Effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees:

Literature Review

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Introduction

To date, there has been little discussion in the literature, or in strategic ALTC/OLT projects, on the supervision of creative practice Higher Degrees by Research (HDRs). However, as this topic sits at the intersection of two established fields– namely the emergent field of creative practice research (also referred to as practice-led and practice-based research) and the pedagogy of research supervision more broadly—a foundational understanding can be developed from a review of the literature that spans these two domains. This literature review therefore includes an overview of how the emergent field of creative practice research has come to be defined and pursued, as well as what Australasian universities and supervisors consider important aspects of postgraduate research supervision across disciplinary fields. A number of Office of Learning and Teaching projects and fellowships have been conducted in both of these domains over the past decade, and literature has been developed more broadly on both topics.

The Emergent Field of Creative-practice/Practice-led/Practice- based Research

History and current contexts

Higher research degrees in creative practice–in fields such as visual and performing arts, music, design, creative writing, film and media–represent a relatively new area of postgraduate study in Australasian universities. In a comprehensive scoping study entitled *Creative Arts PhD*: *Future-proofing the creative arts in higher education,* Baker and Buckley (2009) chart its history, noting that the first creative arts professional doctorate was offered in 1984 at the University of Wollongong. However, it was not until the Strand Report's formal recognition of practice-led research in 1998 that a wide range of creative disciplines began to support HDR students to submit creative works with an accompanying written document or 'exegesis' for examination. Baker and Buckley (2009) track a ten-fold increase in enrolments in creative disciplines over the next decade, growth which has also been documented by Evans, T., & Macauley, P., & Pearson, M., & Tregenza, K., (2003) and Brien, D.L., & Burr, S., & Webb, J., (2010).

This rapid, unprecedented growth has been fuelled by a combination of factors. Firstly, creative practice doctorates provide a new form of accreditation for creative practitioner-academics, which allows them to meet increasing expectations of a PhD as an entrance level requirement for academic roles. Secondly, in 2003, creative outcomes came to be recognised within the Excellence in Research for Australia

(ERA) framework, which established the legitimacy of practice-led and practice-based research. Thirdly, the value of the Creative Industries and its research modes to the economic and cultural fabric has been emphasised in recent years (Higgs, Peter L.; Cunningham, S., & Pagan, J. D., 2007)[1]. And finally, an increasingly competitive funding environment has led to increased HDR enrolment targets across the board. With 30 Australasian universities now offering creative practice higher research degrees, creative practice has come to be widely recognised as a legitimate methodological choice for students engaging in higher degrees by research.

DEFINITIONS

Despite its rapid and widespread uptake, creative practice remains an emergent field of postgraduate study, and its definitions and approaches are yet to stabilise. There is broad agreement around a base definition: HDRs in creative practice combine the production of creative artefacts (for example art or design objects or processes, creative writing, film, new media, performance, or a combination of such mediums) with a written, theoretical component. And, as Dally, K., & Holbrook, A., & Lawry, M., & Graham, A. (2004) note, there is increasing recognition that, while the practice may speak for itself (within the context of an exhibition for example), as a research endeavour, both the exhibition/outcomes/products and the written thesis must speak to each other. There is consensus that, "The mere presence of art [is] not indicative of a novel paradigm called artistic research" (Biggs, M.A.R., & Büchler, D., 2009: 9). That is, there is t creative practice undertaken as a research endeavour must be framed as such within a written explication, which explains how it is situated within its field, how is underpinned by a methodology, and how it contributes to the formation of 'new knowledge'.

However, there remains a lack of consensus around key terminology, and much debate around what the paradigm of 'artistic research' entails. During the past decade, various defining terms, models, methodologies and research paradigms have been proposed in academic papers, as well as in university guidelines. The terms 'creative practice as research', 'practice-led research' and 'practice-based research' are variously employed (sometimes for different types of projects and at other times interchangeably). Postgraduate degree titles and forms (at doctoral level alone) range from PhD, to Professional Doctorate, to Doctorate of Visual Arts and Doctorate of Creative Industries. And the written component is variously referred to as a thesis and an exegesis. Moreover, the evolution and contestation of the field continues to play out on the ground, as students and their supervisors experiment with what is possible in terms of the form, content and structure of both the practice and the written document.

Much of the definitional work that has occurred around creative practice research has been a result of efforts to establish its legitimacy and value, and to differentiate it from other fields of research or, as Estelle Barrett puts it, to establish, "an identifiable location within the broader arena made up of more clearly defined disciplines or domains of knowledge" (2006: 7). It is widely agreed by advocates of creative

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[1] See also www.unctad.org/en/docs/ditc20082cer_en.pdf and
https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-culture-media-sport/series/creative-industries-economic-estimates

practice as research that there are significant conceptual and methodological differences between scientific and creative research. For example, citing Eisner's (1995) definition of research, Dally et al. write that, "scientific methods, such as formulating hypotheses, pursuing solutions and reaching conclusions may be incompatible with artistic practice" (2004, para 3). Biggs and Buechler go on to suggest that the key to effectively supervising PhDs in creative practice is in understanding the distinctions of this alternate paradigm. They write,

> supervision of the PhD in areas of creative practice is perceived as complex only when it attempts to produce research that imitates received paradigms rather than being in accordance with its own worldview. (2009: 12)

A number of authors have set out to identify, or perhaps to establish, what the distinctions are. Darren Newbury's early positioning report for the United Kingdom Council of Graduate Education pragmatically identified the types of new knowledge contribution that creative practice research might make (1997: 3). They include innovations in design, aesthetic development, methods and methodologies for art and design, new understandings, models and theories of art/design, as well as empirical novelty. Other writers have offered relatively open definitions. For example, Dally et al. (2004) argue that the key factor of artistic research in advancing understanding is in "recontextualizing the familiar and awakening viewers to new ways of seeing, thinking and knowing" (para 4). Biggs and Buechler suggest that while traditional research involves a question and an answer, and a method that meaningfully connects the answers to the questions order to produce 'knowledge'; the 'alternative paradigm' of creative arts research revolves around the artefact, rhetoric, and personal experience. Creative production may generate the question, be instrumental in the response to the question, or form an integral part of the communication of the outcome (2009: 8-9).

THE PRACTICE

Many authors argue that the creative practice occupies a central position within, and plays an integral role in, the research process. For example, Hamilton and Jaaniste (2009) argue,

> Practice-led research is a unique research paradigm because it situates creative practice as both an outcome and driver of the research process and positions the researcher in a unique relationship with the subject of the research.

And, in defining what it means to conduct higher degree research in/through, creative practice, Brien et al. suggest that "outcomes typically encompass research products that make an original contribution to knowledge in the field, and creative products that satisfy relevant aesthetic standards" (2010: 2). Understanding what constitutes the latter, somewhat esoteric, part of this definition provided the impetus for their current OLT funded project, *Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards* (2010). It responds to criticism around the quality of creative practice HDR outputs (in terms of content, rigour and assessment standards) and sets out to establish a consistent understanding of high-level creative aptitude.

METHODOLOGIES

The methodologies of creative practice research are emergent and, as yet, are

unsettled. There has been increasing discussion since Carol Gray first argued that "'practice-led' research [is] initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners" (1996: 3) and, borrowing from Donald Schön, suggested that this involves practitioners researching through 'action', and 'reflecting in and on action'. Haseman (2006) and Bolt (2008) have since developed the concept of practice-led performative research, which challenges the binaries of qualitative and quantitative data collection. Barrett (2005) describes the research process as experimental and speculative; involving a dynamic interplay of understandings gained from theory, practice and the researcher's situated knowledges.

Recently, Hamilton and Jaaniste (2009) have argued that distinctions exist between creative fields due to differing forming contexts, research goals, intentions invested in the 'artefacts' (creative works, products, events), and knowledge claims made for the research outcomes; which all gives rise to a plurality of methodological approaches and ways of evidencing and reporting new knowledge. Gray also described a 'pluralist approach' and the use of a multi-method technique or 'expansive synthesis', in which a range of approaches and interpretive paradigms may be employed. That is, there is no single methodology for creative practice research, but different creative fields may adopt, adapt, and recombine a range of methodologies from other fields and, indeed, establish new ones.

THE EXEGESIS

Besides the quality and role of the practice, the written component is also of particular interest to supervisors. Some scholars in the field have differentiated the emerging genre of the exegesis from the dissertations or theses of other academic fields. Indeed, this is part of the scope of the *TEXT* journal in Australia and the *Writing PAD* project in the UK. A number of writers have explored the role of the exegesis in the creative practice PhD, including Bourke, N., & Nielsen, P., 2004; Hamilton, J. & Jaaniste, L., (2010); Ings, W. (2013); Dally, K., & Holbrook, A., & Lawry, M., & Graham, A., (2004). It has variously been described as an explication of the practice, a framing document, and a thesis; and various models have been proposed in the literature as well as in university guidelines. Milech, B.H., & Schilo, A. (2004) describe what they call the 'context' model, in which the exegesis explains the theoretical and philosophical frameworks, historical precedents, or conditions of practice. They also describe a seemingly opposite approach, which they call the 'commentary' model, in which the exegesis acts as an 'explanatory annotation' to the creative work and focuses on reflections on the creative process, the works, and/or their reception. Hamilton and Jaaniste (2010) describe a 'connective' model of exegesis, which combines these approaches into an integrated thesis. However, the function, form, and even the name of the written component remains contested. Indeed this subject is currently being addressed in a large, ARC funded project entitled *Writing in the Academy: the Practice-based Thesis as an Evolving Genre* (Paltridge, B., Starfield, S. and Ravelli, L., 2011).

STANDARDS

Highlighting the diversity of definitions, frameworks, methodologies, guidelines and models in the field of creative practice research, the OLT (formerly ALTC) scoping

project, *Creative Arts PhD*: *Future-proofing the creative arts in higher education,* recommends that we must resolve the confusion of terminology across the sector along with other anomalies, such as inconsistent admission processes and examination procedures (Baker and Buckley, 2009: 12). Indeed, a key aim of this project was to, "provide an overview of current practices, which in turn could then provide the basis for the discussion of best practice and movement towards consideration by the sector of benchmark standards" (Baker and Buckley, 2009: 12). Similarly, in the project report for the OLT/ALTC project, *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statement: Creative and Performing Arts,* Holmes (2010) argues for the need to establish a clarifying statement on higher degrees and the creative arts. He proposes convening a network of Deans to help manage standards and address the variations in HRDs offered and maintained in Australian institutions.

On the other hand, while flagging the lack of consensus around terminology and institutional structures, and the wide variation in examination guidelines provided by Australian institutions, Dally et al. (2004) report a surprising level of consistency between the Visual Arts examiners they interviewed. Despite being drawn from a range of backgrounds– including curators, art historians, art practitioners and academics from across institutions; what these examiners/informants considered to be doctoral standard–both in terms of artistic merit and exegetical standard–was in almost absolute agreement. While a small study (N=15), this research emphasises the need to focus on academic attributes, such as what constitutes new knowledge in the creative arts, and the standard of the examinable components, above consensus on functional aspects and terminology. It suggests that a shared, tacit understanding of 'quality' may already serve to provide an unstated, yet nonetheless, consistently applied 'standard'.

SUPERVISION

While there has been little investigation into supervision practices in the field of creative practice research, some OLT projects on creative arts higher research degrees have raised issues relating to it within their recommendations. In *Creative Arts PhD*: *Future-proofing the Creative Arts in Higher Education*, Baker and Buckley draw conclusions based on interviews with postgraduate coordinators. The final report notes that "supervision was seen as a critical factor in the success or otherwise of the student's experience and the quality of the submission" (2009: 77). Hence, a key recommendation of this project was that,

> Further examination of patterns of supervision could assist in establishing some best practice models to assist in creative-arts-specific research supervision training programs (2009: 97).

The *Creative Arts PhD* project also identified issues around the (limited) number of academic staff in creative fields with doctoral qualifications (and so the number of registered supervisors), as well as the number of students that supervisors are allowed to supervise (which varies institution by institution), which have led to pressures on intake capacity. It also raised issues around consistency, noting that some universities accept a doctoral qualification *or equivalence* as the capacity to supervise. It pointed out hat this can lead to generational differences, given the growing expectation for newly employed staff to have a PhD (2009: 89-90). And, while contextual factors, such as the backgrounds of supervisors, have led to

supervisors sometimes supervising different 'parts' of the PhD (i.e. the exegetical component or the creative component), the report identified a gradual shift to supervisors overseeing the entire thesis, as more supervisors become able to do so. This process aligns with the increasing recognition that these components are integral to each other. The report concludes that rigorous and fine-grained data collection would be useful in identifying issues such as overloading of supervisors and managing candidate demand (: 91).

The OLT supported project, *Australian Writing Programs Network (AWPN)* by Webb, J., Brien, D. L., Bruns, A., Battye, G., Williams, J., Bolland, C., and Smith (2008) has similarly identified issues that have arisen out of the rapid growth of creative writing programs in Australian universities. They span from inconsistencies in policy frameworks and variations in supervisor experience and expertise. On the latter, they write,

> ... teaching staff come from highly diverse academic and professional backgrounds... many have little research training, or knowledge of what is involved in preparing a candidate to complete a doctoral program. Other supervisors are experienced researchers in cognate fields but have limited background in creative practice. (: 7)

Both project reports note differences between institutions in terms of training, and the *Creative Arts PhD* project recommends establishing national training and 'best practice' standards for academic development for supervisors. On the other hand, the AWPN report recommends developing and promoting "knowledge building about supervisory best practice", based on network building and encouraging a community of postgraduate writers and supervisors across universities (: 6). Through a series of workshops in 2008 (which covered the selection of candidates; research ethics; coursework for HRDs; methodologies; practices; examination practices; personal/professional issues in relation to supervision; and informal and formal student cohorts) the project modelled the approach it recommended, with an emphasis on information provision, knowledge transfer, networking and community building.

HDR SUPERVISION

The supervision of HDR students is a significant learning and teaching activity in Australasian universities, which has been subject to significant changes in recent years. Firstly, there has been a substantial increase in the intake of candidates into postgraduate research programs as a whole since 2000 (a 28.6% increase from 43,433 to 55,869; with the largest relative increase (nearly 50%) being in the area of PhDs (DIICCSRTE, 2013)). This growth is due to higher intakes of both domestic and international enrolments, as well as an expansion of postgraduate research degrees into new and emergent fields. At the same time, relatively static funding allocations have resulted in increased pressures on completion rates and limits to duration of candidature. As noted in a recent discussion paper, *The changing PhD* (Group of Eight, 2013), "An overriding challenge for universities is to increase the number and quality of graduates without corresponding increases in funding"(: 5). Secondly, the past decade has seen significant changes in the nature of postgraduate research, driven by an increased diversity of students, research areas, and what constitutes HDR outputs and the examinable thesis (Hammond et al., 2010). This diversification

has increased the complexities of supervision processes and the approaches of supervisors who, at the same time, also face increasing pressure to balance their own academic and research responsibilities.

Given this combination of change factors and pressures, there has been considerable discussion around the inclusion of coursework (particularly around academic literacy), as well as calls for clearer management structures for dealing with 'risk'. However, it is the role and capacity of supervisors that has been the most prominent area of scrutiny for, as the recent Group of Eight discussion paper (2013) concludes, "It is difficult to underestimate the importance of supervision and the quality of supervision in creating the PhD experience and in ensuring the completion of a PhD." (: 13).

The OLT and its predecessor bodies have funded a number of learning and teaching projects and fellowships on postgraduate research degree supervision. They span a range of discipline areas and diverse topics from graduate entry to research skills training and coursework in PhD programs, supporting international and indigenous students, scoping studies of established and emergent HDR fields (such as law, business, information technology, creative arts, and trans-disciplinary studies), as well as examination and effective supervision. It is the resulting outcomes, particularly the project reports and scholarly publications, that focus on the latter, which are of particular importance here.

A recent project by Hammond et al., *Building Research Supervision and Training across Australian Universities* (2010) provided a detailed exploration of cross-disciplinary supervision. The project's methods—a symposium, surveys (with 1884 responses), interviews, and dissemination—generated many new insights into the role and practices of supervision in Australasian universities. It provides insights into the implications of the professionalisation and formalisation of higher degree research education for supervisors. Central to this change, they argue, is quality assurance and the increased scrutiny of supervision practices that this quality assurance has driven. They write, "Supervision no longer occurs just in the private space between supervisor and student" (2010: 7). However, they go on to argue that it is necessary to look beyond compliance drives, and to engage in discussions around supervision pedagogies. A key recommendation of this project is the theorization of what it means to be a supervisor, and what constitutes effective practices of supervision. The project report pays particular attention to changes in supervision practices. Importantly, it notes that there is a "decreasing relevance of supervisors own supervisory experiences for supervision in the twenty first century university, and hence the need for supervisors to develop new supervisory practices" (: 12).

This agility in supervision expertise is especially pertinent to the creative arts–not only because it is a relatively new area of postgraduate supervision, which means that first generation of supervisors must necessarily supervise PhD projects that are fundamentally different to their own, but because experienced, as well as second generation supervisors, continue to face shifts in what is still an emergent field. Moreover, there are many varieties of PhD outcomes that constitute viable and valuable contributions to the field, and interdisciplinary projects are commonplace. For these reasons, it is likely that a supervisor may be supervising students who are

working outside of their own principal research domain, are practicing in different mediums, and are following methodologies and conventions that are fundamentally different to those in the PhDs they undertook themselves.

Hammond et al. take up the implications of the changes in HDR cultures and institutional and sector expectations of supervisors. They argue that academic development for supervisors must involve more than opportunities to 'top-up' supervision skills; it must "address the increasingly complex nature of supervision" (2010: 14). The report recommends that training should include "*reactive, pre-emptive* and *proactive* dimensions" (15, original emphasis). However, noting concerns voiced by supervisors that universities value compliance over quality, the report cautions against tying academic development to quality assurance processes. Furthermore, it cautions against the efficiencies of centralised generic training, noting that,

> there is considerable resistance from supervisors to compulsory, centralised and formal training programs. There is also considerable cynicism about the value of such programs (15).

By contrast, the report notes a continued interest in decentralised training. What is highlighted by this project is the need for local, discipline level exploration of supervisory practices and processes. This potentially includes the development of contextually targeted exemplars of good practice for supervisors and informal mechanisms for supervisor training, such as peer mentoring.

One of the most significant discipline-based studies on postgraduate supervision was produced by Christine Bruce's 2009 ALTC (now Office of Learning and Teaching) fellowship, entitled, *Towards a pedagogy of supervision in the technology disciplines*, which focussed on Bruce's field of expertise: science and technology. The findings of her fellowship fall into three categories: the perspective and assumed roles of supervisors, approaches to supervision, and specific supervision strategies.

First, from questions about how supervisors perceive their practice, the project situates postgraduate research supervision in a unique place within universities—within the "teaching-research nexus". Bruce concludes that,

> In practice, while many universities position research higher degree supervision at least in some respect as a teaching and learning practice, typically supervisors largely consider supervision as part of their research endeavor rather than as part of their teaching endeavour. (: 9)

Bruce's final report goes on to identify three primary supervisory roles that are adopted *as required* throughout a student's candidature. They include directing roles, collaborative roles, and responsive roles. Within these roles, the report identifies three defining approaches to supervision namely: a direction setting approach, a scaffolding approach, and a relationship approach. Drilling down further into the detail of these approaches, the report extends to identify key strategies for effective supervision. In summary form, the strategies can be described as follows: negotiating expectations; creating a structure; generating outputs; focusing on the big picture; creating space and creating groups. Bruce concludes by discussing the potential of adapting this pedagogical framework to other disciplines, and it is worth considering whether these ideas provide a potential framework for creative practice supervision. Such a framework could provide an interesting trigger for dialogue amongst creative

practice supervisors in a forum to assess its relative merits for the field and what adaptation may be required.

Besides the findings and outcomes of Bruce's fellowship, what is particularly interesting for this project is her research methods, which included interviews and small group discussions with supervisors to provide initial methods of data collection. Then, through the process of qualitative analysis, a propositional 'best practice' framework (a pedagogy of supervision) was developed and presented to supervisors for comment and discussion. This participatory and dialogic approach has elements of distributed leadership embedded within it.

Moreover, the impact of Bruce's dialogic research methods provides a useful precedent. Of particular interest in the report is the description of the way in which the interviews and small group discussions produced benefits for the respondents themselves. Bruce writes,

>Individual interviews enabled supervisors to become aware of their own, previously implicit, thinking. Supervisors' new self-awareness was commented on explicitly in their evaluation comments. (: 24)

It also produced benefits for the group as a whole, as Bruce goes on to explain:

>Holding conversations with supervisors in small group and workshop contexts raised awareness of each other's approaches. Interest in adopting the approaches of colleagues was explicitly commented on in evaluation responses. (: 24)

That is dissemination took place *through the conduct of the research*. This provided insights into the benefits of early dissemination to this project. Notably, as we discuss in the outcomes section of this report, we encountered a similar response from those participating in our interviews and the ESCARD symposium we held, which allowed supervisors to reflect and to share stories and experiences with colleagues.

Bruce concludes that conversations around supervision as a teaching and learning practice are crucial. Indeed, she argues that the key to effective academic development for supervisors is to encourage dialogue, with self-reflection providing a tool through which personal preferences and insights can be articulated. To further extend this dialogic process, Bruce goes on to recommend a mentoring scheme for less experienced supervisors. Such a recommendation aligns with the recommendations of earlier reports (including the *fIRST* project), albeit for different reasons. And, finally, to enable regeneration of supervision pedagogy in the future, the report recommends increased support for supervisors and postgraduate student researchers, as well as the introduction of faculty level awards as a form of recognition of good practices. These insights and recommendations can be aligned with Hammond et al.'s (2010) recommendation for contextually targeted exemplars of best practice and informal, personalised approaches to supervisor training. They provide a useful foundation for this project's questions around appropriate forms of academic development for new and established supervisors of creative practice higher research degrees.

ONLINE SUPERVISION RESOURCES

Besides formal publications and project reports, three main forms of online resources have been developed for supervisors through funded research projects. They include

websites, for example *fIRST* (for Improving Research Supervision and Training) <www.first.edu.au>. *fIRST* provides a comprehensive collection of supervision resources, guidelines, and supervision practices. It includes references, workshop suggestions, and questionnaires. Moderated and structured by a steering committee, it has been established as a long-term, updating resource.

Online repositories of books/PDF resources for supervisors are also available. Examples include Christine Bruce's *Resource for Supervisors*, <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/28592/> an output from her ALTC fellowship. A large, linear document, it offers strategic information, comments, and suggestions for supervisors from a wide variety of backgrounds and it includes an extensive bibliography.

Blogs include the *Supervisor's Friend*, produced by Geof Hill, which offers informal, personal discussions on the role of the supervisor. Another is *The Doctoral Writing SIG*, which raises questions and poses potential solutions through informal discussion. Other blogs primarily targeting research students rather than supervisors, including Inger Mewburn's *The Thesis Whisperer* and the *Research Whisperer*. Contemporary and multimodal in form (including Twitter feeds, tagging and archiving), such blogs assume an informal, personal tone, and foster dialogue around topics of interest to the research student community.

An expanded summary analysis of online resources is provided on the project website. However, it is important to note that, like those mentioned here, all of these resources are generic and cross-disciplinary, and make no specific mention of the creative arts or creative practice HRDs.

CONCLUSION

While little literature exists on the supervision of creative practice HDRs specifically, crystallising the contexts, issues, and key concepts of the fields of creative practice research and HDR supervision more broadly was crucial in establishing our project approach, developing questions for our surveys and interviews, and informing our recommendations. In particular, understanding what is considered important to effective supervision more broadly provided an important foundation for probing the practices of supervisors of creative practice.

Nonetheless, analysing responses to the interview questions we asked has provided illuminating perspectives on what supervisors of creative practice PhDs consider creative practice research to be. And, analysing interview responses in light of this background has resulted in establishing striking similarities to, as well as differences from, other more established fields.

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