Underpinning Practice-Based Creative Research with Quality Supervision

James F. Sillitoe
Victoria University, Office for Postgraduate Research

Allan R. Mann
University of Ballarat, Arts Academy

Loris Button
University of Ballarat, Arts Academy

Introduction

The nature of the characteristics determining the practice of scholarly research that is carried out in the university system has been a growing and eventful topic of debate in recent times. Following the traditional 'mono-method' or 'purist' era of research which held sway in universities until the 1960s (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), in the social and behavioural sciences there emerged the 'mixed methodology' period which, because of its inherent controversies (Snow, 1993), was accompanied by the phenomenon that some called the 'paradigm wars' (for example Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Of particular interest here is that the resulting discussions and eventual clarification of alternative positions that mostly settled down in the mid-1990s, brought with them a much more liberal definition of knowledge-generation into research schools. This outcome has contributed, in our opinion, to a strengthening of the whole of research education as a result of the codification and acceptance of multiple epistemologies as legitimate areas of postgraduate education.

It was during this period of intense qualitative / quantitative (or positivist / constructionist) debate that universities experienced significant pressure for the introduction of postgraduate degrees in the creative arts. The situation of the negotiated outcomes between the positivist and constructionist paradigms mentioned above contributed in large measure to the subsequent emergence and acceptance of subjectivist research in the academy and, along with it, the parallel development of the exegesis route in the creative arts for postgraduate research. Most universities are now familiar with postgraduate research by the exegesis route, which is currently the most favoured approach to higher degree qualification in the creative arts area. The production of an innovative artwork, which is accompanied by scholarly written exposition, has become an important vector for the generation of cultural and social knowledge within the university.

Notwithstanding the current institutional acceptance of the exegesis route as having equivalence with the more traditional by-research programs, there is still some important debate to be had on the precise formulation of the exegesis structure. In a useful summary of the situation, Sullivan (2005) suggests that the key issue here hinges on the changing focus of

theory in higher education research. In particular, for practice-based doctorates that include creative artworks, there is a question of 'where does the knowledge lie?' Is the theorising that is essential to a doctoral study encapsulated within the artwork? Or is it explicated in the exegesis? Or should there be a combination of these two residences? For some, suggests Sullivan (2005), 'an explanatory exegesis is seen as redundant because it fails to acknowledge that art-making can be research', whilst 'for others, the inclusion of an exegesis that contextualises the research is necessary' (Candlin, 2000; Webb, 2000; cited in Sullivan, 2005).

Within this debate, we fall into the latter school. Whilst we agree with Sullivan's (2005) comment that 'pathways [to visual arts research] remain to be sketched in greater detail, we strongly believe that the development of the 'artist-theorist' or 'artist-researcher' as a critical figure in higher education research is best supported by a transparent and scholarly approach that can be shared and appreciated by the wider academic community. As adherents to this perspective, we see in the exegesis an important opportunity for creative artists to share with the wider community the concepts, ideas and insights that have led them to the production of the creative work that has been submitted for examination. This is in no way to diminish or to question the primacy of the artwork as the central contribution to knowledge. It is rather to systematise the development of a document that will ensure that the essential message contained in the research is communicated in a scholarly way to an audience that is, in the main, accustomed to understanding written texts. In addition, we feel that this is a chance to provide, for audiences unfamiliar with creative works, an opportunity to understand and learn from the perspectives and concerns of postgraduate research in the creative areas.

The development of a scholarly exegesis

Notwithstanding the importance of the decision to pursue the route of written exegesis for postgraduate masters and doctoral qualifications, problems still remain with the practice of quality supervision in the creative arts. Some of these problems arise from the selection of an appropriate supervisor. There are concurrent requirements implicit here of having a supervisor with (i) a significant reputation in the student's field of creative endeavour who is able to advise on the development of the portfolio and (ii) the skills and experience to advise on the preparation of the scholarly exegesis that expounds on the creative work at a level consistent with university standards. Because of the relatively short history of the exegesis route to higher degrees, there are few Arts Academy staff who have had the opportunity to pursue their own doctoral studies, and therefore there is a dearth of experienced research supervision staff in the creative arts.

In addition, and equally as important, there are factors that, although external to the research process, nevertheless impinge upon the ability of a faculty to provide high quality supervision. For a numerically small faculty such as the University of Ballarat's Arts Academy, there is a range of linked problems that must be satisfactorily dealt with when supervising creative Masters and Doctoral research programs. Supervisors must be provided for research students in an institutional context of: a small number of staff being responsible for several undergraduate programs; a responsibility to meet the needs of a relatively large number of

enrolled postgraduate students who are involved in a wide variety of practice areas and; a limited budget and stock of physical resources.

This is not an uncommon situation in small universities. However, we are nevertheless attempting - in what we think is a relatively innovative way - to provide each student with the best postgraduate experience possible and produce world-class creative higher degree graduates in a context of increasing government expectations for timely completion.

Our first concern is that we should provide quality supervision in both the practice and exegesis areas. We have done this by sharing the supervision duties for each student between creative artists with a recognised profile in each student's area of practice, and a small team of supervisors who have had experience in the production of the scholarly theses and exegeses. In addition to ensuring that each student is receiving adequate supervisory attention, this approach has an added benefit for the Arts Academy in that it opens the way for additional staff members of the Academy to experience close engagement with postgraduate research students which is an important step towards broadening and extending our community of practice. The other benefit for the Academy and its postgraduate students is that working directly with experienced supervisors from other disciplines within the University, techniques, expectations and standards of postgraduate research are passed-on at an intimate level. Because the culture of research in the Arts Academy is still maturing, the contribution of creative arts to knowledge generation is still contested in some areas, and the legitimacy of our work in the eyes of the University is significantly enhanced by the input of these scholars.

This is an important issue for us. One of our principal aims is to produce postgraduates who have not only the opportunity to contribute to the development of their discipline in a scholarly way, but also to be able to contribute to the research standing of the university in more traditional areas. By encouraging our students to engage with issues that students in other disciplines are familiar with, albeit from a different epistemological stance, makes possible important intellectual links between the Arts Academy and the other Faculties. A number of our students, for example, have now been through the process of Ethics clearance in relation to their research, and this has provided significant exposure of the intellectual basis of some creative arts projects to the University community. In addition, some of our postgraduate students have joined with science students in extended field trips to the University's arid land rural research centre, and have been able to demonstrate aspects of their research to students and staff.

To support the development of the postgraduate student cohort's scholarly exegeses, a supervisor from outside the Academy with a particular interest in research education has been invited to work with the two Arts Academy staff that have taken-on special responsibilities in the postgraduate area. This core team of three supervisors meet regularly with all enrolled students for formal supervision sessions, and provide a sounding board for issues to do with progress on the creative work, to assist in the formulation of the research question, and to develop the written text that will accompany the examination exhibition. The cycle of meetings is usually no longer than five weeks, and in this way all 25 currently enrolled students in the Academy obtain a reasonable frequency of contact with research staff. In this way, we have become satisfied

that the exegeses submitted from the Arts Academy as a precursor of the examination of the artwork, are of equivalent academic quality to all theses submitted by the University.

Our second concern is that many of the postgraduates are enrolled as part-time students, and many of them live and work a considerable distance from the University. This concern is connected to the notion, implicit in the assumption of a 'quality' postgraduate experience, that the students are immersed in a situation where there is modelling and practice of the ways in which people act as research scholars. This is an ontological issue that we should not ignore, and is, we believe, a responsibility of the Academy that is implicitly taken on by the act of enrolling a student in a postgraduate degree.

To address this issue, we have decided to group the students into 'progress levels' and these small groups are invited to attend the regular supervision sessions together. This arrangement has been instituted as a way of increasing the intellectual and social contact between students and staff so that feelings of academic isolation, often noted by part-time postgraduate students, is minimised. We have deliberately avoided the strategy of running large group tutorials, where all research students and staff come together on a regular basis, because we feel this does not advantage the development of the student as a creative artist/researcher. The ambience of large groups can inhibit the flow of creative thought, reflection and communication that we are seeking to facilitate, and informal feedback to date from students who have experienced both systems, seem to justify this position.

The notion of a 'community of practice as an ontological strategy has guided this decision to work with small groups (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and we have been encouraged by the way in which much peripheral learning is apparently taking place as students observe discussions and examples of each others' work (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). This approach is predicated on the assumption that social interaction is a critical component of situated learning. In such a group situation, a beginning researcher initially becomes peripherally involved in the discussions and behaviours that characterise a creative learning community. As a result of this interaction with other members of the community during the supervision sessions, participants gradually become recognised research students as they acquire knowledge at a self-paced rate at their own level of need.

In this scheme, because we have the core team working with students on issues connected with concept development and scholarly writing (Sillitoe & Crosling, 1999), the external or practice supervisors are not diverted from their role as creative advisors. It is interesting to observe that, although the core team take full responsibility for the development of the exegesis, it is not uncommon for practice supervisors to come with their student to the regular meetings, and to engage in the discussions about selected passages of writing or aspects of the development of the conceptual basis of the work. This is an important aspect of the community of practice that we are trying to foster within the Academy, in that it also is a mechanism of expanding the available pool of staff that have exposure to the production of a scholarly exegesis.

There is a further step that we have taken recently in the area of research education for students proceeding by the exegesis route. Whilst it is a requirement of the conditions of

examination that students in creative postgraduate degrees mount an exhibition of their work for the examination, we are encouraging all students to exhibit in a separate commercial venue as a test of acceptance within the wider community. We are hoping, in the fullness of time, that these public exhibitions - properly critiqued - will become as recognised in the scholarly context as refereed papers, and contribute to the academic reputation of the discipline and the university.

In addition, we are developing methods for the production of scholarly text publications based upon the students' work. We have an increasing number of successful higher degree completions and, as yet, we have not been able to fully exploit the innovative ideas and approaches contained in them. Now that there are a growing number of journals that are designed for the communication of ideas connected to creative work, we intend to investigate ways in which we can stimulate successful students to engage with this aspect of communicating research. In this way we can not only help strengthen the Curriculum Vitae for those students considering a career in arts education, but also make a positive statement about the place of a creative art academy by making a pragmatic statement to the university about the contribution to knowledge made by creative artists in the area of community in terms that are widely recognised throughout academia.

Finally, as the exegesis route to higher degrees gains maturity, we are beginning to make explicit links with the community in ways that have important applied social outcomes that are in addition to the required knowledge contributions to the artist's discipline. This has required us to meet issues such as ethics clearance and insurance for research students that hitherto have been more in the bailiwick of traditional thesis areas, and has led us into a rich area of interdisciplinary research possibilities with other faculties, underscoring the important place of the Arts Academy within the traditional university system.

Outcomes of this system

One of the immediate outcomes of this approach that we can report is that the completion rate of postgraduate students in the Arts Academy has been quite remarkable. Since 1999, there have been fifteen completed students (four doctorates and eleven masters), and a number of these have been passed at examination without any further work being required. In addition, there are twenty-five enrolled students who are, from informal feedback sources, very satisfied with the level of interaction with the Academy. Of these students, we anticipate that five will complete this year, contributing to the timely completion demands that are required of us. This record places the Arts Academy high on the University of Ballarat's list of successful higher degree completions.

We are also pleased with the level of scholarship displayed in the exegeses that are being submitted. In this regard, we have encouraged the students to view the exegesis itself as representing their artistic abilities, and to be a stand-alone piece of scholarship. Students have reacted very positively to this suggestion and recent works have set new standards in image reproduction, layout, and intellectual structure of argument and design.

A final aim of our initiative is to assist creative arts postgraduate students to more clearly appreciate the nature of research work characteristic of other disciplines. By talking explicitly to students in terms of their epistemology and theoretical frameworks (Slife & Williams, 1995; Crotty, 1998), creative arts students are able to intellectually locate themselves in the research sphere. In this way, we feel that our students, and a substantial section of the University generally, have come to appreciate why creative arts research is an important 'alternative' knowledge-creation vector.

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