A Working Model For Postgraduate Practice Based Research Across The Creative Arts

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Abstract

A research intensive university, James Cook University has an enviable reputation in a number of scientific areas.   Its decision to incorporate the creative arts within the traditional PhD rather than establishing a separate degree (eg. a DCA) provided a considerable challenge in creating a model for practice-based disciplines.

The model was developed and has evolved over a ten year period, longer than any other university in Australia, and has proved to be both robust and successful (approaching 70 completions).   It is applicable across a broad range of creative arts disciplines and has been lauded by Gillies (1999), Shepherd (2001) and Weston (2002) for its capacity to provide rigorous research training consistent with the purposes of doctoral level research as well as affording individual artists, designers, performers, writes, filmmakers etc the scope to make a quantum leap in their practice.   The paper outlines the generic underpinnings of the model in practice.

Introduction: The Context

In Australia the practice based creative arts have been in the university sector for little more than a decade.   Acculturation to a research orientation has neither been simple nor swift and, in some cases, has been actively resisted.

Hence it is not surprising that the issues in creative arts research are still far from resolved although research training has probably moved further than has either the issue of competitive funding or the research publication audit process.   This may be because the latter issues require national agreements and a systemic willingness to commit resources in an area still regarded as outside rather than inside the Academy while research training operates within each university with greater potential for implementing change much more quickly.

For historical reasons Wollongong, Tasmania and James Cook University (JCU) were early market leaders in the field (Strand 1998); Gillies 1999). Wollongong University established both MCA and a DCA in the 1980s.   These degrees focused on a creative outcome, whether it be a film, exhibition, play, performance etc.   allocating 50 per cent for the creative work, 25 per cent for the studio notes, journals etc., and 25 per cent for the accompanying dissertation.   While all components were obviously related,   the model did not require that they be integrated.

Wollongong's experience predated the Dawkins (1988) Higher Education reforms in Australia. These reforms saw a major program of amalgamations resulting in former conservatoria, Art and Design Schools, Theatre and Dance Academies being incorporated into universities and expected to acculturate to university morés including research.   Many universities introduced practice-based Masters degrees but not Ph.Ds.

Some recent windows on the status quo in the discipline

Ten or so years on, the sector has had variable success in accommodating its practices to a research orientation.   The report of the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS) Honours Benchmarking Project (Lendon, 2000) illustrates the diversity of approaches across the sample (the sample did not include JCU where first class honours are reserved for exceptional research).   Lendon (2002) acknowledges the importance of revealing *"to all member schools how differently we produce ostensibly similar results…":*

For example, Lendon (2000) notes that

- *At the most general level of the years polled [1998 and 1999] … one can say that 48% of students achieved First Class Honours, within a variable of 70% [RMIT IN 1998] to 26% [SCA in 1998]…*

- *A student may … [in some schools] progress through Honours to Higher degrees without ever having to represent the ideas methods and contexts of their work directly in assessment, or even in written form.   In other schools such expectations are fundamental.*

- *The provision of research training as preparation for Research Higher Degrees varies widely.*

Lendon (2000) concludes, as a result of this study, that

> *In the matter of preparation for Research Higher Degrees, if this sample is representative, I do not believe that as a system we are doing a very good job.* [Lendon, 2000 : 7 – 21]

In relation to the Creative Arts Papastergiardis (2002) argues that

> *The main problem with developing a research culture in an art school is not to do with the angst of creativity, but with the structure of research ... . If the graduate program in an art school is to be taken seriously then it must either define how the written component extends rather than simply reflects the artistic practice, or else it should abandon the requirement for writing altogether. If all we are concerned with is appreciating the intrinsic value of a given practice, then a Ph.D. should be automatically awarded to every artist who can demonstrate the development of a coherent body of ideas over a sustained period of time. However, this is not my idea of a Ph.D., nor do I believe that it will provide sustainable foundations for a genuine research culture. I agree with Paul Carter's pithy statement: "A Ph.D. is not an opportunity for an artist to pass the beads of their success through the rosary of academia" (Papastergiardis, 2002 : 9).*

In Australia more fine arts than design or photography staff tend to have completed postgraduate research degrees. In that respect Friedman's (2003) comment (from another context) that

> *Design research today is where physics was in 1895... we must grow the field.* (Friedman, 2003 : 3)

is relevant.

For practitioners in the creative arts, however, there is still resistance to the imperatives of research within a university. At a recent meeting of the National Heads of Tertiary Music Schools (NACTMUS) held on January 30, 2003, one head commented irrately:

> *I hate the word research. What you're doing and what I'm doing IS research – why should we have to <u>write it down</u>?*

JCU, however, as Gillies (1998) has acknowledged, accepted the research imperative earlier than most, establishing its niche

> *... in the development of research courses of practical creative orientation ... [and leading] the way in fostering cross-disciplinary frameworks.* (Gillies, 1998 : online)

Developing a Model for Practice-Based Research

In JCU, it was critical to establish credibility for the creative arts disciplines. The university's Academic Board deliberations resulted in a decision to modify the university's definition of research for the Ph.D.

"Research" means the process leading to the production of original scholarly *or creative work* to be presented for the purpose of obtaining the degree (section 1.6, Doctor of Philosophy – Degree Requirements, JCU).

It was clear that the creative arts would need to demonstrate the rigour of a traditional Ph.D. The initial impetus for and context of the model was the need for staff in these areas to gain postgraduate research degrees.

In developing a working model, issues which needed to be addressed included the following:

- Distinguishing between professional practice and research;
- Generating a definition of research;
- Identifying an appropriate role for theory in modelling the processes of research
- Drawing the line in the sand
- Structuring and synthesizing research
- Managing the dual roles of artist and researcher
- Communicating hitherto inchoate practice to an audience
- Contemplating Future Questions/Directions

Each of these is addressed below

Distinguishing between professional practice and research

Initial candidates tended to be practising professionals across the creative arts; many were also staff. Hence the issue of professional practice vis à vis research was a critical pivot point for them.

In a strongly collaborative and collegial frame, staff from each discipline identified key decision points. Regardless of artistic form, the sequence of major decision points culminated in public presentation followed by critical reflective processes providing a feedback loop to the next exhibition, performance etc.

The initial process diagrams encompassed Visual Arts, Music and Theatre and a fourth was developed for theatrical design. These were and are used (a) to reality check for process and (b) to demonstrate that there is a professional practice/research continuum along which an individual artist might be located, depending on the degree of overt/covert analysis of process to product.

Generating a workable definition of research

A cross-disciplinary and collegial process created an umbrella definition to take account of the disparate nature of creative practice and the need to create a methodological framework to capture and interrogate that practice. Subsequently this definition was adopted by NACTMUS (Strand, 1998:33).

Identifying an appropriate role for theory

It is a critical part of research training that a student learns to research and chart an appropriate path through the literature in the field. Across the Creative Arts, the field is seen to encompass both published literature (in the normal sense of books, journals, articles etc.) and *other* literature in the form of visual research, recordings, performances, etc. The capacity to survey, synthesize and evaluate the literature is an essential prelude to a clear identification of the niche which the research is designed to fill.

Drawing the line in the sand

In the context of the creative arts, this also typically involves locating the genesis of one's practice, an identification of pivotal theoretical and other influences on practice, as well as a critical analysis of current dilemmas/stalemates etc., in the practice.

Modelling the processes of research

Traditional concepts of research methodology appear alien to many artists. Hence one of the initial challenges was using reflection on process to structure a methodological framework. Students reflect on their progress in this regard positively:

- *[I now have the] ability to use a hybrid research method as a means of probing idiosyncratic meanings of various discourses that collide in our multicultural society. Also using research that evolves from the theoretical to the personal to the public facilitates a broad and holistic approach not often found in research* (Knight Mudie, Ph.D., Toowoomba)

- *[This] has been the best way to critically examine my own practice. I was determined to look beyond the sanctioned methodologies of my own profession for answers. The cross referencing of ideas from a broad framework of human experience, for example, from art, science, philosophy, and religion became increasingly important not only as a defence but as an advocation of the contemporary importance of my discipline* (Kirkegard, Ph.D. candidate, Brisbane)

The university's quality assurance processes have also helped in this regard. Each student, as part of the milestones of candidature, is required to present a Confirmation and an Exit Seminar evaluated by a Research Student Monitor, typically an experienced supervisor from another discipline/Faculty.

Examiners of candidates from across the creative arts have responded favorably to both the clarity and rigour of students' statements of methodology (the university expects examiners at Ph.D. level not only to have Ph.Ds and relevant disciplinary expertise but also to have experience in examining):

- *The approach and to some extent the methodology of this dissertation are very unusual, perhaps unique. They are based on, but go considerably beyond, the accepted parameters*

for degrees such as the (typically United States) Doctor of Fine Arts. That is to say, they incorporate a body of artistic work with reflections on its origins, inspiration, artistic processes, and success, but they go far beyond that standard pattern to provide a philosophical and psychological argument and meditation about such matters as the nature of artistic cognition, feeling, and conation, the relationships between the self, the 'other', the world, and the artistic object .... [She] covers an immense amount of scholarly ground, quite beyond the limits (and limitations) of most dissertation writers (PhD Examiner)

- *This is a rigorous experiment, which has the potential to provide filmmakers with a salutary model of their ethical responsibilities to artists…The thesis is original, the research diligent, the effort prodigious, the experimental ground is significant, and its potential for development…   is high. (PhD Examiner)*

- *This thesis is highly original in topic and approach, defying many of the usual criteria of examining theses awarded for this type of degree.   Nonetheless, it is one of the most professional theses that I have examined as well as being highly enjoyable to read (itself a rare feat!).   The candidate has taken an exhaustive, almost encyclopedic, approach to the topic which has resulted in a painstaking and thoroughly documented historical journey through the development of horses, the culture of horses, and horse riding apparel ... . This has not been done before and the thesis will make a major contribution to the research field as well as proving an invaluable resource for future researchers.   (Ph.D. Examiner)*

- *This is an impressive work of extraordinary scholarship. Highly original (I am aware of no other work of its kind), exhaustive in the scope of research ..., very well written and impeccably documented, this dissertation certainly exceeds the standard required of major universities .... The work is focussed, cohesive and readable – much more so than other dissertations I have read. (Ph.D. Examiner)*

Managing the dual roles of artist and researcher

There is no doubt that these two roles are different – but they are not incompatible.   As a supervisor, however, it is essential to be sensitive to candidates' individual differences.   Some need to focus on their practice exclusively.   At other times they concentrate on writing.   Other students gravitate between the two, seemingly allowing the one to fuel the other.

However the individual student manages the two roles, it is essential to recognize their existence and manage them so that the research is not compromised.   The studio practice, regardless of creative arts discipline, requires documentation.   These capture the first person moment and hence take a range of forms eg sketch books, creative journals, diaries, tape-recorded reflections etc.

These data are then used by the researcher to exemplify, interrogate, or amplify the practice.   The capacity to manage these two voices contributes to the objectivity of the research and militates against any sense of self indulgence.   When an examiner's report counterpoises references to a candidate's "beautifully realized exhibition" and the fact that "The work continuously reveals an energized and inquiring mind – combined with an effective analytical methodology", there is pleasing evidence of the reflective and reflexive capacities referred to by writers such as Schon

(1983) and Scrivener (2000).

Structuring and Synthesizing the Research

The presentation of creative arts research *vis à vis* conventional theses presents another level of challenge.   Students working within this model are given both parameters and freedom.

- *I have found [my supervisor's] approach to be both ingeniously flexible [and] firm, authoritative, and particular without displaying an over prescriptive or authoritarian attitude…   [The] approach [is] encouraging and helpful… in building and developing a synergistic relationship between the practice and its theoretical and conceptual underpinnings. (Preston, Ph.D., Townsville)*

- *[My supervisor has] created a flexible system in which the candidate feels included, welcomed, challenged, guided and, most importantly, respected (Rees, Ph.D. candidate, Sydney)*

- *[I was attracted by the ability of the desired project to shape the thesis (not the other way around as is usual).   (Martin-Chew, MCA, Brisbane)*

- *I have learnt to be probing, critical, innovative, challenging and confident in all my research endeavours...   [and] to apply a flexible yet vigorous approach to methodology. (Daniel, Ph.D. candidate, Townsville)*

The book end style of presentation has been found to be very useful in this regard.   This may involve using a tripartite structure in which Part 1 contains the Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology and Implementation, Part 2 The Creative Product, and Part 3 The Reflections on Process *and* Product together with implication for further research etc.

Communicating hitherto inchoate practice to an audience

Over the ages artists and designers have not communicated or explicitly reflected upon their processes.   Typically they have produced and it has been left to the secondary audience –critics, musicologists, art historians etc., - have interpreted, extrapolated about process, passed judgment etc.   This model encourages students to provide primary source evidence and documentation for future generations of researchers. A questioning approach by the supervisor and encouragement to be inclusive of the reader assist students with this process:

- *I wanted to be challenged and indeed I was.   As a result of many trials and tribulations during the research process, I am now a much more proficient, intuitive, independent and forward thinking researcher. These attributes now influence the way in which I supervise postgraduate students. (Daniel, Ph.D. candidate, Townsville)*

Contemplating Future Questions/Directions

The capacity to recognize what one has achieved in a particular research project – and what unanswered questions still beckon – is critical to research training. Students must be able to recognize achievements, mistakes, alternative pathways with the benefit of hindsight, as well as new questions that have arisen. The open door of research needs to be celebrated and embraced.

Overview of the Model

The model has now been applied extensively across the creative arts disciplines (see Table 1)

Table 1 - Scope of Creative Arts Practice Based Research at JCU

Area of Research	Masters by Research		Ph.D.	
	Completed	*Current*	*Completed*	*Current*
Costume Design/Fashion	3	1	1	
Theatre Design	1			
Playwriting	2		1	1
Directing	2			
Film	1		1	
Biography	2		1	
Communication Design	1	1	1	1
Visual Arts 2D	21	11	2	5
Visual Arts 3D	4	2	4	
Music – Performance & Research	2	3	1	2
Music – Performance & Composition	1			
Illustration	4	1		2
Photography	1	3		3
Art and Technology	2			
Performance Art	5			
Cross Disciplinary Arts	4		2	
Public Art			1	1

Evaluations of the Model

In essence, students' and examiners' comments confirm the positive attributes of the model which has also received external validation from reviewers and peers.

- COMVAT [The College of Music, Visual Arts and Theatre] has developed one of the most successful and most experienced postgraduate research programs in the Australian arts schools system. COMVAT has not only established a longer history of success in this area than most, but under the present leadership has created one of the very best systems of practice for ensuring consistent standards of research outcomes. It is attracting quality students from around Australia. The supervision methods set up are very thorough and students have been well trained in traditional research methodologies and their application

to artistic output. There is an outstanding record of achievements in student awards. These not only stand up to benchmarking in the national arts arena.   (Shepherd, 2001 : 24)

- *... the postgraduate work of the James Cook University multi arts programme has been significant.   In the postgraduate programmes of many institutions a division between theory and practice is emphasized…   JCU, however, has advocated the integration of theory and practice.   This has led to a methodological route which not only maintains parity between the key elements of reflective practice but has also established new approaches to the documentation of creative arts practice…   [It] is my view that the JCU approach to the provision of postgraduate research documentation and supervision provides a most important model for the higher education sector.   (Weston (2002) email, August 12)*

Conclusion

In 2002 the Creative Arts were in the top third of research degree enrolments across the university and, while having only five per cent of all such enrolments, achieved 11 per cent of postgraduate research scholarships.   Students enroll from across Australia and beyond.   While many are part time, the record of completions is high.   It is agreed that the success rate, longevity and generic applicability of the model warrants both dissemination and research as a basis for further development.   Given the imperative for the creative arts disciplines to achieve parity of esteem as an emergent research area rather than struggling in the research abyss.   The opportunity to share both the potential of pathways and *cul-de-sacs* experienced is critical.   The model's ten year trajectory offers just such an opportunity.

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