



A proper anxiety? Practice-based PhDs and academic unease

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In the handbook *How to Get a PhD*, Phillips and Pugh note that

The most pervasive of all the psychological aspects of doing a PhD is the anxiety that accompanies you through all its stages. At first it is very high and exemplified by such concerns as "am I clever enough?" "will "they" realise what a fraud I am?" and so on. As you progress, you go through periods of higher or lower anxiety but you are never completely free of it. It comes in bursts, and one of the reasons for feeling that a great weight has been lifted from you once you have successfully completed your PhD is that the nagging anxiety that has been your companion for so long has finally been lifted.

Anxiety is endemic to doctoral study; abnormally balanced or overly arrogant candidates aside, virtually everyone suffers from it. Yet, to others, a candidate's anxiety can appear unfounded and is often treated as such - the student is obviously talented and simply needs to be more confident, to stop worrying, to get on and do some work. Like any other PhD, practice-based PhDs are also the focus of much anxiety but, significantly, those anxieties reach beyond personal doubt and are often shared by supervisors, examiners and senior academic management. Here, I argue that the anxiety concerning practice-based PhDs should not be lightly dismissed because it is a product of the institutional relations practice-based doctorates put into place. At least in the short-term anxiety is structured into the qualification and the aim of this paper is to examine why.

Although academic regulations for practice-based PhDs have now been passed at some forty British institutions, a certain anxiety about practice-based PhDs still remains. Katy MacLeod's research on PhD methodologies revealed candidates often suffered from "an acute anxiety about retaining their identity as artists" 1. Students were worried that the PhD might steer them away from art practice and towards overly academic concerns. In many cases, my own included, supervisory emphasis has been placed upon the written component. Elizabeth Price who recently completed a practice-based doctorate at Leeds comments:

Of particular concern was the relation of any formal critical writing to other activities, and the relative status of these things within the context of the PhD. As a new course these

issues were not all defined. I think it is fair to say that probably 90% of the formal discussions I had were about the status and value of the written component. This was necessary but unfortunate.

Unlike most conventional PhD candidates, practice-based candidates not only have to deal with their individual project but contend with both the constitution of their PhD as such and the implications of doctoral study for their professional identity.

Anxiety is also evident in the HEQC (Higher Education Quality Council) report, Survey of Awards in Eleven Universities. By emphasising "the need to clarify the use of new doctoral titles and to protect the significance of the PhD / DPhil" <sup>2</sup> the report implies that the validation of practice-based doctorates would undermine and devalue conventional and more obviously valid doctorates. Equally, while the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) report Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design is ostensibly sympathetic to practice-based research, it nevertheless exhibits doubts about the capacity of images to function as research.

One of the central concerns of the report is the apparent difficulty of judging the intellectual and scholarly worth of artwork. For the purposes of a PhD, artwork is deemed inaccessible to judgement unless accompanied by written contextual material. While 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. Yet artwork has been, and is still successfully judged outside of an explicit relation to text, so why does the practice-based PhD destabilise what are established and educationally viable modes of judgement within art departments?

Until recently art practice and academia have been institutionally separated. A compulsory academic element was only introduced into higher education art courses in 1960, and even then the two remained both physically and temporally separate, a division underpinned by a conceptual framework that similarly split theory from practice. This ethos was largely exemplified by (and to some extent established by) the work of Clement Greenberg, who famously argued for art's autonomy, not just from academia but from almost any other aspect of social, economic or political experience. Now arguably, Greenberg's insistence on the different spheres of art suggests something of what is at stake both in maintaining and, in the case of the practice-based PhD, working across theoretical and practical areas, and that what is at stake here is competence and institutional authority.

For Greenberg the delineation of art's boundaries mutually ensured artistic competence and his own competence as an art critic. The exclusion of anything that was not specific to a particular art form guaranteed the purity of art. Here, purity was essentially an attempt to establish a clear identity for art, specifically for painting. As Greenberg notes "purism is the translation of an extreme solicitude, an anxiousness to the fate of art, a concern for its identity" <sup>3</sup> In turn, this clearly defined purity allows for the clear construction of competence:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. <sup>4</sup>

Greenberg can only argue for the superiority of modernist art, if the ground upon which excellence is judged is kept clear, so competence is necessarily tied to an insistence on maintaining the boundaries of aesthetic criteria. If the territory of art is heterogeneous or

amorphous, it becomes difficult to make qualitative assessments, whereas once clear criteria are established, in this case fidelity to medium, an emphasis on flatness and so forth, then what constitutes good art is much more obvious. In turn, being able to authoritatively pronounce on issues of quality is of course the measure of the critic's competence. So, it's not just the success of particular artists that is at stake in the separation of theory and practice, but that of the art historian.

This clear demarcation of disciplinary boundaries is similarly important for the academic. To become an expert you have to have a specialised field, which can only be only mastered if it is enclosed, or defended if its borders are clearly defined and policed. To construct or defend those boundaries is to assert a right to the territory, to make it one's own. It is to claim that art historians, for example, know what art history is, and are better equipped to judge, teach or write about it than someone from outside its borders. Clement Greenberg constructed boundaries around the arts so that it was made completely clear which fields belonged to whom, and who was pre-eminent in each.

Precisely because the demarcation between specialist areas is so closely tied to judgements of competence and the attribution of authority, it is unsurprising that people feel anxious when projects like practice-based PhDs cross boundaries. Yet crossing artistic and academic boundaries is nothing new - one thinks of conceptual and feminist art practices - which were initially almost unrecognisable as art are now both firmly mainstream. Indeed, precisely because it may be impossible to maintain those borders, particularly in art since much avant-garde work is judged to be successful precisely because it does cross existing boundaries, anxiety is perhaps unavoidable. So given these precedents why has the practice-based PhD caused such anxiety? Why isn't the PhD just a recent step in a history of theory and practice?

Significantly, the practice-based PhD has involved a shift in the institutional arbitration of competence. In the past art that crossed disciplinary boundaries was nevertheless evaluated within art colleges and in relation to their traditions and practices whereas in this instance art is being judged within an academic context and with a different set of expectations in mind. Unlike other previously contentious forms of art practice, this is not a change in medium or subject matter that nevertheless remains within the parameters of the art college, but is a shift in the way that the art object is legitimated as such. The practice-based PhD involves the theory and practice of art being acknowledged as academically valid. What then are the practical and conceptual consequences of academic validation for artists and how exactly does it provoke anxiety?

Greenberg demonstrates the degree to which competence and judgement are tied to artistic boundaries, but competence, authority and evaluation are also closely linked to institutional space. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Michel Foucault offers a different paradigm for the construction of competence. In contrast to Greenberg who suggests that there is something essential to painting and therefore to competent painting, Foucault examines the way in which discourse, in this case art, is validated within a network of institutional relations. The precise network formed by various institutions (art schools, universities, galleries, museums, publishers, auction houses), forms of classification (whether something was fine art, craft or design, media, conceptual framework) and authorities (curators, collectors, critics, teachers) positions something as art. Rather than having a fixed definition, art is recognised as such through this network. So, for instance, Hans Haacke's *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings* (1971) is a documentation and analysis of social housing in New York but, because the network through which that work emerges, differs from that of academic enquiry, it is still understood to be art and not, say, social

policy. It is not, therefore, the subjects or material that the practice-based PhD works with that potentially make it awkward, because art can unproblematically incorporate academic material, rather, the difficulty arises from the change in networks through which artwork is recognised.

In turn, where and how artwork emerges involves who is entitled to produce and validate it. By moving the right to legislation from the practising artist to the academic (and it is notable that a number of students are co-supervised outside of the art department) 5 a different series of institutional norms, professional and pedagogical practices are brought into play. It is this overlap between art practice and academia that potentially makes students, staff and management anxious. If authority is linked to specifically located and defined areas then it is clear that someone who is differently situated, who employs different processes, norms and frames of judgement, will not have the same claim to authority. For example, I may know as much about law as a Queen's Consul but without institutional recognition will not be able to practice as such. An artist could potentially make the same statement as an academic, but like the legal statements uttered by a layman, without the recognised position of an academic, it would lack value and status as an academically legitimate pronouncement. This is not to say that the declarations artists make do not have any status, but that they are constituted differently and have force in different arenas.

The practice-based PhD, however, effectively posits that artists can speak from the positions previously occupied by academics alone. This inevitably creates problems concerning competence. As with the lawyer, competence, authority and indeed the right to practice are linked to both the institution and the appropriately qualified individual. In this case, the competencies required by an artist are different to those demanded of an academic, yet a similar authority, that of being able to make academically legitimate statements and to conduct valid research, is being conferred.

Pragmatically, this means that the practice-based PhD potentially demands at least two sets of incompatible competencies, one that satisfies the demands of the university, and one that looks to the non-academic structures of art production. The specific criteria of competence for the practice-based PhD is not therefore immediately obvious, something that has far-reaching effects and raises questions such as; how do you produce or examine a PhD when it is unclear what competence constitutes per se? (Notably, my first choice of PhD examiner, an eminent art historian who had written extensively on contemporary art refused to examine it on the basis that she didn't feel sufficiently competent). Should the artwork be assessed in relation to contemporary art practice or should it be viewed as a thesis in images? Does the theoretical or intellectual investigation take place in relation to practice, or through the accompanying text? Does the artwork, like academic research, put forward a hypothesis and demonstrate a mastery of a canon or should the emphasis be placed upon technical ability and if so, how is technical ability judged? Should practice-based doctoral students be expected to write thesis of the same proficiency as conventional PhD students?

The anxiety practice-based PhDs provoke is entirely warranted. As Samuel Weber has pointed out habit is a strategy for the prevention of anxiety and here, habits and patterns of work, assessment and judgement have been broken. 6 While institutions do vary in the criteria they establish for the newly inaugurated PhDs, candidates, supervisors and examiners are still expected to proceed without a clear map of what is expected and without established criteria of competence. This is not to say that we have a blank canvas and therefore the lack of parameters can be interpreted as an exciting opportunity for

experiment and innovation. In fact, the canvas is overloaded with precedents that candidates and staff have to negotiate. Practice-based PhDs may be new but art practice and doctoral study are most definitely not and candidates inherit all the associated artistic and academic expectations.

Ironically, the UKCGE's attempt to negotiate these expectations by making practice-based PhDs academically respectable through the introduction of textual commentary, backfires. Rather than advocating an integration of theory and practice, the report, by privileging text in relation to research actually reinforces the distinction between them. Paradoxically, while this may make the practice-based PhD academically legitimate in the most conventional of ways, its overall effect is to reinforce the illegitimacy of art practice as research. Conversely, if practice-based PhDs could be simply practice-based, then artwork would be more clearly acknowledged as a valid mode of intellectual enquiry and the concomitant anxieties concerning whether or not art can constitute research might be reduced.

Alternatively, the anxiety practice-based PhDs provoke could be viewed in a more positive light. The separations between theory and practice, artwork and academia have served to build and maintain specific competencies and authorities; supporting particular groups of people and their interests to the detriment of others. The practice-based PhDs, however minimally, have had an effect on these constructions of academic space, opening it up to a different constituency, to different forms of knowledge and of practice. Given that boundaries favour the holders of intellectual territory, and not those people who are dispossessed academically or otherwise, the re-definition of academic and institutional boundaries offer different groups of people access to research and indeed, a changing recognition of what research is. This change in intellectual and administrative boundaries may well induce anxiety for some but for others it offers an opportunity to critically reappraise academic territory.

The critical productivity of anxiety in relation to institutional questions of knowledge and authority is, however, unlikely to offer much comfort to the doctoral student who not only has to deal with the unclear parameters of what is expected for a practice-based PhD, but often has to cope with a very real sense of dispossession. Precisely because practice-based PhDs are institutionally uneasy, candidates are neither recognised as academics nor are their careers necessarily furthered as artists and it is as yet unclear how the acquisition of a practice-based PhD can benefit the candidate beyond a solely personal pleasure in working (which will not help your chances of making a living, much less of paying back your student fees). What practice-based PhDs are for (above and beyond raising fees and improving the postgraduate profile of the department) is something that the institutions concerned need to address.

While I would not wish to downplay the consequences of living with often acute anxiety throughout the duration of a PhD, an understanding of how that anxiety is structural as well as personal could help. Otherwise, it might simply mean biding our time, as it is perhaps inevitable that the field of practice-based research will itself become firmly established within higher education. Just as feminist and conceptual art practices were once considered inaccessible to judgement, but have now become thoroughly institutionalised, so too will the practice-based PhD. Instead of being an anxiety inducing but potentially groundbreaking path that confuses modes of judgement and established authority, it will become a beaten path with its own canons, authorities and precedents. As its critical potential fades the conferences, debates and disagreements on the subject will no doubt diminish but the doctoral candidates' experience might well be vastly improved.

## Endnotes

- 1 MacLeod, K. "Research in Fine Art: theory, judgement and discourse", *Drawing Fire: The Journal of the National Association for Fine Arts Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (1998), p. 35.
- 2 Higher Education Quality Council: Graduate Standards Programme Survey of Awards in Eleven Universities, (1997), p.5.
- 3 Ibid. p. 35.
- 4 Greenberg C. quoted in Frascina, F. "Introduction", *Pollock and After*, op. cit., p. 5.
- 5 For instance, at Keele University I was informally supervised within the Center for Social Theory and Technology while practice-based PhD students at Staffordshire University were co-supervised within the philosophy department.
- 6 Samuel Weber, "The Limits of Professionalism", op.cit.

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