

Feature: 'The Academic Book of the Future: Practice-as-Research' by Rebecca Lyons

The Academic Book of the Future is a two-year project funded by the AHRC in association with the British Library, with a **core Project team** of academics from University College London and King's College, London. The Project investigates the academic book and its possible futures, as well as its current and emerging contexts and communities. The Project has already published one output, **The Academic Book of the Future**, a Palgrave Pivot reviewed on **LSE Review of Books**, and has another currently in progress – an experimental BOOC (Book as Open Online Content) in collaboration with UCL Press. In this article, the Project's Research Associate **Rebecca Lyons** reflects upon the two publications and the process of undertaking Practice-as-Research.

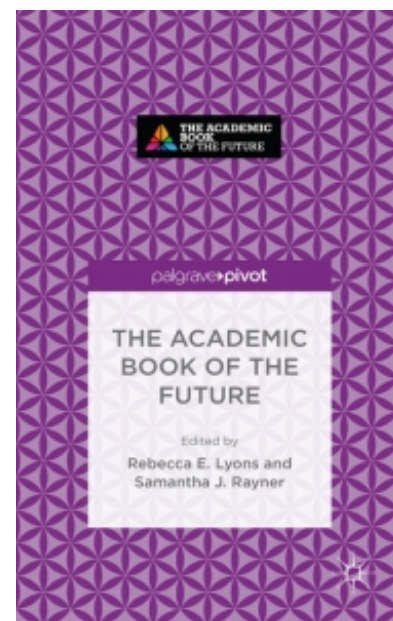
The Academic Book of the Future: Practice-as-Research

In March 2015, my colleague Nick Canty (UCL) and I visited the Palgrave offices at King's Cross to discuss possible collaboration between **The Academic Book of the Future Project** and the publisher during the inaugural Academic Book Week (9-16 November 2015). Caffeine and enthusiasm were probably to blame when, at one point during the meeting, someone made the outlandish suggestion: 'Let's make a book in a week for Academic Book Week!' Following further conversation over subsequent weeks, this suggestion was modified slightly to a book in a few months, rather than a week. And the rest, as they say, is history. A book was born.

Dr Samantha Rayner (co-editor) and I outline the process of commissioning, editing and producing the Pivot in its introductory chapter (which is freely available to [download](#)), so I won't repeat that here. Instead I'd like to focus for a moment on the process of Practice-as-Research and the profound collaboration that this volume represents. Firstly, it is important to clarify that there was no imperative for the Project to publish in its first year – it was not a requirement, but a conscious decision to 'put our money where our mouth is', as it were; to roll up our sleeves and work with our partner communities in academia, publishing, bookselling and libraries to create something – to experiment, together – and in the process to capture just a few of the many conversations currently taking place around the academic book.

The spirit of experimentation and Practice-as-Research is evident in every aspect of the commissioning, writing, editing and production of the Pivot. The chapters are shorter than in most edited collections – at 2,000 words each, they are micro-experiments in themselves – and are well-researched thinking-out-loud provocations (see, for example, Michael Pidd's chapter on 'Wearable Books' – a futuristic satire). The turnaround demands were fairly provocative too: a month to write, a week to edit. The proposal reviews came back just before the authors submitted their chapters, and were positive. The authors themselves were not all academics, a decision that was also intentionally experimental. A quarter came from academia, but the rest were drawn equally from bookselling, publishing and library perspectives.

Keeping with the spirit of openness and collaboration, the cover design was opened to a public vote. Ingram Lightning Source very generously printed the first limited edition Academic Book Week copies of the book at no charge, and these hard copies were distributed – again, with no charge – at a showcase event at the British Library at the end of Academic Book Week. The book is also Open Access, and therefore freely available to anyone with a computer (or other device) and an Internet connection. Whilst not radical if viewed alone, when combined these



factors show how valuable Practice-as-Research can be. Under the pressure of deadlines but with the strong support of all concerned, everyone learned a great deal from the process.



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Now the Project is going one step further. We are applying the same spirit of curiosity, boundary-teasing, collaboration, innovation and experimentation to a new Practice-as-Research publication with UCL Press. A [Call for Submissions](#) has been launched for content to populate a new type of book – a BOOC (Book as Open Online Content). The term was coined by UCL Professor Melissa Terras, and describes a peer-reviewed academic digital publication that is content- rather than format-driven, and which publishes work on an ongoing basis over time, as and when it is ready, rather than in one go. It is also completely Open Access. Our Academic Book of the Future BOOC will contain textual content, such as articles and chapters, reports and blog posts, but will also include audio-visual material, such as film and images, written by a range of contributors from both academia and the publishing industry. We will also experiment with the inclusion of other types of content, such as Storifies of Tweets from a conference or email conversations. The BOOC will be published on a web-based platform designed by the team at [Armadillo Systems](#), who have worked with UCL Press on their interactive digital publishing platform.

More important, however, than the inclusion of different content types, are the questions around how these pieces of content are peer-reviewed, edited and presented in an academic publication, and what the user journeys through them can or should be. In the BOOC, content will be displayed in blocks that can be rearranged according to user preference – for instance, sorted by theme, date, author, keywords, format, genre etc. This allows for the choice of a linear journey through the content's narrative, as in a printed book, or a completely bespoke journey of each individual user-reader's choosing.

When I met with the designers, this raised issues about the value applied to certain types of content: should we devise a taxonomy by which content can be prioritised in the publication? For instance, should long text-based content (such as articles or chapters) always be displayed first, before other content types such as Storifies or images? How should a Storify be presented in order to qualify as 'academic'? Can this – should this – even be attempted and included? Should it have a narrative element, commenting on the individual tweets? Is it a peer-reviewable item of content, or should it be considered more like an appendix or footnote, as supplementary evidence to a main overarching theme? This kind of publication raises a huge number of very interesting questions.

We want to be as transparently self-reflective about this experiment as possible, and so some effort will also go towards recording the thought processes behind each decision in a separate section of the BOOC.

UCL Press is the ideal collaborative partner for this project – as the first fully Open Access university press in the UK, they are well-versed in experimentation. Their stated vision is to ‘combine responsiveness, innovation and quality publishing to become one of the leading academic publishers in the world, and the Open Access publisher of choice for authors, editors and readers’. It is just over nine months since UCL Press’s first titles were published, and the total download figures for eleven books in nine months is now over 18,000 copies in over 150 countries. The BOOC will sit alongside these other publications on the [UCL Press website](#), but it is also hoped that it will enable us collaboratively to push new boundaries, ask important questions of the possible academic book of the future and reflect meaningfully and openly upon the processes involved.

Rebecca Lyons is Research Associate for the Academic Book of the Future project.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog as an entity, or of the London School of Economics.

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