged birth through early adolescence. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses, works with young children in various settings and conducts research on the nature of children's singing voices. She has been an honors advisor for over 10 years.