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Expert Perspectives & Methodological Excerpts: Stitching a thesis quilt

Emer Emily Neenan

Trinity College Dublin, School of Education, Carlow Town, Ireland (neenane@tcd.ie)

Much like many crafted items, research must be functional and fit for purpose, but there's no reason why it can't also be beautiful, creative, and expressive.

In working with teenagers and young people on geoscience education and climate literacy, it became increasingly important to me to find ways to express my research that would connect with people who didn't have a foundation (yet, or at all) in academic discourse. My PhD thesis is therefore written as a creative semi-fictional epistolary; a collection of documents that tell the story of the research from the first tentative proposal to my would-be supervisor, to the final submission. I made the choice to produce a creative thesis for my student co-researchers and other readers, but the person who benefitted most from it was me. The creative process in designing my thesis was fulfilling, fun, and facilitated a deeper and more meaningful engagement with my own research.

In discussing my thesis with another researcher, trying to explain how and why I was writing geoscience education research through annotations and poems and chatlogs, I suggested the metaphor of a quilt. A quilt is inherently a functional object that must meet certain qualifying standards in order to be accepted and used. But also, a quilt can be an intricately crafted artwork, reflective not just of its use, but of the person who makes it; their choices, their joys, their cares. As a quilt is an artwork with a specific useful function of keeping someone warm at night, so too a thesis (or paper or project) can be artistic and creative while also still having useful functions of building knowledge, generating data, or developing theory.

So, long story short, I also sewed a thesis quilt, to express both the process and outcome of my doctoral research as a piece of fabric art!