

Practice-based Doctorates and Questions of Academic Legitimacy

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Abstract

Over the last six years there has been a massive increase in the number of students studying for practice-based doctorates in Art and Design. It is now possible to do a practice-based PhD in over forty departments, although what is expected from doctoral students varies considerably across institutions. In 1997 the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) addressed the variance between practice-based doctorates in the report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*. This paper examines the recommendations made by the report and asks to what extent does it acknowledge art as a legitimate research practice within the university. The UKCGE report recommends that all practice-based PhDs have a substantial theoretical and

contextualising element that will demonstrate general scholarly requirements and render the artwork accessible to judgement. I argue that this proposal is problematic on several counts; it draws a firm line between theory and practice, places academic research in opposition to practice generally and artwork specifically, maintains the stereotype of art as anti-intellectual and forgets the degree to which theory is itself a practice. In addition it suggests that art practice can only be legitimised as research when it is framed by a conventionally academic enquiry. I suggest that instead of trying to make art practice fit academic regulations it would be more productive to use the practice-based PhDs as a way of re-thinking academic conventions and scholarly requirements.

Until the 1990s PhDs that included an element of practice, or were solely comprised of art practice were virtually unheard of; the Royal College of Art is perhaps the only English institutions that had any long-standing history of such qualifications. It is now possible to do a practice-based PhD in over forty departments, although what is expected from doctoral students varies considerably across institutions. For instance, at Leeds Metropolitan University it is possible to submit a PhD that is entirely practice based, while other students may have to write a thesis alongside their artwork. The length of the thesis also varies substantially, from a minimum of 10,000 words at Brighton University to a maximum of 80,000 words at the University of Hertfordshire. In some institutions the written component can take the form of an exhibition catalogue supporting the work, while in others it is more akin to a conventional doctoral thesis with students receiving supervision from the philosophy or art history departments.

In 1997 the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) addressed the variance between practice-based doctorates in the report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*. The report discusses doctoral studies in architecture, creative writing, design (including graphics, 3D design, computer related design), music, performing arts and visual arts. As was intended, the substance of the report has been influential on the formulation of practice-based PhD study across a number of institutions. This article explores the recommendations outlined in the UKCGE report and considers their implications for practice-based doctorates, in particular those in visual art.

Despite the theoretical component required by most institutions the UKCGE report refers to these PhDs as being practice-based, rather than practice/theory. To some extent this is a simple question of nomenclature, but it is notable because the UKCGE report makes a firm distinction between art practice and theory. I suggest that this distinction is, however, one of the difficulties of the UKCGE report. While the working

party acknowledges that practice can satisfy various PhD criteria, such as originality, they ultimately assume that artwork cannot be as intellectually clear and accessible as writing. Indeed, in order to become precise, clear and accessible artwork has to be accompanied by written analysis. Here, I argue against the UKCGE's conception of theory and practice, not least because it forgets the degree to which academic study is itself a practice, and ask to what extent does the report acknowledge art as a legitimate research practice within the university.

Although the regulations for the new practice-based PhDs have been validated by numerous universities, there remains some unease about the capacity of images to function as research. In the UKCGE report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*, the Working Group notes that it 'is an unusually complex and sensitive topic raising a number of issues about regulations, submissions, examinations and above all "equivalence".' [1] The Working Group did consider the possibility of giving practice-based doctoral study a different title to conventionally academic research, but remaining in line with the Dearing Report's proposal that the classification of higher degrees should be broadly standardised to avoid a proliferation of awards, decided to reject the suggestion. The Working Group also pointed out that there is already a substantial amount of 'doctoral research, particularly in the humanities, which, though not practice-based, does not conform to a narrow (and probably mythical) definition of a traditional 'scientific' model of doctoral research. [2] Instead of trying to differentiate between conventional and practice-based doctorates, the Working Group proposed a broad continuum of research-oriented work capable of encompassing both approaches.

In some quarters, however, there was an anxiety that if practice-based doctorates were acknowledged as such, they would undermine and devalue conventional doctorates. Making reference to practice-based doctorates, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) Report, *Survey of Awards*

in Eleven Universities [1997] had emphasised 'the need to clarify the use of new doctoral titles and to protect the significance of the PhD/DPhil' (my emphasis). [3] For the UKCGE Working Group, who were supportive of practice-based doctorates, the question of equivalence was therefore important to ensure that art practice was not considered an easy route to doctoral status. How a practice-based doctorate can meet the same standards and criteria of conventional PhD work is thus one of the main concerns of their report.

The UKCGE report comments that in contrast to traditional doctorates, a practice-based doctorate is:

distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. [4]

Although the report also registers that practice-based doctorates should make the necessary 'contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field of study' [5] partly by means of practice, the report places a heavy emphasis on the need for an accompanying written submission:

practice-based doctoral submissions must include a substantial contextualisation of the creative work. This critical appraisal or analysis not only clarifies the basis of the claim for the originality and location of the original work, it also provides the basis for a judgement as to whether general scholarly requirements are met. This could be defined as judgement of the submission as a contribution to knowledge in the field, showing doctoral powers of analysis and mastery of contextual knowledge, in a form which is accessible to and auditable by knowledgeable peers. (my emphasis) [6]

In other words practice alone cannot independently demonstrate general scholarly requirements or analysis and mastery of the subject level to a doctoral standard. Notably clarification is also an issue. Without (con)textual material the art work

is not accessible to judgement or thorough comprehension. So although the creative work may demonstrate originality and so on, it is actually only the written research that can adequately clarify those factors and provide a basis for judgement. This notion that images need words to explain or pin them down them is a relatively common one. Margaret Iverson, for example, has commented on the relative grasp images and words are perceived as having on meaning:

The image is set over against discourse. It is mute and in need of a voluble interpreter. It drifts and requires a linguistic anchor. [7]

In the UKCGE report writing is similarly understood as being a way of securing the meaning of art work or the intentions behind it.

Significantly, this demand for contextualising theory is not a demand for the integration of theory and practice, although individual candidates could potentially interpret it in this light. Rather, it privileges theory over artwork since it is the theoretical component of the doctorate that gives the work PhD standing. This not only outlaws those candidates whose doctoral research is practice only, but makes the place of art practice an ambivalent one within doctoral study. Within the terms laid out by the UKCGE report, artwork, no matter how theoretically informed or critical it may be, does not function as research, it becomes research worthy only through the framing theoretical enquiry. In other words, an art practice, no matter how cognitively sophisticated and theoretically rich it is, or however much it enquires into and works through a set of ideas, cannot be deemed research without the supporting apparatus of conventionally presented academic study.

The necessity of having written documentation is reiterated in relation to process. In conventionally presented doctorates process and product are both present in the thesis:

The process – the programme of research and the research methods followed – can be distinguished

from the product – the outcome of the research – although the product is a significant indicator of the process. The determination of doctorateness is dependent on the exposition of both. (emphasis in text) [8]

In contrast, the Working Group suggests, that the product of art practice research is essentially

determined by the nature of the art form or the specific project undertaken. Depending on the agreed method of presentation... the product may be a musical or dramatic performance or a play or works of visual art / design. But no matter how valuable or well received in artistic terms this product is, this is not, in itself indicative of process. (my emphasis) [9]

According to the UKCGE, then, the finished product of creative work does not show adequate evidence of process, either in individual works or in relation to a series of work. In order to compensate for this 'it follows that a recording in written form... of the context and development of the project is necessary to provide publicly accessible evidence of the research processes'. [10]

The suggestion that an artwork is 'essentially determined' by the nature of an artwork's form, emphasises form to such an extent that it is perceived as eradicating process. The converse is apparently true of writing. Written research is understood to be clear and to act as a vehicle for the straightforward communication of meaning. As the report has it, the written component

would seem to be a necessary accompaniment to the body of work in order for that work to be valued, understood and assessed as an outcome of a rigorous and intellectually demanding programme of study, which without such documentation would be otherwise difficult to determine. [11]

In the terms of the UKCGE report writing gives us better access to meaning because it does not carry the extra weight of form associated with

artwork. Writing is implicitly conceived of as something which does not itself signify but carries signification. To a large extent, then, the UKCGE report maintains a divide between theory and practice, image and word. Although the report argues for an equivalence between practice-based and conventional PhDs, it nevertheless maintains that separation at the level of production.

What the report forgets is that writing also has a form and has a determining effect on the finished product. Just as choosing lard rather than clay, as Janine Antoni has or using chocolate instead of gouache, will to some extent shape the outcome, so too will the medium of writing. In the report writing is perceived as being so naturalised that it is not recognised as having a form. Nevertheless, there is a particular style to academic writing as the numerous graduate self-help books testify. This piece of advice, entitled 'Developing an academic writing style' illustrates how academic writing is a genre that has to be learnt:

In some fields of study by the time research students come to write a report, they will be thoroughly familiar with the accepted style of academic writing and academic argument in the discipline. [12]

Similarly, *The Guide to Scientific Writing* not only implies that the appropriate form of writing varies from discipline to discipline, but that students should also be aware of different styles of writing within journals:

We are about to embark on a piece of scientific writing, not a piece of English literature. Our paper should contain three ingredients, precise logical science, clear and concise English, and the idiosyncrasies of style demanded by the journal to which it will be submitted. [13]

What is an appropriate language in science is not the same as that used in English Literature or in non-academic writing. In a similar way to studying oil painting or drawing, academic writing has to be learnt and practised.

Although apparently unimportant, questions of style and terminology do in fact embody massive assumptions about the relative standing of subjective and objective observation and opinion. The ability to successfully participate in academic debate, either as a student or as an expert, relies on an ability to use these codes correctly. For example, within such apparently minor issues as the use of 'I' lie conceptions of objectivity and impartiality. Even if this is taken into account and the first person singular is deliberately used as a way of declaring the subjectivity and partiality of academic work, this still depends on knowledge of academic form. For students particularly, the incorrect use of academic style, such as writing up the results of an experiment using the active voice, can be severely penalised. Thus the acquisition of writing skills is not only a matter of style but indexes and implicitly subscribes to academic codes and procedures. Academic writing is not simply apparent and clear but forms an ingrained set of assumptions that underpin stylistic rules to the point where they have become naturalised.

The UKCGE report suggests that the written material in a practice-based PhD can clarify and provide a basis for judging the artwork partly because it is not 'essentially determined by form'. By extension the assessment of scholarly requirements is predicated on the clear separation of theory and practice. This position is problematic on several counts. The recognition that academic writing is embedded with a range of preconceptions about what academic work includes and excludes reveals it to be a mode of practice. This both blurs the distinction between theory and practice and demonstrates that academic writing is not simply a means of conveying information, but is concerned with establishing academic legitimacy through form as much as through substance.

Academic writing is a mode of practice that is to some extent determined by form. If writing is not a simple means of communication but carries all kinds of extra assumptions and codes within its structure and terminology, then it cannot straightforwardly explain or clarify art practice.

Writing has its own form that interrupts its status as pure signifier and prevents it from being a completely stable point from which to judge the artwork. Consequently, once writing is considered to be a practice it ceases to be a means of simply explaining or underpinning art work.

While the UKCGE report intends to establish ways in which the practice-based doctorate can be deemed equivalent to conventional doctorates it utilises a traditional distinction wherein academic work is opposed to both practice generally and artwork specifically. While this is a common model in both academic and art circles it ignores both the practical elements of theoretical writing and the theoretical aspects of art practice. There is a long history of artists engaging with intellectual issues, concepts and philosophies, and of making artwork which is thoroughly engaged at a critical level. Clearly, these practices do not operate in isolation or in a separate sphere to theoretical debates but nor do artists rely on dissertations to make their point.

Yet, without a written thesis how would a practice-based PhD meet the criteria the UKCGE report stipulates? While the report suggests that without a contextualising element the artwork would not be auditable or accessible to judgement, artwork is and has been accessible to judgement, whether the context is that of a Foundation level show or an international gallery. The judgements themselves may on occasion be contentious but, since judgement *per se* can never be absolute, the same could equally be said of academic work. Admittedly, art practices are not generally assessed in terms of whether or not they meet 'general scholarly requirements', but perhaps the issue here is how to re-think what is meant by scholarly, rather than to unquestioningly try to squeeze art practice into the regulatory forms of academia.

The academic community is increasingly questioning what constitutes academic practice. To some extent this has been forced upon the academy through educational reforms and market-oriented management, but a re-thinking

of academic territory has also been done from the perspective of who and what has historically been excluded from the parameters of the university. Among others, feminist, post-structuralist and post-colonial writers have critiqued the way in which particular forms of knowledge, ways of working and groups of people have been legitimated by academia while others have been dismissed. In this context the attempt to make the practice-based PhD equivalent to conventional academic study seems to be missing the point. Artwork does not operate in the same way as academic practice, although the growing heterogeneity of both arenas means that the overlaps are increasingly frequent. A practice-based PhD, whether or not it includes theoretical elements, will be different from a conventional one. Rather than making art practice as scholarly as possible, the practice-based PhD could be seen as an opportunity to re-think academic norms.

While the UKCGE report is sympathetic to practice-based doctorates it nevertheless does not re-consider the relationship of artwork to academia, practice to theory, or indeed the nature of academia itself in any substantial ways. Instead, by maintaining that artwork needs to be underpinned and clarified by written commentaries it deems artwork to be competent as research only through theoretical elucidation and thereby keeps a traditional image of academia in place.

Moreover, such a formulation retains the oppositional relation between art as predominantly anti-intellectual and written work as properly academic. In effect, it does not open out the boundaries of academia to acknowledge different ways of thinking and working, but reduces art practice to the conventions of academia.

References

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4. United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education, *op. cit.*, p. 18
5. *Ibid.* p. 11
6. *Ibid.*
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10. *Ibid.* p. 22
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