

THE CREATIVE PHD

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Challenges, Opportunities,
Reflection

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PROLOGUE

Tara Brabazon

I am 28 years of age and sitting in a university higher degree committee as a faculty representative. Three examiner reports are being discussed by the committee for a performance-based PhD. The results were a B (minor corrections), a D (restructure and re-examination), and F (predictably, a fail). The thesis was composed of an artifact and exegesis, a live performance and 40,000 words of a research frame to contextualize it. The examiners were sent a video of the performance, and the D and the F results offered a commentary about the quality – or lack thereof – of the recording. Also, the exegesis appeared to re-tell the script of the performance rather than explore why and how this performance created new knowledge. The quality of the “art” was irrelevant. What was the research? Where was the research? What was the object of discussion? How was originality created, proven and verified through such a doctoral thesis?

It was a mess and because of the nature of the performance, it was impossible to re-create the event in a way that would satisfy the examiners. How could a thesis such as this be “re-examined” – as required by one of the three examiners?

I was a young researcher and early career researcher given an opportunity to be on a university-level governance committee. I was inexperienced and privileged to be learning from more weathered colleagues. Yet, there was no resolution from these senior academics, gathered from an array of disciplines. The problems were multiple: what was being examined and what were the relationships between the two components?

Cut to a decade later. I am 38 years of age. A PhD student has been bounced around the University of Brighton where I am Chair of Media. Supervisors have walked away from this project as if the student is carrying a contagious, air-borne disease. Her four films have been demeaned and dismissed as “lacking quality.” The exegesis remained unread, but explained the nature of the films and the research within them. As the document had never been read, the films were being evaluated with profoundly subjective criteria. Her institutional PhD file was thick with commentary from research managers questioning the “quality” of the “art.” The student had a different purpose and inflection. The candidate had written the thesis with a very clear frame around the films. These visual and sonic objects were not self-standing works of “art.” The sonic and visual artifacts were ways of thinking.¹ The student had produced the films and written the exegesis concurrently, so they dialoged tightly and effectively. The artifacts informed, framed and developed practice and iteratively created knowledge, as demonstrated through the exegesis. But even with my leverage as a professor, I could not support the student through to completion at this university. Instead, she submitted at a different institution and passed easily and without corrections or caveats. Therefore, the research leadership at the time was incompetent and wrong. Yet, the consequences of that error – if the student’s supervisor had not been senior and experienced enough to recognize the quality of the thesis and have the capacity to recommend admission and submission

at another university – is that the student would have walked away, another statistic in the overwhelmingly shameful attrition figures emerging from doctoral education. But in this case, unsubstantiated statements about “art” were used to demean the student and research. A good outcome was reached through these conflictual interpretations of cultural value by leaving one institution and submitting at another.

The clock hands circle one more decade. I am 48 and the Dean of Graduate Research at Flinders University. PhD students – their admission, candidature and examination – are now my responsibility, focus and priority. Once more, I see a soap opera of assumptions, errors, flaws and debates about “quality” in the discussion of creative-led thesis. The difference this time is that I can do something about this situation. What has been revealed through my academic career is that silos of “creatives” have been built, filled with (over) confidence and dated assumptions of cultural value. The research has been lost through the propulsive focus to create “art.” There are proxies for these problems. Long candidatures. Mental health issues from the students. Multiple changes in supervision. Attrition. Yet, the goal remains: blame the student for the “failure.” Each individual student is to blame for their own inability to complete, rather than the institution, supervisor or system.

That individualization of student blame ceases in this book. Three people – an academic and dean of graduate research, a creative-led, successfully graduated PhD student and experienced and awarded actor, and a professional staff member who heads doctoral examinations in a university – have aligned to create the book in your hands. Whether you are an administrator, academic, student or supervisor, the time has come for all of us as a community to improve the situation of the creative-led, practice-led, practice-based PhD. The conflation and bagginess of phrasing is challenging enough.

How we implement standards and international protocols of accountability, rigor and transparency remains even more complex. Unfounded, ambiguous, class-ridden assumptions of “quality” and “art” must be discredited. Theories of research and originality must be centered. We are now post-post-poststructuralism. We are now post-post-postmodernism. Indeed, we have never been postmodern.² Instead, we are supervising, learning and managing in the simulacrum. We open the door to the post-art PhD and show how research values will transcend and transform cultural value. Artistic “quality” cannot be examined. Research can be examined. This book guides scholars, students and managers through implementing and understanding that difference.

NOTES

1. Ambrozic, M., & Vettese, A. (Eds.) (2013). *Art as a thinking process: Visual forms of knowledge production*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
2. Redhead, S. (2011). *We have never been postmodern*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

INTRODUCTION

Tara Brabazon

This book has been decades in the making. Three professional careers converge to enable this book. The differing positions and perspectives are important. A dean, who is also a supervisor and examiner and has worked around the world, offers one particular lens. A successful student, an experienced and successful actor who has translated her professional life into academia, offers another, distinctive and remarkable view. Finally, the administrator of a University's higher degree examinations, a writer of regulations and a daily engager with students, supervisors and examiners, reveals a special, distinctive and frequently invisible and marginalized view.

Together, these views align, conflate and focus on the problems in the doctoral space. The diverse voices, views and spaces have been necessary to write this book because the focus is unusual, complex, confused, conflated, marginalized, decentered or ignored. This monograph focuses attention on the artifact and exegesis mode of doctorate. This is the first book that aligns this challenging form of research degree with the diversity of stakeholders in the process. The timing is correct and appropriate for such a book. Higher Education is moving through so many changes that an array of scholarly

monographs attach “zombie” to their title (Payne, 2016). A dead structure, a university’s policies and procedures, imperatives and purpose, seem to hang like dead flesh off a carcass. At such a time, the PhD is a beacon of hope, of promise, of a better future. Students in this program may move higher education – and workplaces more generally – into a positive, proactive, innovative, transformative knowledge economy. Such hopes may be utopic, but it is timely to ponder the status and stature of a PhD in difficult times for international higher education.

Through the impact of research assessment exercises such as the RAE, REF and ERA, disciplines have retracted to their conservative cores. “Impact” and “engagement” are measured and assessed. Citations are counted. Journal rankings are evaluated. For a PhD student trying to succeed in this system, they gain from fitting – snugly – into a discipline, selecting a supervisor who can write them an effective reference, and quietly building their CV. Interdisciplinarity, postdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are not rewarded.¹ Intellectual silos are validated by the research ecosystem: journal gatekeepers, academic publishers and even the coding of publications in research management portals. While Siomonn Pulla and Bernard Schissel rightly summon the “applied interdisciplinary researcher” (Pulla & Schissel, 2016), the question remains how this scholar is positioned in a research culture where “outputs” are measured and managed through disciplinary codes.

This market-driven, economic focused research and educational formation is often described as the neoliberal university. That ideological description is not quite accurate. There is no doubt that market forces have gained a primacy in universities that have not been witnessed in their history. The irony that higher education is deploying such ideologies at the point where their failure has been so clearly demonstrated

through the Global Financial Crisis remains a moot point. But the reason neoliberalism nestled so comfortably into higher education is because universities through the twentieth century were lacking a purpose, mission, agenda or aim. As more students gained a degree, what was the point of a university beyond credentialing for the workforce? If the university had a clearly marked and disseminated “project,” then neoliberalism would not have been as successful in its migration into the institution and organizational structure. Instead, the university is a husk, an empty vessel, a zombie organization. It can be invaded and infiltrated with ease by the ideologies that are fashionable during a particular time. There are hopes and opportunities beyond this assembly line for degrees. Richard Hill was both disingenuous and generalized.

The ideological foundations of higher education, and the work-place relations, practices and organizational systems that define them, have turned universities from public institutions into money-making corporations, sites of mass consumption and industrial training centres suited to the requirements of the neoliberal economy.
(Hill, 2015)

His premise is based on a nostalgic vision of the university that never existed. Through its institutional history before neoliberalism, it was a colonizing, patriarchal institution that enabled those with wealth to perpetuate it. Nostalgia is not the answer to the lack of a “project” in the contemporary university. Hill argued that this marketized system has revealed a profound impact on doctoral education. But the “evidence” used and shape of his argument were unconvincing.

Many of the students I spoke to attributed much of their stress to the pressure placed on them by

supervisors eager to secure completion. Invariably, the upshot is a dehumanized, functional experience in which students are regarded more as purveyors of outcomes than people with feelings and genuine intellectual aspirations. (Hill, 2015, p. 175)

It does not enter his argument that students gain from rapid completions. Is he recommending that students remain in the university year after year as unpaid or underpaid research assistants, never able to move on to the next stage of their lives?

A better case is made when probing neoliberalism in the academy through tracking the commitment to particular methods. Daniel Saunders, Ethan Kolek, Elizabeth Williams and Ryan Wells argued that the methodologies enacted to research higher education overwhelmingly deploy quantitative methods.

Neoliberal ideology presupposes the quantification and inherent commensurability of all individuals, actions and outcomes, and approaches social, cultural or political problems as individual issues with technical solutions ... As such, knowledge creation in neoliberalized spaces centers around quantitative analyses based on sophisticated models and advanced statistical procedures. (Saunders, Kolek, Williams, & Wells, 2016)

This functionalist knowledge creation attempts to demonstrate that political imperatives do not shape research. The key tropes of research methods – accountability, transparency and repeatability – have been stretched to an extreme. Quantitative methods are more “representative” and therefore more accurate. Through quantitative methods, the truth is revealed to researchers. At this point, a commitment to the

empirical spills into empiricism. Furthermore, not only are qualitative projects demeaned and decentered, but theoretical projects must fight for space and currency. This is not a humanities issue. Theoretical physics, pure mathematics and research into financialization in Business faculties and disciplines all require complex and intricate engagement in and production of theory. Theory remains demeaned through the clichés hooked into our language. It is “just a theory.” There is nothing “just” about theory. It is a propulsive formation. It shapes. It contours. It configures. In theoretical times (Redhead, 2017), theory is the strategy to reimagine and revision not only the “project” of the PhD, but the “project” of the university.

One area of the university has particularly suffered through the focus on quantitative methods, industry, impact and engagement: the humanities. Through vocational ideologies in the twentieth century, the humanities became the ugly stepsisters in the STEM Cinderella narrative. Clumsy, needy, gobby and delusional, Minerva² and Brigit³ stumble through the contemporary university, baying their worth and value. Yet, cultural value is not an absolute variable. It is a debatable ideology. Post-poststructuralism, post-postmodernism, after the wars on an adverb (“Terror”), and the Global Financial Crisis that confirmed the arrogance, self-absorption and greed of a few to the cost of many, what is the humanities “for”? In response, instead of answering this question with rigor, clarity and consideration, the arts has entered its silo – locked inside its Virilian bunker – and commenced echo chamber conversations within increasingly misshapen and shrunken disciplines. Assumptions have replaced arguments. We – as scholars and citizens – require those arguments. They must be robust, expansive and stretch the parameters of knowledge. The comprehensive university is fighting for its place and worth. Without the humanities, higher education

transforms into a different institution, one guided by vocationalism, empiricism, laboratories, clinical environments and quantitative methodologies. It is important that this moment of change be logged and understood. If more is required of knowledge, scholars and expertise than bench-derived knowledge, then the path back to that meaningful intellectual landscape will require evidence, debate and considered commentary, rather than arching back to nineteenth century conversations with a metaphoric Matthew Arnold validating “sweetness and light ” (Arnold, 1986).

Vocationalism takes a particular form in undergraduate education and manifests overtly into “employability” through doctoral education (Sin & Amaral, 2016). Graduate employability is measured and used in institutional rankings and league tables. Through the Bologna Process’s third cycle, employability was also one of the areas added to the doctoral program as of importance (Bologna Process Third Cycle, 2009). All these debates are founded on the assumption that higher education providers are “responsible” for the employability of their graduates. In other words, university degrees and academics must train – not educate – students into the needs of the labor market. Termed by Neave “entrepreneurial utilitarianism” (Neave, 2013), teaching, education and learning are collapsed into training.

Universities remain a space apart. For all the affirmations, policies and hard work aligning gown and town, universities are a place where the minority of each generation attend classes, complete assignments and then graduate, rarely returning to the institution after the attainment of a degree. Frank Furstenberg revealed an odd surprise in the preface to his book: “I am always amazed at how little newcomers know about what goes on behind the academic curtain” (Furstenberg, 2013). The inverted question is much more interesting. Why would there be detailed knowledge about universities

generally, and a PhD specifically? The identity label of a “student” – even a doctoral student – is a transitory one. Contemporary political policies and funding decisions reshape and retexture the university with every funding cycle. But this means that every undergraduate – and every PhD student – enters a program with little socialization, literacy, context or a frame to understand what they will experience and what will be required of them. Academia is unstable as an industry and workforce. Universities are also increasingly diverse and reveal a long tail in terms of quality and priorities. The University of British Columbia has little in common with the University of Bolton, beyond featuring the word “university” in the title.

The reasons and motivations that guide a student into a PhD rarely sustain them through the program. As Michael Fennell stated, “starting out on a PhD is a life-changing event and achieving it will come at a cost” (Fennell, 2013). Yet, the program remains difficult to understand because of its diversity and complexity. Every student arrives into their program with different hopes and expectations. There has never been more PhD students in the history of our universities than right now. There has never been a greater diversity of students – in terms of age, race and educational background – than in our present. Therefore, to cite Lenin, “What is to be done?” (Lenin, 1902)

This book will focus on one component of the doctoral program: the creative-led thesis. Deploying many titles and names, it is the most unusual mode in which the doctorate exists. An artifact, which can include a sonic or visual presentation, a novel, an epic poem, design, art installations or a performance, is “submitted” to examination with an attendant exegesis. From the Greek and meaning “explanation,” it is a written text that demonstrates and confirms the research and originality of the artifact. The slippage between these

modes and objects creates challenges for students, supervisors, examiners and professional staff managing the process.

This book is “about” the creative-led thesis. But it is also “about” a great deal more. These theses are proxies, they are canaries in the intellectual mine. They capture the complexities and confusions of doctoral education and summon a provocative meta-question. What are we doing in doctoral education? What is the point? Who is it for? Through the oddly tangled space of the artifact and exegesis, some tropes and tools to reinvigorate and regenerate our universities may be discovered.

NOTES

1. While recognizing the profound value of transcending disciplines, we also wish to log the importance of understanding the discourse, context, history and trajectories of disciplines. It is impossible to transcend disciplines without understanding their boundaries and borders. While under-developed particularly for doctoral education, there is incredible potential in the research of Lent (2016).
2. Minerva was the Roman Goddess of Art.
3. Brigit was the Celtic Goddess of Poetry.