12 Principles for the Effective Supervision of Creative Practice Higher Research Degrees

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http://supervisioncreativeartsphd.net
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In late 2012 and early 2013 we interviewed 25 experienced and early career supervisors of creative practice higher research degrees. This journey spanned five universities and a broad range of disciplines including visual art, music, performing art, new media, creative writing, fashion, graphic design, interaction design and interior design. Some of the supervisors we interviewed were amongst the first to complete and supervise practice-led and practice-based PhDs; some have advocated for and defined this emergent field; and some belong to the next generation of supervisors who have confidently embarked on this exciting and challenging path.

Their reflections have brought to light many insights gained over the past decade. Here we have drawn together common themes into a collection of principles and best practice examples. We present them as advice rather than rules, as one thing that the supervisors were unanimous about is the need to avoid proscriptive models and frameworks, and to foster creativity and innovation in what is still an emergent field of postgraduate supervision.

It is with thanks to all of the supervisors who contributed to these conversations, and their generosity in sharing their practices, that we present their advice, exemplars and case studies.

The interviews were designed by Jillian Hamilton and Sue Carson and conducted by them, along with Liz Ellison, in November 2012 to June 2013. Transcription and content mapping was conducted by Liz Ellison. The booklet was compiled in collaboration. All direct quotes have been attributed anonymously. A full list of interviewees appears at the end of the document.
Experienced supervisors agree that there are many aspects that creative practice higher research degrees have in common—fostering creativity, supporting the integration of theory and practice, and promoting the generation of new knowledge in the creative arts, for example. However, they also recognise the need to embrace diversity and a ‘tailor made’ approach for each student and their individual project. Experienced supervisors also appreciate that students have varied experience and skills, which are an integral aspect of their candidature. They therefore recognise that each student may need different forms of support around the written and practical components of the research.

A student-centered approach involves recognising each student’s unique attributes, needs and capacity. The lynchpin of this principle is support with respect—for the research student and their ideas and creative passion; for the integrity of their research question(s); for their chosen mediums of expression and how they approach their work; and for their capacity as practitioners and researchers. Supervisors emphasise the importance of providing space for questioning, and it is worth noting that many supervisors are reluctant to determine what a student’s thesis should look like in form.

“Some candidates ask you to lead them; others don’t like you interfering … I have yet to find a single student I have ever taught who doesn’t have something to offer; the question is how do you bring that out?”

“I think I can help find a way for students to get excited about what they’re doing—with respect for the student, the question, and trying to empower the student to be really confident with what they’re doing within the academy.”

1. Adopt a student-centred approach
“student focused, student led”
Because creative practice research is a relatively new area of postgraduate supervision, and it has been necessary to build momentum and the capacity of universities, many early supervisors have supervised beyond their own field. As one notes, “I was only one of a few people in the university who had actually supervised to completion [when I arrived]. And so … if anyone wanted to do a PhD, I was supervising.” This involves advising PhD students who are working outside of a supervisor’s own principal research domain, practicing in different mediums, or following conventions that are fundamentally different to the PhDs they undertook themselves. Far from finding this daunting, many convey that it has invigorated their practice, teaching and outlook; and it has required them to focus on core principles of research design, while being attuned to the unique attributes of every individual project and candidate.

Agility in supervision expertise continues to be important in the creative arts because of the many forms of PhD outcomes that constitute viable and valuable contributions to the field, because interdisciplinary projects are commonplace, and because supervisors continue to face shifts in the field in terms of form and practices. As an emerging supervisor explains, “I have a sense of how to do a PhD, and I see the work of the creative and match it in standard. The candidate is happy to be guided by that”. While the core principles of research design are central to PhD supervision, it is also important to acknowledge the differences in methodologies and processes of different fields and not seek to impose familiar approaches across disciplines and projects.

“Working across discipline fields is fine. I usually try to have someone in the pocket of the discipline area as an Associate Supervisor, or as close as possible… [It is often] managed by having two [supervisors] in this way with me taking charge of the ‘PhD-ness’ of it. It’s about how to go through and what’s required [in terms of scholarship] – not always about being an expert in the precise field.”

“With creative practice, they’re always working across borders. I like to think that at PhD level the practitioner is innovating or renovating the question of what the field is. They’re bringing something that’s fundamentally questioning to the field, truly asking this question: ‘can we easily now define what performance is?’– so they’re kind of pulverizing a discipline rather than saying, ‘I’m going to hold in check the notion that there are two nodal points and I’m going to be shuttling between them’.”
While some supervisors are very confident in the validity of creative practice as research (indeed some of those we interviewed were fundamental in establishing and defining it), others raise concerns that differences between traditional frameworks and creative practice as research may still be misunderstood and its value questioned by both universities and candidates. As one supervisor notes, “There’s a potential anxiety about not seeming as big as cancer – that’s legitimate but that’s not a reason to not do it. We need rigorous research degrees that explore art.” In addition, some supervisors noted that when a candidate is an established and well-known practitioner with a ‘public face’ they may experience anxieties about translation of their practice into a scholarly form.

The fact that creative practice is different to other forms of research, as well as to other forms of practice, is viewed in positive, exciting ways by supervisors. As one supervisor notes, “It allows you [as a candidate] to immerse yourself in your practice. It’s an incredible privilege”. Supervisors describe creative practice research as a ‘different modality’ or way of thinking, as a type of ‘performativity’, and as ‘experiential communication’. Many supervisors argue that it has advantages for the discipline (and more broadly) because it allows for a different mode of answering the same question that a traditional research project might pursue, and because it necessarily produces different outcomes—not just in form but also in new knowledge.

While establishing rigor around methodologies, outcomes and new knowledge creation, supervisors need to be confident in the validity of creative practice research as well as comfortable with its undefined boundaries and continued experimentation. After all, rigorous experimentation is integral to creative practice research.

“There is an exciting but troublesome idea that there is a sense that anything goes, [which is] worrying for students, and I can say this from my personal experience. Students are still experiencing it – we found last year that there were students constantly asking ‘is this research, can I write like this?’. There are a lot of unresolved issues there. But the difficulty in pinning it down is that this goes against the grain of what we were doing.”
4. The theory and practice need to speak to each other

“together the theory and practice make the thesis”

Although naming conventions may differ across institutions and local contexts, there is broad agreement amongst supervisors that the written component/exegesis/thesis/explication is an integral (if sometimes difficult) component of the higher degree by research. There is consensus that its role is to articulate the research problem and creative practice methodology and to contextualise the outcomes in relation to them. To this end, experienced supervisors advise that the exegetical/written work must engage with relevant theory as well as with the existing field (through a contextual and/or literature review). Some supervisors, though not all, argue for the inclusion of reflection on the practice. Supervisors agree that some form of interweaving or integration of the practice and the writing is necessary to best articulate the contribution of the research.

It may be helpful to see the written component as some supervisors do, as “another performance or modality of the research, which helps to clarify [the practice] in a more familiar and intelligible way for the examiner” or, as another supervisor puts is, “[both] expressive forms are a way of pursuing important questions – the evidence is in the work itself and in the written component”. Either way, supervisors tend to see them as absolutely integral to each other.

“They can’t sit separately; together the theory and practice make the thesis. [They can be seen] separately – practice can be exhibited, research can be published without the exegesis; but the exegesis can’t sit alone without the practice. And the practice is enriched by the research. We can consider the practical outcomes by themselves … It might be very high value work without that written component but it’s not a thesis. It’s a symbiotic relationship.”

“The purpose of the written component is to help the student come to an understanding that’s deeper and richer: not just about [the work’s] reception but also about its production. Its purpose is two fold.”
5. The theory and practice might not be done simultaneously, despite the need to work together in the completed work

“some things can’t be expressed in words”

Supervisors overwhelmingly agree that the theoretical and practical work must be of a similarly high standard and they recognize the importance of their integration. However, they also recognise the tension between theoretical and practice processes, and acknowledge that it is often difficult to work on them simultaneously. Some supervisors suggest that the practice should lead while others propose that theoretical and contextual research drives the practice (this depends largely on their discipline perspective). However, none suggest that continuously working on both simultaneously is crucial, and supervisors are often acutely aware of the difficulties of balancing creative and theoretical progress.

It is important that supervisors encourage students to progress both theoretical and practice aspects overall, while acknowledging this difficulty. To assist them, it may be useful to consider the student’s primary mode of expression and to help them use it to form a bridge between theory and practice.

“Both [modalities] can be creative and both can be analytical; often the student is involved in the ‘making’ of the work and this can often be a physical and processual expression of the research question and of the answer/outcome of the research. There are some things that can’t be expressed in words, hence the creative practice is a form of expression and a way of remunerating a particular idea, argument, position.”

“You can get further ahead if you consciously look for ways to remove the anxiety of presentation of the ideas so you can get back to the thinking of the ideas. We’ll come in here and have food, and the whiteboard and there’s no writing. There’s only talking and drawing and food. This relies purely on thought, and not the formatting of thought … as diagrams or narrative or conversation. Generally what happens is that they will take a photo of the whiteboard: a landscape of the thinking they’ve gone through in a strategically guided journey to find the essence of what it’s after. There’s always a residue there of someone’s journey.”
6. Balance the big picture and attention to the detail

“zoom in and zoom out”

With an eye on timely completion and the rhythms of candidature, supervisors emphasise the importance of a student-tailored approach that combines a sense of routine and regularity but also allows students who prefer to work independently to be able to do so (within the constraints of the degree). To generate a routine for the student, most supervisors believe that regular meetings and shifting between the big picture and attention to detail are crucial. Meetings may take place in either the studio or the office, but two particular purposes are clear: to discuss the direction of the project (at a macro level) and to provide constructive feedback on the detail of the practice and the writing (at a micro level). An emerging supervisor speaks of having two ways of looking at things: “one is a microscope and one is a telescope to rise above [the project] and what it says about this, and will it interest people who aren’t in your little case study”.

Besides helping to ensure relevance, ‘zooming in and zooming out’, as one supervisor describes it, helps to contain scope and maintain momentum. Some supervisors provide a roadmap for completion, with clear points of focus along the way, some keep an eye squarely on the central research goal and question, and others encourage a gradual ‘resolution’.

“They keep going outwards, but I keep pulling them in at different points to explore the centre of where the research is.”

“I will work with [the candidate] quite explicitly around budgets, timing, importance of getting things to conferences and exhibitions, making stuff, writing stuff, meeting deadlines. So all the planning things are quite explicit. So every six months they draw out timelines for the next six months. The most explicit part is around planning of time resources.”

“It’s almost like making an art work – unformulatable [sic], but there’s a point of resolution.”
Concern about quality and integrity often prompts discussions on the role of academic writing in creative practice higher degrees by research. Supervisors—both new and experienced—acknowledge the importance of the written component in “helping the student do justice to the work they have done.” However, academic writing is an area in which support may be needed. An experienced supervisor discusses “working with candidates who have a very damaged belief in their ability to write”. He comments that, “with them I’ll work immersively. I’ll climb inside their drafts and we might sit at the computer here and work extensively on three paragraphs”. Supervisors also acknowledge the importance of feedback on drafts and the iterative development of the written component in shaping the PhD outcomes. However, editing drafts is a time-consuming activity and this raises concerns for many supervisors.

It is sometimes necessary to provide a great deal of academic writing support and it is always necessary to interrogate the writing at a close level. Some supervisors offer strategies for managing it. An emerging supervisor says clear deadlines are crucial for some of his students and so is an efficient process: “he hands in one section, I review it while he works on the next section”. An experienced supervisor describes a similar approach through a ‘three draft process’:

“For confirmation of candidature, for example, I’ll see three drafts. Two weeks between each draft for me to look at it and then time for them to make changes. The first draft is concept and content – what do they have? Are they missing anything or, on the other hand, have they gone off on tangents? I only look at these aspects. The second review is structure – is it structured in a way that makes sense of what they’re doing and in a way that is most persuasive as an argument? There are major and minor structural changes – lots of arrows. The third draft is the final editing, looking at the sense of sentences. It’s like making a sculpture. You’d get all of the materials on site and then create an armature—a structure. That might just be a contents page. Then you put all the bits on the structure and move it to produce the right shapes. And then you begin to refine it.”
Some supervisors reflect that the focus of their attention can tend to be pulled towards the written work, particularly when candidates are established practitioners and are less familiar with academic writing requirements. As an emerging supervisor notes, “there is a broad assumption sometimes that the practice will take care of itself. The thing that needs most attention is the document. Students have a compulsion to make art and be creative–it’s harder to do the writing. It makes them more anxious. It is easy to respond to that anxiety and deal with the thesis, and then spend less time on consultation in the studio”.

It is important to remember however that, regardless of a student’s ease or enjoyment of it, the practice requires full attention. As an experienced supervisor advises, “Be very involved with the creative product as well as the exegesis”.

“[You] involve yourself, go to exhibitions, talk to the work. [I am] very much involved with the creative product as well as the exegesis. You have to be quite generous with your time – and the more one’s able to do that, the better.”

“My general style would be to be very intimate with the work and then make sure the student is one with the work and conveys that synthesis.”

“Respond to where the work is, always. Sit with the work and out of that engagement – not without an awareness of milestones – you must respond to the work. Have faith. Experience tells you.”
9. Provide support while managing interpersonal relationships

“a strategically guided journey”

As yet, there are few formal processes for managing creative practice higher degrees by research and the supervisory ‘relationship’ (unless there is an escalating problem). Some institutions have candidate-supervisor agreements, but some supervisors reject this ‘management’ because it is important to consider the candidate as a newcomer to the field with individual working styles, strengths and support needs.

Supervision necessarily involves a tailor-made approach to support each candidate. Candidates are often balancing other stresses in their lives alongside (or exacerbated by) their degree. However, supporting a student through milestones and supporting them through their life are distinct concepts. Support involves balancing pragmatic support like frequent meetings, being attentive to the work, modeling rigour and honesty in feedback.

“You have to turn up. There are a whole lot of good pedagogical things to do: your phone switched off; not be harried; don’t make the student feel as if they are imposing on you. You need to read and think about what they have written; you need to read the emotional intelligence; you need to be supportive when they are facing their greatest fear; and you need to be tough.”

“It’s creating a supported environment, but also one that’s enlivening and inspiring. You can’t be just nice... The most important tool a supervisor has is the ability to ask and formulate the question.”

“It is managing the psychosocial aspects; in practice-led research this is heightened due to candidates dealing with ambiguity. It is also proactively advocating for the study. This is not injecting a level of advocacy with criticality; it is saying the student might need extra money and you support the student to go through the process.”

It may be important to maintain a balance between personal and professional relationships.

“I have to make a demarcation. I have a part of my life that is not accessible to students, otherwise it would take over your life.”

“During the course of a PhD students can have major crises – as a supervisor where is the line beyond which you’re not helping ... sympathizing but not helping? It’s almost better to say, okay, let’s just talk about the PhD.”
While the terminology, processes and timing of PhD milestones are not consistent across the sector, their role is fundamentally similar – to ensure progress, rigour and timely completion. Of particular importance to supervisors is the confirmation of candidature (which may be otherwise named). It usually comes in the first 9–12 months. Some supervisors believe that milestones need to be carefully managed in order to be useful. As an emerging supervisor notes, “Now there’s tons of milestones and coursework to support people to get from A to B: coursework; progress reports – these are all distractions to the actual work.” Many others see them as fundamentally important to progress and an opportunity to pull together components of the research and practice. As an experienced supervisor suggests, “Being indeterminate [in creative practice] doesn’t mean sitting around for a few years. For me the milestones are very important”.

It is important to ensure that students understand the necessity of milestones in the institution, and for supervisors to assist them to utilise them in the most practical and meaningful way. One experienced supervisor for example uses them to help their students to “get into the academic space”. And others believe that, through critical engagement, milestones can become a fundamental part of strengthening the final product before examination.

“I try to help them shore the project up from different directions so that when they get [to the milestone] they don’t experience criticisms at that point. I try to anticipate issues and gaps and any potential barrages from all angles. We do rehearsals of their confirmation presentation and discuss potential questions [from the panel] and think about responses. We try to anticipate trouble and it’s really to make sure that [the student] strengthens their work and gets through fine.”
Supervisors are conscious of formal institutional requirements and that the candidate’s work must conform with PhD regulatory frameworks in order to ensure smooth entry, milestones and examination. As one experienced supervisor counsels, “With the shrinking timeframes, as supervisors we are more aware of our responsibilities to the candidate and the way we report it as research to our school.” On the other hand, supervisors emphasise that they enjoy their students having freedom to experiment and want them to be able to shape their projects according to their individual goals and contexts. Supervisors – particularly experienced ones – are reluctant to feel bound by certain forms of ‘management’ or ‘proscriptive models’.

Perhaps what is most important then – as a supervisor – is to assist candidates to navigate their way through process, while being open to experimentation; and to support them to reach a balance between allowing the work to find its own performativity and identity and conforming to the requirements of the degree. Instead of prescriptions or models, supervisors advocate using case studies and exemplars. Many supervisors use the works of previous students to model a range of possible routes to success.

“[It’s about] not trying to impose any sort of artificial overlay that takes the colleague away from what their core passion is. What I hope at the end is that the student becomes more and more energized by the work they’re doing, rather than being drained because there’s a sense of having to please me or conform to an academic requirement or be burdened by the weight of what they think the academic thing is.”

“[The] key for supervisors of practice-led research is they need to be highly tolerant of ambiguity.”

“As a newer supervisor you tend to hang on to the guidelines. As you are more experienced you are less anxious.”
12. Reflect, discuss and share your practices with colleagues

“This best academic development is talking things through”

One of the most pronounced, yet unanticipated, outcomes of the interviews was the effect on supervisors who participated in the process. They embraced the opportunity for reflecting upon and discussing their practices in detail, with enthusiastic and often frank and detailed discussion. Supervisors saw the interviews as a form of academic development. As one supervisor remarked, a questionnaire would not have resulted in the same depth of response: “I would not think on my feet; I would have generic and polite answers. But in interviews you’re responding to questions, words, phrases on the fly and it is very useful [and] allows us to learn”. It brought to light a wealth of tacit knowledge that has been hard won, but rarely articulated. For some supervisors it had a profound impact in terms of confidence in their position, willingness to progress conversations with other supervisors in their school, and to present at conferences.

The value of providing supervisors of all experience levels with an opportunity to articulate their process and practices, their concerns, and their experience and strategies for success is clear. It suggests that reflective practice is of considerable value to supervisors and, given the broad resistance to ‘generic’ central training, participating in dialogue with other supervisors is an important component of supervisors’ professional development.

“This is professional development … we don’t get the chance to talk. The best academic development is talking things through.”

“I found it quite interesting to answer questions. A supervisor’s role is such a cloaked affair compared to other contexts. It makes you realise that whole degrees are without a lot of training or consensus.”

“I enjoyed the conversation. I have found answers that I may not know how to repeat. It is fantastic that you are interviewing supervisors across the board because the debates and ideas are pushed through by a handful of the vocal, argumentative. It is fantastic to capture the view of the lurker.”

“There’s a sense of peer sharing that works for me - a multiplicity of voices, keeping things open rather than closed.”
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More resources for supervisors and examiners

http://supervisioncreativeartsphd.net
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