

## **New Possibilities: Supervising Fine Art Doctorates**

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Fine art doctorates are relatively new and quite distinctive from the studio based MFA degrees or PhD study in other areas of art such as art history and theory. Unlike some traditional fields of study there are no established canons of supervision and assessment that can make change difficult because of firmly established precedents. Fine art doctorates are still in the process of formation and as yet there are no fixed, universally recognised customs or guidelines across universities.

The possible forms and requirements of such doctorates are varied — viva or no viva, unspecified or prescribed word length etc. Consequently I will speak in a generalised and abstract way and avoid consideration of any *specific* requirements for fine art doctorates apart from assuming that any fine art doctorate is characterised by containing a studio component as well as a written component. There is no doubt that including a practical studio component with a thesis/ dissertation has contributed to concerns regarding the definition of projects, their quality, their supervision and assessment.

Fine art studio doctorates provide some new challenges for supervisors as they may be responsible for a major studio practice and a substantial written component. While this kind of supervision can combine elements of traditional doctoral supervision with some aspects of supervision in studio based research master's degrees, I have not found these approaches adequate to accommodate the complexity of fine art doctorates.

Conferences such as this allow for those who supervise these students and those who research these educational processes to discuss emerging models for research in fine art doctorates and to explore ways of creating ethically and educationally sound practices. This paper offers some comments on supervision generated from my experiences in supervising both research masters and PhD students in the fine art studio and media disciplines. This experience extends back over the past twenty years and with my commitments to my current group of students continues well into the future. I am currently supervising four MFA students and seven PhD students with two new students starting next year. I see many new possibilities for supervision in the fine art area where 'the content of their work is self-chosen' rather than prescribed. (Salmon, 1992, p1) I intend in this paper to concentrate on the relationship of supervisor and student, the nature of the writing of artists and how fine art doctorates, like those in dance or film making, differs from traditional doctorates in the requirement to produce research in *both* written and creative forms.

### **The relationship of student and supervisor**

Supervisors may work alone with the student, with a colleague as a co- or joint supervisor, or with a panel of supervisors. Many fine art doctoral projects are also interdisciplinary in nature and require joint supervision provided from the wider university. The communication with supervisors from other disciplines can provide stimulation as well as challenge for supervisors from the fine arts. As long as the line of

responsibility for the mechanics of supervision are clear, and there is consultation between all parties there can be exciting opportunities provided to students. However in the light of the shrinking numbers of staff available in most art schools to supervise, the most usual form may be that of a postgraduate student with just one supervisor.

Supervisors can be required to assume a daunting range of different roles. Brown and Atkins include among them that of 'director, adviser, facilitator, teacher, guide, critic, supporter, friend, manager and examiner.' (cited in Sue Johnston, 1999, p17-31) As Sandra Acker points out, supervision significantly

does not take place between interchangeable cardboard figures and does not occur somewhere on an isolated island. The expectations and perspectives, as well as background experiences and characteristics that each party brings to the relationship do matter. (Acker, 1999, p75)

Bibby (1999, p169) acknowledges that in some disciplines, students are experienced adults who have chosen to undertake research degrees for their own purposes and who are in a position to negotiate their own learning. He regards such supervisor/ student relationships as based on mutually agreed arrangements, that proceed in partnership each having responsibilities towards the other. The comparison he makes with supervision is that between professionals and their clients. Such relationships are 'characterised by mutual requirements of trustworthiness, in which neither side has total dominance' (p169) and require that the client's interests will be promoted including their freedom to make decisions. (p170)

This level of maturity certainly is characteristic of many current doctoral students in the fine arts. As it takes time to develop as an artist these students are often mature practitioners who for various reasons, such as a passionate desire to explore a topic or project or to build a career in university teaching or a wish to undertake a degree to research and extend aspects of their established visual practice. They are used to directing their own creative path, usually in an isolated studio environment. With such students there is a need for the supervisor to establish a sense of trust so that the student becomes willing to allow another to enter their private 'creative space.' This is important as the issues that arise from the studio component frequently form a key part of the doctorate. In the studio area mutual understanding and partnership are ideal approaches.

The second part of these research projects is the written component that helps to establish the significance and the originality of the study. For most university students the written word *is* their form of expression and has been systematically shaped into the requirements of their discipline through their undergraduate and masters studies. As language is their chosen mode of expression they have a degree of confidence in writing. Art students are usually adept in using visual language and are often less skilled and experienced in the written language. The undergraduate essays and writing required by honours or master's degrees are not of the same order of complexity as a thesis or dissertation. Even the conventions of bibliography, referencing, footnoting etc may be

unfamiliar. For some students, both local and overseas formal English may be also unfamiliar.

In this situation the supervisory role needs to be more directive and requires strategies to assist students to develop academic writing skills of the same quality as they have reached in their studio work. This does not mean that graduate students in the fine arts are like undergraduate students. On the contrary they are often extremely knowledgeable in their area of interest and capable of imaginative and critical thought in their chosen area of study.

Their unfamiliarity with the genre of academic writing can make it difficult to focus the initial, and sometimes sweeping, formulation of their project as there appears to be a universal belief amongst these students that they need to know *everything* about what they see as their topic, no matter how remotely connected it may be. (Perhaps this is true of other disciplines too.) Forming these (often surprising) relationships can greatly enrich their research but sometimes results negatively in an anxious desire to keep reading, rather than writing or refining their topic. I consider this desire to extend, rather than to close options, is also a function of the artist's creative imagination and when appropriately incorporated can add exciting and provocative dimensions to their research. The current flexibility of writing possible in doctoral theses and dissertations allows not only for invention in content, but also in form.

### **Artists writing**

As yet, unlike some other disciplines, there are no conventions, recipes or formulas for fine art theses or dissertations. The possibilities remain open and endless. Sadly I have assessed several students where the language in the text appeared to be motivated by the need to provide some kind of 'deep' and 'academic' style of writing to justify the level of the award. One document consisted entirely of a historical account of the phenomena that interested the student and although competent, in no way captured the passion of the work exhibited nor referred to it in any way. The second incorporated a very limited survey that appeared to be inserted to make the document "real research."

Any aspect of research should be there because the student's topic justifies it and not to make the thesis "academically respectable." While there has been much argument about whether art works constituted 'research', I consider that the active and systematic way that artists investigate the world as preparation for making their art work is recognised as valid research within fine art doctorates. Some of this research can venture into other fields, such as art history or art theory, or the physics of holography, or media representations of the body, or postmodern theory, or narcissism and so on. Where art students traverse other disciplines they need to respect the conventions required in writing in this area. Sympathetic co-supervisors from these fields can be a blessing to the supervisor when sallying into cross-discipline studies.

How do artists write about their own work? It appears to me to be in many voices — passionate, critical, lyrical, objective, poetic, depressed, anguished, pained, cold, emotional and so on — indeed they reflect the same voices which they use to make art.

Consequently their writing can take many forms — field trip notes, journal entries, creative writing, story telling, autobiography, family history, conventional academic writing, critical commentary, poetry and so on. Writing by artists frequently becomes a hybrid using whatever voice and form is appropriate to their particular search. Supervision can then be very different from the usual journey taken by supervisor and student, and become more like sitting together in the front seat of a roller coaster.

Creative approaches to thesis writing are also possible in other fields but my experience suggests that such approaches are both suitable and appropriate in fine art doctorates. Phillip's description of the process of 'weaning' the student so that they take increasing responsibility for their research (Phillips, 1994, p164) does not seem to apply as well as the model put forward by Bibby of mutuality and partnership, which seems a better option ethically and educationally.

### **Keeping it together**

I consider that the relationship between the studio component and written requirement is a vital and unique characteristic of fine art doctoral projects. It is important that these two parts work together and that neither is neglected although the proportions dedicated to each may vary from project to project. If the studio work is the dominant component the dissertation should support the art work, revealing something of the theoretical basis of the work, locating it in current and/or past art practice, detailing the processes undertaken, considering its aesthetic grounds, etc. If the thesis is the major section then the studio work should not be a mere appendage but serve some integral purpose, such as a demonstration of the ideas developed in the thesis, or as an example of the technical processes researched etc.

As Head of School I frequently found myself dealing with students undertaking research masters degrees who had happily completed their studio work and were now horrified that they now needed to write (a very brief documentation) to complete their degree. This situation is prevented for tardy doctoral students as their progress is formally reviewed each year. However it is still important to keep the developing research ideas informing the studio work as well as being the basis of the written component. If possible it is advantageous if they develop together. Where the supervisor has been able to encourage the students to develop their ideas in the studio in company with their writing there has often been a real benefit. This is frequently articulated through student comments such as "by writing down my ideas I have clarified the direction I will take"

concerned with spatial, synthetic and global processing. (Edwards 1979, pxi) Whether this is the cause, there appears difficulty in operating simultaneously or in moving quickly between these two modes and fine art students frequently comment on this disjunction.

Doctoral students in the fine arts need help in the management of these complex projects and this requires supervisors to develop strategies to assist in their organization. Students need to be encouraged to establish (tentative) timelines and plan for presentations, reviews etc, as well as have time to contemplate their project. The increasing pressure for students to finish in minimal time does not assist in the creative process.

Finally there are the many considerations that arise in the presentation of the final project. The supervisor needs to consider the best way for the student to present/exhibit their art work and to advise on the most suitable choice of assessors. It is difficult to find examiners skilled in evaluating both aspect of written and studio based research projects however with increasing experience this shortage will improve in time. But if funds are not available to pay travel costs for examiners some fine art students become badly disadvantaged when they work in modes that cannot be reduced to forms of documentation able to be posted/emailed. This makes it difficult for some students to have equal access to overseas supervisors.

Any supervisory relationship does not end with the student's graduation. Delamont, Atkinson and Parry point out the importance of mentoring as 'a good supervisor should help doctoral candidates to build good strong foundations for their careers.' (1997, p158) I have found that graduate supervision builds special and enduring relationships with students. While working with doctoral students in the fine arts has diverse challenges, it also has great rewards.

## References

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