The Ignorant Supervisor:
About common worlds, epistemological modesty and distributed knowledge

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Title slide

Creative practice-led PhD research projects investigate *and* reveal gaps in contemporary knowledge, including knowledge about PhD research itself. Thus, in 2009, James Elkins asserted that "no one knows how to supervise these degrees". And this provides interesting opportunities "to rethink the supervisor's role", as "the precondition | or at the very least | the corollary condition of developing the reflexive doctoral practitioner" (Elkins, 2009: xii, 65).[1]

While all candidates undertaking creative practice-led research are operating on the fringes of the traditional Western University to some extent, some are negotiating creative and academic existences across several intersecting worlds. I focus here on the intersections between Western and other cultures' knowledge traditions, and my presentation today refers mainly to two supervision relationships.

Moana&
Azadeh

Moana Nepia, is a Māori choreographer, dancer and visual artist. Azadeh Emadi is a spatial designer and video maker from Iran. You will see their work screening throughout my presentation, first two clips of Azadeh's work-in-progress and then two of Moana's (his final performance was not documented).

To provide appropriate supervision and support for candidates whose projects do not fit into the mainstream paradigms is not only a matter of social justice and research ethics, but also in the best interest of new and emerging research fields.

For there is an interesting, generative intersection of creative practice-led research agendas and non-European approaches to knowledge.[2] Non-traditional candidates (that is, typically not male-white-middle-class-and-fit as the majority was thirty years ago; see Taylor & Beasley, 2005: 141) increasingly choose to work in this very area. If well supported, they have extra-ordinary contributions to make to our common body of knowledge. At least for now, though, they will most likely work with supervisors who are not quite at home with those research agendas.

In these cases, I suggest, support is best provided by assuming a position of epistemological modesty (Arendt, 1992: 33; Barone, 2008: 35) – making room for a creative link between the interests and dispositions of non-traditional candidates and the concerns of non-traditional knowledge areas or fields of research.

When supervisors find the uncertainty associated with epistemological modesty daunting they may become "very directive in shaping and guiding students' work; discouraging students from intellectual risk-taking […]; [or] blurring the boundaries between reviewing and

writing students' theses" (Halse, 2011: 562).[3] This is likely to suppress a knowledge gap between them and those candidates whose research is informed by cultural knowledge that is not well represented in the university.

If candidates feel compelled to engage with Western or "European subjects" (Dorrian), and with methodologies their supervisors are familiar with, this gap will be less pronounced. But then, a more significant contribution to knowledge may have been missed.

Culture does not necessarily translate to *non-Western*, by the way – even though it does in Moana and Azadeh's cases – it can also translate as *discipline*.

Some years ago, my own lack of disciplinary knowledge in some Masters supervisions led me to question the effects of this lack, and to search for effective ways of addressing it. A subsequent commitment to different modes of candidate-supervisor collaborations was based on three assumptions

One, a supervisor is not, in the first instance, a conveyor of knowledge.

Two, postgraduate researchers already have substantial pockets of relevant and refined knowledge to draw on.

Three, and very importantly, they are able to activate networks of distributed knowledge, often outside of the University.

Come to think of it, disciplinary-cultural ignorance on my part has been an issue in relation to nearly all candidates I have worked with. Today, I focus on Moana and Azadeh because their **creative practice-led theses are deliberately drawing on their original knowledge cultures**.

Ignorant Supervisors and Common Worlds

AUT currently requires that supervisors have "expertise in the field in which the student research is located". This is a common enough regulation, which aligns with the institutional consolidation of research expertise, partially through PhD research supervision. That supervisors and candidates' research should be closely aligned is a logical conclusion.

However, Mark Dorrian (University of Newcastle, UK) sees the role of a supervisor as that of a "critical respondent", who engages "through dialogue", "rather than speaking from a position of expertise in that particular field". He even suggests that a supervisor who is "not necessarily an expert" might be more open to "a different kind of approach to the subject matter".[4]

For Jacques Rancière, expert explication even "divides intelligence into two": one superior, one inferior (1991: 7). In the extreme, a "method of the riding school master" directs students to surprising discoveries, which stultifies them, as they feel they would never had made themselves (59). Ranciére follows Joseph Jacotot, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, who adopted an extraordinary teaching method by chance. A lecturer in French literature in Flanders in the 1820s, Jacotot spoke no Flemish and many of his Flemish students no French. Jacotot distributed a bilingual edition of a novel, from which students were to learn French through comparison. That they succeeded in a remarkably short time convinced Jacotot that teachers can teach what they don't know, and that students can instruct themselves (10).

What fascinates me about Ranciére's ideas in the context of creative practice-led theses, is an emphasis on a *thing in common* (in Jacotot's case, the book), which establishes an egalitarian intellectual link (13).

"[P]laced between two minds, [it] is the gauge of … equality". It acts as a bridge, a passage, but – thanks to its *materiality* – "it is also distance maintained" (32). Distance prevents explication, "the annihilation of one mind by another". And the *thing* acts "as an always available source of material verification …" (32).

Rather than conveying knowledge, the *Ignorant Supervisor's* role is to affirm the equality of intelligences and their diversity; to discourage false modesty and encourage learning through experiment and experience, attentiveness and persistence, and the use of one's own intelligence.[5]

MN2 – Kehua (3:28)

Enduring, man-made things, like a table, similarly provide continuity for Hannah Arendt: "those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity". Only in "the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects" can "worldly reality truly and reliably appear" (57). A *thing in common* here not only mediates different perspectives, as with Rancière, but it also contributes to a world in which horizontal plurality prevails over vertical hierarchy.

Arendt's notion of "train[ing] one's imagination to go visiting" (1992: 43), and to think from standpoints not one's own, is also useful in our context. The space of the visiting imagination is "open to all sides". It allows our particular conditions to stand next to those of our hosts – never becoming the same, though, and always maintaining their distance. We co-produce our common world, which is "not a given but produced as a result of visiting" (Peng, 2008: 74), across those distances in conversations.

The double movement of the imagination, between representation and visiting, produces both distance from the familiar (a space for thinking and seeing something a-new) and connectivity with the strange

(through stories told from a plurality of perspectives). This work of distancing and bridging is typical not only of critical thinking, but also of creative processes: it "distances me from the familiar and takes me to standpoints that are unfamiliar" (Disch, 1994: 160).

Two supervision relationships

Moana is a mature student with an extensive career as a dancer, choreographer, painter and tertiary educator. His thesis, begun in 2008, involved several disciplines, only one of which is established at our school. It was originally entitled "The Poetics of Performance: strategies for innovation and creativity within the context of Maori visual and performing arts". At the time of examination in 2012, the title had changed to "Te Kore – Exploring the Māori Concept of Void."

When Moana developed his Application for Confirmation of Candidature in 2009, some internal reviewers' comments flagged a distinct risk that it might be evaluated according to aspects relevant to a particular reviewer's discipline but irrelevant in Moana's research. Welby Ings and I (as co-supervisors) suggested he narrow his focus, and Moana chose to explore the role of Te Kore in Māori accounts of creativity. This topic and his methodology drew upon a field of concepts from iwi and hapu knowledge traditions. [*Aratika* is composed of ara = pathway, approach; tika = appropriate, correct.]

The greater emphasis on mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) meant for me, as a supervisor, that I knew less about Moana's research field and methods than before. This was scary enough. What made it even scarier was a prevailing consensus amongst colleagues about the importance and necessity of a tight

fit between candidates and supervisors' research fields.

However, this perspective really only considers the dyadic relationship between supervisor and candidate – but what about other members of the "learning alliance" (Halse & Bansel, 2012: 384)? Moana is extremely well connected in a plurality of intersecting worlds of choreographers, dance practitioners, visual artists, managers, academics and Māori tribal repositories of knowledge. To expand the range of consultation formally available to him, we appointed an additional Māori supervisor, Wiremu Kaa. I also encouraged Moana to further develop his collaborations with some of his PhD peers.

Following a very successful examination in December 2012, Moana is now attending to minor amendments to his exegesis – some spelling and punctuation mistakes.

MN2 – Whero2 (10:00)

When Azadeh immigrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2003, she switched languages and cultural context and completed Bachelor and Masters degrees in Spatial Design. She is now in the second year of her PhD candidature, with a thesis informed by Persian/Islamic worldviews and entitled "*Pa Dar Hava* (Feet in the Air) – an unfolding of a Middle Eastern space of exile in installation". With Azadeh, I am truly an *Ignorant Supervisor.*

Her video practice explores the conjunction between pixel/frame and individual/community in a realm of transnational moving images. Theoretically, she works with Persian/Islamic art forms and philosophies (particularly Mullah Sadrah's); and Gilles Deleuze's views on cinema. She has the support of two secondary supervisors: Dr. Geraldene Peters and Prof. Laura Marks from Simon Frazer University, Vancouver.

Azadeh has just returned from Canada, after three months of months discussing the literature on Mullah Sadrah and Deleuze with Laura Marks. In discussion about the current state of her thesis, she has announced that she would like to increase the written, scholarly part of her thesis from 50 to 60%.[6] By default, scholarship is driving her project at the moment. In an attempt to create a *thing in common*, we are now mapping the territory of her thesis in diagrammatic form to reposition practical modes of investigation. My role here is obviously not that of a conveyor of knowledge; rather, I see it as challenging Azadeh to make informed decisions about the shape of her thesis and to start thinking through practice again – regardless of the eventual weighting.

Conclusion

In such moments, I feel twinges of uncertainty and anxiety that can make me close down and become rigid. A supervisor interviewed by Christine Halse (2011: 563) reflected that fear of non-completion can incline supervisors towards spoon feeding and filling deficient areas with *Spakfilla*.[7] This is unsustainable: graduates eventually realise that they do not have the knowledge or skills they need. A different scholarly identity for both supervisors and candidates, involving collaboration, interdependence, and an appreciation of each other's specific capacities, would always see knowledge in the diverse contexts of its production and distribution (Halse & Bansel, 2012: 388).

In transdisciplinary and participatory research projects, supervisors will do well not to assume the relevance of their expertise – in the supervision of non-traditional candidates, such epistemological modesty seems crucial to me. Supervisors still have a lot to do: as critical respondent, guide and/or midwife, to help in setting up

the epistemological territory, appropriate structures and contexts; and in translating the expectations and requirements of ethnic, institutional and disciplinary cultures.

In a book I am about to finish editing, on which I cannot really expand here, [and to which, incidentally or significantly, Welby, Moana and another of my PhD candidates have also contributed] my AUT colleague King Tong Ho recommends the early production of glossaries and various forms of documentation, to create a shared vocabulary and context (Engels-Schwarzpaul & Peters, 2013). These are useful for consultation and mutual education, and, as *things in common*, they act as material references in the exploration and testing of different ideas in dialogue and debate. As part of the exegesis, they may later also provide a reference and focusing device for examiners. Of course, the work-in-progress itself constantly provides, in its different iterations, a material thing in common, even though it is ultimately wholly shaped and owned by the candidate.

The inherent uncertainty of creative-practice led, non-traditional thesis projects requires, I suggest, an appreciation of each other's capacities and a willingness to educate and be educated. To ascertain the best chances for non-traditional candidates' success, we also need to identify their particular ways of excelling and achieving distinction in their work, so that this recognition might, in turn, "redefine the standards by which distinctiveness is recognized" (Disch, 1994: 57). Creative practice-led research has a lot to gain here.

The appreciation of different modes of excellence, and an acceptance of the principal limitation of knowledge held in any one person, could further become a platform from which to review doctoral education in general.

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Notes

I would like to acknowledge Moana Nepia's excellent radical cut of my initially over-worded draft for this presentation – his culling was so radical that I had a choice of what and how much of his advice I wanted to follow and still stay under the word limit!

[1] The very uncertainty about questions, methods and standards at PhD levels, and the roles and re-sponsibilities of supervisors and candidates in multi-disciplinary and practice-led PhDs (Taylor & Beasley, 2005: 41) opens onto new possibilities.

[2] Knowledge transfer and acquisition occur often through other than textual means here; knowledge is seen as an accumulation of, often collaborative, practices; there is less separation between aesthetic and other types of knowledge, but a greater connection with the situated knowledge of communities.

[3] In every PhD project, there will be "inevitably a huge splashing around at the start, where various things are being tried and ideas being tested" (Dorrian et.al., 2012). This generic uncertainty can be intensified, for instance, by disputes about the relationship between an artefact and the written component. When appropriate questions, methods and standards for practice-led creative research are determined "on the hoof" (Taylor & Beasley, 2005: 42; see also Webb, 2012: 3), supervisors, candidates, and examiners certainly have to negotiate a volatile terrain. They need high levels of negative capability (Keats) to remain coherent in changing circumstances (Bonz & Struve, 2006: 152). This capability permits open and creative engagement with unexpected and surprising aspects – the more so, the greater the trust and confidence prevailing in the supervisory team (Winnicott, 1967: 372).

[4] Which, in his experience, "is almost always not the case", anyway. Dorrian speculates that someone who is "positioned in terms of a much more dominant position", "a recognized expert in the field", might be less flexible (Dorrian et al., 2012)

[5] Ranciére contrasts explicator-instructors with artists, whom he sees more closely aligned with equality and common action. His consideration of the pedagogical relationship takes place, though, in a tightly vertical, hierarchical atmosphere. By contrast, Hannah Arendt explores horizontal difference between equals in the public realm, the common world. We constantly co-produce this in-between, which relates and separates us at the same time, gathering us *and* providing distance that "prevents our falling over each other" (Arendt, 1958/1958: 52).

[6] This has generated discussion not only of what makes a thesis practice-led, but also how reading and making can be brought into a generative relationship. The potential shift raises the question, yet again, of how far outside of one's own area of knowledge one can venture and still be a good enough supervisor. The answer depends, again, partially on Azadeh's access to networks outside AUT. At the moment, it is difficult to get a sense of her overall thesis since Azadeh has not produced video work since last year.

[7] This danger is particularly high when faced with intensifying accountability regimes {see \Halse, 2011 #3070}.

[8] This corresponds to ideas of *Mode 2* knowledge production, and epistemologies and transdisciplinary applications that are more "context sensitive, eclectic, transient, and inventive than traditional (or mode 1) … research practices and methodologies" (Van Manen, 2001: 850).