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The play's the thing: reflections on the use of playwriting as creative practice within an education studies PhD.

Beth Curtis & Gary Husband

Abstract.

Expanding on Harris and Sinclair's claim that 'the writing of a play is an act of inquiry', this article reflects on the joyful entanglements, messiness and friction-led use of creative methods within the context of a PhD in education studies. Amplifying the voices of both doctoral student and supervisor, we explain how the construction of a dramatic script informed the crafting of an alternative format thesis within which, "the play's the thing" (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2). In responding to the influence of creative practice in the lives of both the student and the supervisor, the article uses creative and reflective writing as a method of inquiry to explore how policy and procedure are navigated in relation to non-standard theses submissions. We find that academic expectancy continues to influence the structure, form, and presentation of the PhD thesis and highlight how enduring tensions surrounding the reverence of "tradition" impacts the application and nature of creativity. The piece aims to bring together and consider the multiple challenges faced but importantly, highlights how the creative partnership between supervisor and student has forged changes in contemporary doctoral education in the awarding institution, and the implications for future practice within doctoral education more broadly.

Keywords: creative practice; doctoral education; playwriting as inquiry; post-qualitative

Provocation (a): the play's the thing.

The play: Passed from hand to hand, mouth to mouth, my pages are tatty-edged and thumbed, fingerprints mark me with traces of the bodies who will inhabit my stories. Stained with the graphite of pencils, sharp points dig into my skin and offer

interpretations of self; reimaginings and new beginnings. I am a thing. I am the thing. I transcend dimensionality and invite possibility as I dance in the spaces between place and time. Feel my presence. Watch me as I come to life.

1. Introduction.

The application of creative practice and creative methods in doctoral studies is not new. Just as there is a history of the innovative, abstract and avantgarde in dramatic writing, so are there myriad examples of researchers marrying creativity with academia, particularly in doctoral studies situated within the domain of arts-based subjects. Transdisciplinary approaches are increasingly common, as researchers seek the best way to tell the story that needs to be told. Arguably however, the guidance and expectations regarding the relationship and positionality of creativity within the context of doctoral education can differ by both institution and the discipline within which the study is situated. Frick notes that doctoral education is a naturally creative endeavour and yet 'a lack of conceptualisation [of creativity] may make it difficult for students to understand what is expected of them' (2011, pp.495-496). Subsequently, this can be problematic for the supervisor whose task it is to guide the doctoral student and encourage originality, whilst also ensuring the work produced merits the conferment of PhD. The question of the supervisor's openness to creative practice - both their own and that of their students - also merits consideration as we explore the extent to which creativity is welcomed as part of the doctoral journey.

This article reflects on the completion of a doctoral research study in the field of education, within which the construction of a dramatic play script is utilised as a theoretical framework. Reluctant to bow to the pressures of capital-A-academic expectancy, we seek to demonstrate how normative procedures and policies of doctoral education were navigated in response to what Koro-Ljungberg (2016) describes as *data-wants* and *data entanglements*. Positioned within an institution open to exploring innovative theses, the creative practice of the doctoral student is allowed to flourish through an approach to supervision which is dialogic, collaborative and critically reflexive. In turn, the supervisor is challenged to test the malleability of institutional protocol in the submission of a nontraditional thesis, within which an "interlude" disrupts the structure of the formal document and the reader is directed to engage with a dramatic script as a separate data artefact and (re)presentation of research:

Provocation (b): an interlude (And The Performance Speaks)

The Interlude serves as an interval in the staging of the story: here, the play speaks for itself. It is at this point that the reader will be directed to the pages of the script as a means of contextualising and punctuating the Acts of the thesis which follow. The reader will be encouraged to move their focus away from formal academic structures and engage in an embodied reading of the play -

And The Performance Speaks

- here, the composite voices of the research participants are illuminated through the dramatic form, which has been constructed as a result of the creative, analytic, and writerly practices of the Teacher-Researcher-Playwright.

2. Approach to inquiry.

The research is informed by post-qualitative (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016; Richardson, 2018; St. Pierre, 2021), embodied (Ellingson, 2017; Leigh and Brown, 2021) and arts-based (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Kara *et al.*, 2021) methods of inquiry. The authors consider the practices of both writing and *wri(gh)ting* as embodied acts of creation (Østern *et al.*, 2023) and understand “data” as constructed, not found (Kamler and Thompson, 2006). In these spaces of critical and creative inquiry, the presence of sensing, emotionally-responsive bodies is celebrated not feared, acknowledging the significance of feeling and being research as we construct ‘academic words and writing that move us, that we feel, and can understand in our own ways’ (Mackinlay in Burnard *et al.*, 2022, p.141). Post-qualitative perspectives resist the dichotomisation of creativity and analysis (Richardson, 2018) and pave the way for academic writing to be in itself, a creative practice and one which the doctoral student should be encouraged to consciously engage with as part of their studies.

In the discussion of a PhD study which positions drama at its onto-epistemological centre, dramatic imagery, poetry and dialogue are interwoven with academic text and used as points of reflection, diffraction, and as visual and performative (re)interpretations of lived experience. These are presented throughout the article as *provocations* which explore our experiences of creative practice and articulate a movement towards alternative ways of doing, being and documenting research. Whilst disruption to traditional formats can be subject to scrutiny and suspicion, writing is one way through which we can know the world (Richardson, 2018; St Pierre, 2015) and for the arts-based researcher, ‘the forms one uses to represent what one knows affects what can be said’ (Eisner, 1981, p.7). The relationship between thesis and form is resonant of the joyful entanglement of process and product, and writer and that which they produce; we resist false dualisms and embrace our inseparability from the work.

Provocation (c): a monologue.

The doctoral student: (*to the supervisor*) It was that time I cried in our meeting - that I fully understood how much it meant to me.

A deeply rooted conviction that to do anything other would be a disservice to the research and the experiences of the participants - and to myself as a creative being. The writing of a play had become so deeply woven into the fabric of the research that to think of it as having anything other than centrality within the thesis felt gut-wrenchingly wrong - imprecise, inaccurate, and a violence against what I knew the work was and needed to be.

Beat.

I think you understood that as you quietly pushed a bar of chocolate across the table in my direction -

3. Identity, positionality and perspective.

To provide context for this article, an outlining of the identities, positionalities and perspectives of the authors is important. We align with an understanding that a 'boundary is more like a membrane than a wall' (Conquergood, 2002, p.45) and see locations, positionalities and identities as fluid, malleable and shifting. Within this space, new knowledge is constructed in the travelling across and through myriad ways of knowing and the situated and embodied self of the researcher is unashamed of their close-to-practice perspective. We seek not to generalise but to illuminate our lived experience in relation to the (human and non-human) world, acknowledging how our personal identifiers including our gender, age, ethnicity and class inform our frames of reference, experience and understanding. We recognise a need to challenge Eurocentric systems of power and knowledge which dominate academia, and undermine global-majority voices and perspectives.

The authors write from their individual positionalities as doctoral student and doctoral supervisor and understand that whilst there is shared experience, each account is an interpretation of past events. Both authors have backgrounds as teachers in the Further Education and Skills sector and their research outputs are situated in practice-based contexts. Creativity is considered as significant in the lives of both student and supervisor and their individual (and shared) practice as creatives in the fields of music, drama, art, woodwork, writing and teaching indelibly inform their practice as researchers and academics, acting as a compass in the navigation of their work. The importance of creativity and the arts within education is a strong and shared value, being a guiding tenet underpinning the relationship as supervisor and student, and as people. The authors' creative identities are expressed in *Plate 1* and *Plate 2* below:

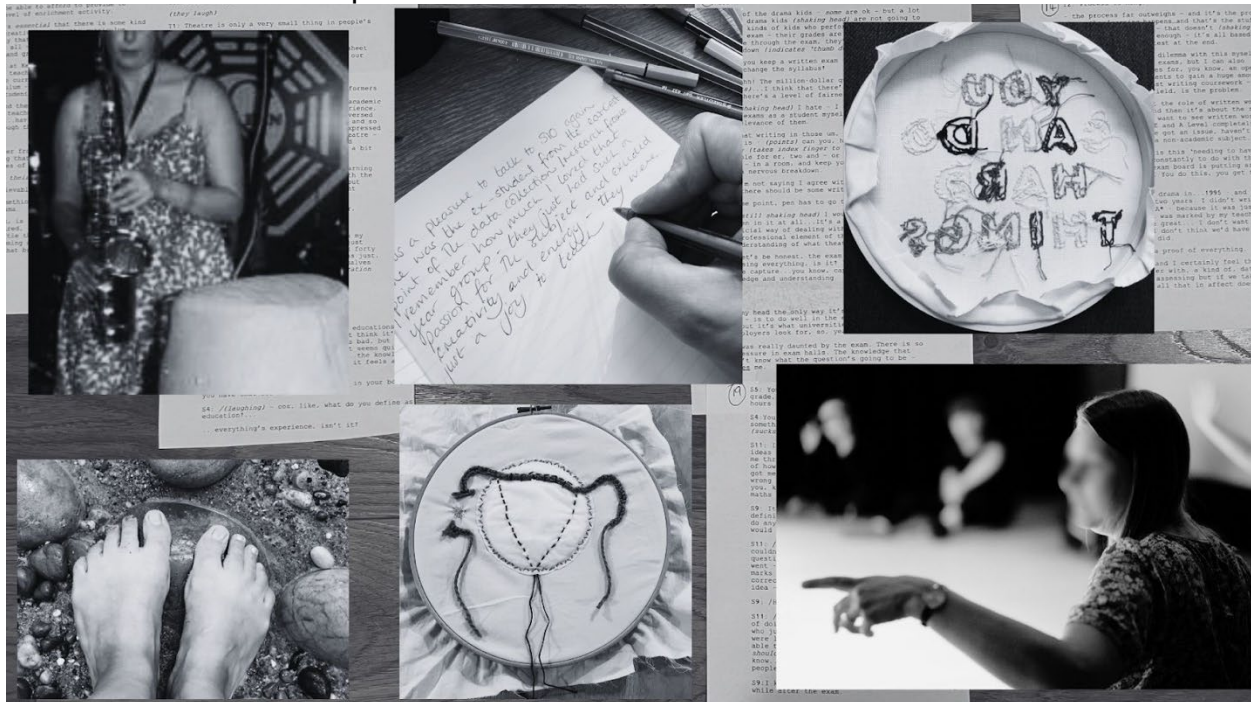


Plate 1: The creative identity/ies of the doctoral student.



Plate 2: The creative identity/ies of the doctoral

supervisor.

4. Writing and *wr(igh)ting* as creative practice.

Within doctoral education, writing is utilised to enable the formation of both text(s) and identity(ies): the dissertation; the thesis; the student; and the supervisor develop concurrently and relationally throughout the journey (Kamler and Thompson, 2008). Wisker states that: 'The role of post/graduate research is to make and contribute to new knowledge, but we only know about this new knowledge through writing' (2016, p.184). However, within the context of much doctoral education, writing is commonly viewed as a decontextualised set of skills which the researcher must learn, often with minimal supervision, to harness (Kamler and Thompson, 2006). We argue that writing should be a guided process of learning and a creative practice of inquiry but also acknowledge the purpose it serves in terms of assessment. In satisfying the descriptors for level 8 study, PhD candidates are expected to 'be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences' (QAA, 2014, p.30), and as such, must consider how to achieve this through the crafting of their writing and in the construction of the academic thesis. This is a creative endeavour and one which requires a degree of risk-taking on the part of the student (and arguably, the supervisor). Creativity and risk-taking are necessary in order to engage in creative practice; you have to step outside of your comfort zone and into the unknown. In this space, failure occurs but so does playfulness, discovery and innovation and it is through

engaging in activities which encourage creative risk-taking, that we can push boundaries, ask and answer questions and generate new knowledge.

In this way, the writerly practices of the doctoral researcher can be likened to those of the playwright. Beginning with the impulse to tell a story, the playwright develops the narrative and explores the characters through an individualised process which may include: researching; drafting; editing; physical exploration; collaboration with others; playing with imagery; sharing; and revision. The playwright must take creative risks at each stage to establish the necessary relationship between the intent of the piece and the dramatic form through which it is best communicated. As playwright Ella Hickson, notes: 'It's about making sure, whatever your intention is, that your form is active in relation to that intention: that what you're saying and how you're saying it are in quite an interrogated relationship' (Hickson in Costa, 2019). In the case of the doctoral study which is the stimulus for this article, a dramatic play was created from the data stories and situated as a living artefact within the context of the work. In doing so, both doctoral student and supervisor were challenged to take a risk in pursuing the submission of a non-traditional dissertation which supported the researcher in maintaining both the artistic and academic integrity of the work. This risk was not without its complexities however, and will be discussed further in section six of this paper.

As well as a process of creative risk-taking, playwriting is also an embodied practice (Gardiner, 2019). When examining the etymology of the word, "playwright", we can understand the writer's process more fully when considering the job of the shipwright, or the wheelwright. The playwright's job is similarly one of craft and construction; their aim being to build something that is tangible and with the capacity to carry something or someone on a journey. The practice of the playwright is consequently one of both writing and *wri(gh)ting*, as they physically and practically make something new: 'Plays can be visualized as an object taking up space, constructed by the playwright using a variety of materials and tools' (Johnson in Dunn *et al.*, 2023, p.13). The playwright's body is central to this task and cannot be ignored as integral to the writing experience. When the body is sidelined, false dualisms are allowed to propagate and mind and body, thought and action are placed in opposition to one another. The words on the page signify the beginnings of a dialogue; an interaction which will grow and change in and through the expression of others (human and nonhuman/more-than-human entities). In doing so, new knowledge is created and ploughed back into spiralling iterations to be (re)embodied and (re)interpreted.

This is also true of the academic researcher for whom the act of writing is both an embodied method of inquiry, and a creative mode of expression and facet of the self. Within this context, the role of the body/ies within stories of self and other is welcomed and utilised as both a resource and an outcome of the work. As doctoral student and supervisor, we believe that conceptualisations of writing and *wri(gh)ting* within academic study should be recognised and supported as creative practice, through which beginning researchers can explore the craft and construction of text as more than a means to an end on their journey through the PhD. This act of "becoming through doing" under the guidance of an experienced supervisor, dates back to the early twelfth century (University of Paris makes a claim to be the first) and forms a parallel between the new academic

standard and the accepted journeyman 5 year route of apprenticeships. Subsequently, we have nearly a millennium of history that brings with it significant tradition and expectations, the tensions and entanglements of which will be discussed later in this article.

Reflecting on the PhD study at the heart of this piece, the supervisor's role in encouraging the doctoral student's crafting of their creative and dramatic writing was significant. Frick notes that: 'As supervisors, we need to create environments that motivate students to become creative, to provide a means for them to be creative, and the opportunity to showcase their creativity' (2011, p.505). In expanding institutional awareness of the role and importance of creativity within the learning and supervision of PhD students, the way is paved for future candidates to be offered supervision that is relational and creatively collaborative in its approach and undertaking.

Provocation (d): the play waits in anticipation.

The play speaks to us from within the expanse of the stage. Emerging from the darkness, it is given form and takes up space.

The play: Well-made...or made-well...?

I feel my weight; heavy limbed and fleshy and yet I doubt my existence.
In sinewy silence I wait, eager-mouthed and expectant -

Do you see me standing here? Can you hear me calling?

I am everything and nothing. I am the end and the beginning. I am the living and the dying. I am the created and the creator. I am here and then I'm gone. Like a pregnant pause I succumb to the weight, and I wait... Wait.

5. The well-made play and the well-made thesis.

The well-made play is a formula for playwriting. Attributed to French dramatist Eugène Scribe, the well-made play followed a strict technical structure consisting of exposition, complication, development, crisis, and denouement. As a dramatic genre, it dominated the stages of nineteenth-century theatre in Europe and the U.S. and proved to be 'remarkably resilient' (Saunders, 2008, p.12) as a theatrical form, despite censure of its highly artificial nature. In contemporary theatre criticism, the term "well-made play" is often used as an insult. It's not to say that a play should not be *made well*: the critique of this form lies in its out-dated construction of narrative and rejection of its verisimilitude of bourgeois middle-class society. Because the well-made play is synonymous with the theatrical style of realism, there is the propensity for reverence of the "purity" of its form, which, as Housely points out, is dangerous: 'there's a right way of doing things and if you do it differently you're either wild or wrong' (Housely in Costa, 2019).

Thrift (2008) describes the job of the researcher as being 'there to hear the world and make sure that it can speak back' (Thrift 2008:18 in Østern *et al.*, 2023, p.277), yet in certain disciplines and institutions, the weight of the "well-made" thesis defines the ways

and means through which research is documented and presented. Whilst it is acknowledged that clarity of communication and engaging storytelling are proponents of both good academic writing and good playwriting, it is interesting to consider what Emily McLaughlin, head of New Work at the National Theatre, infers when she states that ‘architecture defines form defines content defines story’ (McLaughlin in Costa, 2019). In bowing to academic expectation in the architectural construction of the doctoral thesis, risk and creativity are jeopardised and agency and innovation are easily subdued: ‘What I write is both my word, with my speech plan and expression, and someone else’s word – the word of authority, of constraint, of precedent’ (Thesen, 2013, p.111).

In doctoral education, there is very often a requirement for PhD students to structure their writing in a form prescribed by the awarding institution and in conformity with the expectancy and traditions of the Academy. Just as the well-made play served as a blueprint for the playwright’s of the time, the doctoral student is compelled to situate their work ‘in a context and tradition of research that has disciplinary conventions and expectations’ (Hodgson, 2020, p.53). These conventions are found to be deeply engrained in the culture and ethos of doctoral education, within which ‘Supervisors, directors of doctoral education and examiners are gatekeepers of the academic acceptability of the forms of expression and shape’ (Wisker, 2016, p.186). This can serve to sustain what Vicars and McKenna (2015) describe as the doxa of foundational research practices and the shoring up of capital-A-academic conventions which hold “tradition” in high esteem, arguably at the expense of risk-taking and creativity:

Provocation (e): a duologue.

The doctoral supervisor: I think they used that word incorrectly - they were wrong to use the word, “traditional”.

The doctoral student: Yes...that’s the bit that really stings... I feel like they didn’t quite get it, which is disappointing...the Academy one, me nil.

The doctoral supervisor: No, no, no...we haven’t given in yet. The chair called me earlier - spent a good twenty minutes on the phone. She wanted to check how you were. She could tell you were disappointed with the feedback.

The doctoral student: That was kind of her...what did you say?

The doctoral supervisor: I said yeah, you were - that we were a bit disappointed by the language they’d used around the recommendations regarding the findings.

The doctoral student: It’s just knocked my confidence a bit, and the imposter syndrome is weighing heavy... but I’m aware that maybe I just didn’t get it quite right in terms of really highlighting the findings in a way that was clear to someone on the outside.

The doctoral supervisor: I have sensed all of this... Your confidence will return, imposter syndrome will fade, well, as much as it ever does, and we’ll sort that

chapter so the examiners get the headlines they want. You'll retain your integrity and the art will remain.

The doctoral student: it feels ironic that as a doctoral candidate, I'm having to jump through the same hoops that the participants describe in the study. You're playing a guessing game with the examiner and there's a rigidity in the system that inhibits creativity. The same question applies within drama education and the whole doctoral assessment process - how do you maintain credibility without having to conform? It doesn't feel possible.

In the case of the PhD study at the heart of this article, the submission of the play text as a separate physical artefact was deemed integral to the authenticity of the research and the experiences of the participants, including the researcher. This was a change to the planned methodological path and required an addendum to the study's ethical approval and special dispensation granted from the Academic Director of Postgraduate Research within the awarding institution. The supervisor's ability to understand the significance of this was crucial, both within the context of the study itself and in terms of an understanding and appreciation of the personal creative practice of the doctoral student. Through professional, constructive dialogue with colleagues within an institution open to creativity and innovation, it was agreed that the play could be printed as a hard copy and sent to the examiners to be considered as part of their assessment of the work.

The use of alternative forms of presentation and modes of communication 'means that the researcher and the reader can get closer to the primary experience that is being investigated' (Andrews, 2014, p.78). The physical journeying of the play (through the post; over land and sea; from hand-to-hand) is seen as part of the creative process and understands the *wr(igh)ting* of the play as central within the body of work presented for examination. The pre-viva thesis positioned the play in place of the commonly expected summary of findings, arguing that "the play's the thing" and should be read simultaneously as both a (re)presentation and discussion of the research findings. The examiners' decision to request the inclusion of a "traditional" findings chapter as part of the recommendations was arguably necessary in clarifying the outputs of the research but equally, could be viewed as the prevailing dominance of academic tradition and an enduring contention surrounding the use and place of creativity and creative practice within doctoral education and assessment.

6. The problematic position of creativity in a culture of capital-Q-quality.

In the context of the arts, the submission of a performance artefact as examinable content is not unusual. Indeed, Baz Kershaw (in Smith and Dean Ed.s., 2009) reminds us that practice-as-research and performance-based methods of inquiry became well-established during the early-2000's in both the UK and abroad. A shift in paradigmatic thinking that placed creativity at the heart of performance research, challenged traditional, Western, and patriarchal hierarchies of knowledge creating what Kershaw describes as, 'an inconceivable disturbance' (Kershaw in Smith and Dean Ed.s, 2009, p.106). In non-performance based fields, the use of creative methodologies and methods has gained momentum since the turn of the 21st century, particularly across disciplines such as healthcare and education but also within scientific and quantitative contexts (Kara, 2015).

With that comes a need for doctoral policy and procedure to flex in response to the needs of contemporary researchers who are turning to innovative and creative approaches to answer (and ask) questions of an ever-complex and entangled world.

However, within doctoral education it is arguably problematic to escape the influencing factors of the weight of history and tradition: the deepening of capital Q Quality assurance; the bureaucratic requirements and processes of the institution (student journey management); and the requirements of assessment. Individually these all present specific parameters and priorities, some of which are arguably and possibly correctly immovable. The question of “when is a doctorate doctorate?” is principal amongst them as it refers to the international maintenance of the standard and quality of the award. As such, the protection of the qualification is enforced by both quality assurance procedures and by quality enforcement processes and gatekeepers; examiners. Whilst selecting examiners with knowledge and expertise in the field is accepted, there can also be challenges in alignment in creativity and assuring a level of interpretation and understanding can be achieved.

The above is making some assumptions that the thesis was given permission to be submitted in the first instance. This is perhaps the greatest act of gatekeeping and an area of consistent development and refinement. The university sets the standards by which it awards its degrees using internationally recognised criteria and levels, the entire system is dependent on compliance and recognised cross examination and collaboration. It can therefore be bureaucratically challenging to introduce new concepts, formats, ideas and methods into a tightly controlled and rightfully regulated environment. In specific relation to the practice of creativity within the context of doctoral education and examination, it is noted that ‘creativity needs to result in an original and appropriate contribution that has value and purpose, and that such a contribution can be judged according to some external criteria’ (Frick, 2011, pp.504-505).

Most doctoral candidates face the question of, “what is your original contribution to knowledge?” as this underpins the foundational principles of what doctoral study is; learning to research by doing research. The viva voce carries with it the expectation of detailed and probing challenge from the examiners and a robust defence by the candidate. However, there is also an understanding that examiners are gatekeepers and arbiters of quality and standards. Doctoral examinations are not moderated or verified like wider curricular and the examiners’ decisions are by and large final (due process and regulations withstanding). However, this relies on recognising the ‘doctorliness’ of the work and making sound judgements on the basis of the presented texts and its defence. There are inherent tensions within the system but as supervisors and examiners have both achieved the standard themselves, it is accepted that this at least protects the “Q”uality and level of the doctorate. Tensions arise, however, when the norms and expectations are challenged. In the case of creative methods and novel forms of presentation, there is an additional layer of complexity in that both the content and standard of research is tested and the examiners also have to be convinced by the creative method and mode of presentation.

The individuals who constitute the gatekeeping panels vary from month to month and sometimes the panels can be formed by more academically traditional or cautious members and as such, much of development tends to be predicated on who is in on the day. This is a slight mischaracterization of much beloved colleagues but it emphasises the somewhat subjective nature of progress. As with all progress, it is incremental and the greatest barrier is related to attempts at too great an increment of change. Change begets change and as ideas are formed, discussed, tested and crystallised, codified and granted bureaucratic protections, they in turn become the norm and standard. The same applies with the challenges presented by arts-based methods and new ways of thinking. The door is (at least in this institution) open to progress and it is readily discussed and embraced, albeit incrementally.

7. Implications for the future of creative practice in doctoral education.

We conclude with our separate reflections as student and supervisor in consideration of the implications for practice which occur as a result of the PhD study discussed in this article. We do not seek to make grand claims or suggest that our experiences are generalisable or transferable but instead, hope to illuminate the possibilities, complexities and potential future of creative practice within doctoral education.

Closing reflections: the supervisor.

The lasting impact of this specific work is the legacy of conversations and the agreement recorded that theses submissions do not have to be “bound” within a physical artefact and that some of the work can exist as a separate and important entity. The play’s the thing: it was given space to be a separate artefact and this directly impacted the assessment process. The submission allowed the readers to leave the thesis and return to it under direction, thus expanding the space that the thesis occupied; less bound and more free. This worked well between submission and reading but ultimately, no real change could be made to repository processes and the play had to be appended to the thesis for final library cataloguing. Whilst this arguably has minimal impact, it does somewhat bring back to the fore the issues of compliance and the lack of space for the play to just “be”. Perhaps seeking a separate post assessment publication of the play could counteract its lack of a separate library space.

Further to this, the assessment process somewhat corralled the examiners who (despite doing a superb job), did revert to the traditional and very codified expectation of all things in their place and recognisable format. As an examiner, I understand the appeal and safety in this and indeed, this reflects my own battle with a desire for explicit direction and specifics in presentation of findings, and my desire to support an artist and their artistic freedoms and space. As a supervisor, I was able to learn and shape my thinking and be prepared to take some risks (albeit calculated). However, examiners still don’t have those freedoms as they are bound by strict process, learning outcomes and the weight of tradition: gatekeepers and defenders of the prestigious award and title.

The requests to conform to traditional models were slightly cushioned post-viva but the requirements remained. The work is academically no poorer for the inclusion of a distinct

list of findings in a specific place and written in a specific format; artistically though, there are perhaps some issues. Great art requires interpretation and nuanced thought. What does the art make you think, what does it make you feel? The space for interpretation and the interaction of provocation and response is diminished by formulaic structure. The work however survives this and is little diminished as with all good art; the space to respond and push back was occupied and a middle ground was sought. There is, I believe, more work to be done on situating artistic pieces within assessment spaces and still allowing for interpretation. That conversation has been advanced by this work which has not only opened the door for future works, but also leaves a door stop in place, preventing the way forward being blocked as the door pushed on slams shut once again.

Closing reflections: the student:

As a doctoral student and a drama teacher, my personal engagement with creativity is foundational to my practice as a researcher. My situated context and the close-to-practice nature of my PhD meant it was natural to view the study through a dramatic lens, applying what I understood about the processes of making theatre to the development of my research practice and methods of inquiry. I did not begin the project aiming to write a play but when I listened to the data, it was clear that the required response involved working creatively, analytically and relationally with the narratives of the participants to produce something that could show, as well as tell, their stories. Presenting the play text as a physical document was integral to my intentions for the work and I was surprised at the challenge this presented. Upon reflection, I recognise this as a personal misinterpretation of the term “originality”, and I have felt firsthand the friction when creativity rubs against established academic expectancy and the upholding of quality and standards. Creativity is notoriously hard to define, let alone assess, and this remains problematic within qualifications at all levels. The crafting of the thesis to include a “dramatic interlude” was part of the joyful creativity of the doctoral journey and I am grateful to have been supported in my endeavour to submit the research in a form which maintained the artistic and academic authenticity of the work. I consider whether this would have been the case if I had been supervised by someone less aligned with my creative ambitions, or within an institution less willing to support creativity and innovation. Burnard *et al.* (2023, p.3) encourage us to be ‘rebellious researchers and writing rebels’ as we ‘battle against the normative standard of conventional academic practices’ (ibid.). To ignore the tensions experienced throughout the process would be amiss, however, and this article has sought to highlight the invisible boundaries of expectation and academic tradition which continue to define the parameters of creativity in the presentation and assessment of the PhD qualification. In short, we battle on.

I offer my final reflections in the form of a poem, written in the period between my viva and submission of corrections, and as a continuation of my creative practice. I write to make sense of the world and I offer these words back in response to my experience:

Provocation (f): writing in motion.

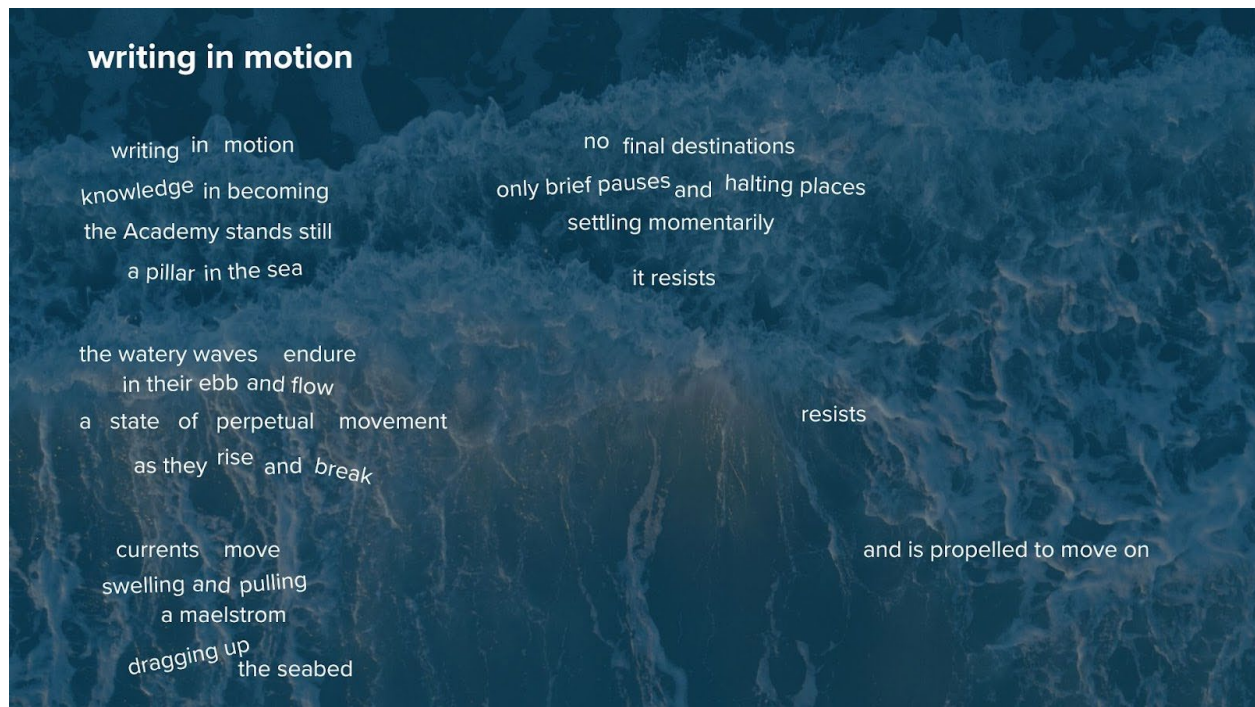


Plate 3: 'writing in motion' - a poem.

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