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Art and Design Practice-Based Research Degree Supervision
Some empirical findings

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ABSTRACT

Little is known empirically about the supervision of practice-based research degree students in Art and Design. Drawing on qualitative interview data with 50 supervisors, this article portrays some of their routine practices, conceptualizing them as an ongoing craft, which, whilst theoretically informed, is foremost a practical activity learned by trial and error. The article concludes by stressing the essentially tacit nature of these craft practices, and advocates the development of an adequately resourced programme of mentorship, so as to facilitate the transmission of good practice between experienced and novice supervisors.

KEYWORDS   *art, degrees, design, doctorates, research, supervision*

INTRODUCTION

WHILST THERE HAS been a recent advance in knowledge about the practice of doctoral supervision in the Natural and Social Sciences, and the Humanities (Burgess, 1994; Delamont et al., 1997; Graves and Varma, 1997), little is known empirically about supervision of practice-based research degrees in Art and Design. These degrees emerged out of the old Council for National Academic Awards system of regulation (CNAA, 1989), and have proliferated in the last decade (Candlin, 2000). The principal characteristic that distinguishes this kind of research degree from more traditional modes is that creative work is submitted along with a written thesis, both being of equal or near equal importance (UKCGE, 1997). This kind of study presents students with the interesting challenge of combining elements of their creative work

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(painting, design, photography, ceramics, printmaking and so on) with a written analysis of that work in text, CD or other form. At the same time, supervisors must meet the challenge of guiding and propelling their students towards effective synthesis of these creative and analytic components. Existing literature seems limited to guides for supervisors on the general management of practice-based research students (Newbury, 1996). Hence the purpose of this article is to portray some of the routine practices of this form of supervision so as to start to develop a more specific literature base.

The article is based upon data gained from qualitative interviews with 50 research degree supervisors based at 25 higher education institutions (Colleges and Universities) across the United Kingdom. The interviews, completed between 1995 and 1997, were tape recorded and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. They spanned novice supervisors to those who had begun supervising under the pre-1992 CNAA regulatory framework. Data analysis was carried out by the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1993); data collection and analysis were sequential, with analysis conducted through an ongoing process of coding. Subsequently, the detailed coding allowed generation of key thematic categories and sub-categories of supervisors' lived experience. Given its qualitative and essentially exploratory nature, the primary aim of the project was to uncover some of the complex social processes of this form of supervision, rather than to seek statistical generalizations (Mitchell, 1983). A word of caution is needed at this point, as what are depicted are the self-reported practices of supervisors and, short of carrying out complementary observational research, the reader is left with these accounts. In such circumstances, as Gilbert and Abell (1983: 2–3) point out: 'Accounts are all we have to work with and shaky inferences to what is/was really going on should be dispensed with, as a pointless metaphysical exercise'.

SUPERVISORY PRACTICE(S)

What supervisors do when they engage with their research students can be divided into two general areas: first, the overall management of the student's programme of study; which involves helping the student to formulate the scope and general direction of the research, its objectives, theoretical underpinnings, temporal divisions, and methodology. Second, as the student's research progresses, the supervisor, if proficient, passes on to the student knowledge about the practicalities of research, such as insights, concrete tips, energy- and time-saving devices. For example, this may involve explaining to the student how to search electronic databases or archives, or imparting techniques for making research degree writing more efficient. Part of this knowledge may be of a general kind, while other aspects tend to be discipline specific, such as

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advice on ceramic glaze temperatures or the provision of new theoretical insight linking bodies of drawing. The supervisor's ability effectively to manage the students' projects and to impart research knowledge increases as s/he implements and develops a repertoire of practices – which are learned, applied, and refined as practical activities during the process of supervision. These practices constitute a synthesis of pragmatic thought and action that is aimed at propelling research students to successful submission and completion. From the supervisor they demand considerable knowledge and skill of practical, intellectual, interactional and organizational kinds. One way of understanding this combination of practices is to conceptualize them as an operational craft.

The concept of craft has been given some attention in the academy. Writers have applied it to academics (Wright Mills, 1975), as regards their general teaching and research functions. There have also been attempts to look at craft practices in music (Sudnow, 1978) and the other creative arts (Needleman, 1979; Dormer, 1994). Although these commentaries examine the topic from diverse perspectives, there is however a degree of agreement about the core characteristics of craft:

1 The only way to know a craft is to practise it.
2 Thus it is learnt practically, through reflection on experience, and demonstrated through practice.
3 The practice of a craft is informed by knowledge drawn from theoretical sources, however it is essentially a practical endeavour.
4 As a result, whilst involving knowledge that can be communicated in an abstract, formal fashion, it also contains much informal, tacit knowledge which is rarely communicated explicitly.
5 It cannot be learnt in the short term (weeks or even months).

When one thinks about research degree supervision in relation to these characteristics, it is apparent that they are all applicable. Thus one cannot learn how to supervise without experiencing a process which usually takes at least three years. While institutional regulations or guidelines may detail the duties and responsibilities of the supervisory role, the actual practice of that role encompasses large amounts of tacit understanding – such as the kind of knowledge needed to select an external examiner for one's students, or what to look for when selecting those students in the first place. Theoretical disciplinary knowledge is obviously required, and experienced supervisors also theorize about their practice. However, such theorizing is always done with the aim of applying it to the process at hand, towards eventually achieving successful completion. Supervision of undergraduates or even advanced taught-course students is not the same kind of experience as research degree supervision, which normally involves a much greater span of time, a higher level of

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intellectual endeavour, and much more intensive interaction. Although there may be differences in the practice of supervision across the spectrum of academic disciplines (Natural and Social Sciences, Humanities), there are undoubted commonalities, so the concept has a potential utility beyond the boundary of art and design supervision alone. That said, it is perhaps particularly apposite in relation to art and design supervision, given that 'craft' has such resonance within those disciplines (Dormer, 1994).

Of course, conceptualizing supervision as craft is not the only way of understanding what supervisors do, but it is a useful analytical device that enables the portrayal of their routine practices and the kinds of knowledge underpinning them. As a social process, research supervision is both a complex and contingent practice. Thus, what is presented as apparently discrete categories of craft practice are, within the reality of routine day-to-day supervision, prone to blurring or overlap. The erection of firm and distinct boundaries to such categories is established here purely for descriptive and analytical purposes; the analytical categories that follow, in the reality of supervision, merge into and influence each other in an ongoing process.

FOSTERING EQUILIBRIUM

Practice-based research degrees require of students a combination of creative practice and some form of written analysis of that practice. Examination of the data revealed that a major problem for students was achieving this particular combination, owing to various tensions surrounding the relationship between making and writing. The majority of students in art and design are socialized primarily via a practice of making (Wayte, 1989). As a result, producing academic writing of a standard necessary to fulfil the conditions of a research degree was a largely unfamiliar and arduous task. In contrast, there was great familiarity with their practice. This imbalance created a number of problems which supervisors readily identified. The first of these was a retreat from the written, when the difficulties of writing at this level suddenly hit home. Subsequently, students may use their practice as a refuge from this relatively unfamiliar and demanding domain. Given the primacy of practice for these students, those who retreated from writing could always justify their course of action by explaining that their practice was going well and that the written element should therefore, for the time being, be delayed. The problem for supervisors was to discern whether such progress was actually in motion, or if the reality was indeed a retreat:

> Sometimes they (students) have told me that their making is flowing and writing is too much of a distraction for the time being. I'm prepared to let that go on for so long, then I will go down to their studio and just have a look and evaluate what progress I feel they have made. By talking to them about the practical work, I can usually get a feel about

what's happening . . . Sort of: 'that's interesting so why haven't you written about it?'
Once we get on to the writing, unease usually comes off them if they are frozen by it
all; usually I can get a picture of the problem.

In such cases supervisors resorted to persuading students to write about their
practice in whatever way they could, gradually coaxing them towards more
academic forms of expression. One example was the use of something akin
to 'story boards', as in the film industry. The student then passed through a
process involving précis of practice in extended note form, to more
conventional prose, which subsequently became more precise and rigorous, in
conformity with academic canons. In this fashion, supervisors strove to push
students from a retreat from writing to the point where confidence and facility
in that medium were achieved.

Difficulties with academic writing ranged from evasion to a variety of
problems with the kind of writing students were initially producing. Super-
visors on occasion encountered a large volume of text but in a form which,
in their view, did not meet the protocols of a research degree. The challenge
to the supervisor was to help the student realize the need for a different form
of documenting practice. Essentially, when dealing with these kinds of issues,
supervisors perceived their task as reaching some kind of compromise over the
portrayal of the students' practice, and persuading them of the need for a more
academic form:

> You need to connect with them so as to persuade them the formal way of analysing their
> practice is not too much of a cop-out . . . What I do is to say 'think of the audience'. I
> put it to them that the audience for a viva is not going to be the same as for a show.
> When you have a show you have a catalogue and that's what informs the audience. A
> viva is a different kind of show, and the audience wants different kinds of things which
> include formal analysis of the practice.

Supervisors' energy was also expended on students whose practice was being
impeded by over-concern with theoretical and conceptual matters. In such
cases there was a conviction on the supervisor's part that creative energy had
been distorted or diminished by this concern, often fuelled by student anxiety
over the need for work to be theoretically adequate at this level of study. Here
the supervisory strategy was to point out the primacy of practice, and to
suggest ways forward. For example:

> I feel that the work is not very clear in terms of its internal relationships practically. In
> this case the theoretical work, off the record, is pulling the direction of what she is making
> around too much. She is too concerned about that theory . . . I didn't actually say to her,
> you know, the sculpture's not very good, but I talked about the relationship of the object
> to the ideas which were much too literal, it was much too descriptive, you know simple
> relationships. I suggested ways around the process by which things might be moved on,
> made less apparent and made more interesting.

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Using these kind of devices, supervisors attempt to realign their students' energies and concerns to the point where their practice works in conjunction with bodies of conceptual and theoretical knowledge, rather than being driven by them. In effect, what has been depicted here are the aspects of craft practice that supervisors use to foster an equilibrium of study, to help resolve the tensions between the analytic and creative components of this kind of research degree.

ENVISAGING POSSIBILITIES

A further craft practice revealed to be crucially important for effective supervision was the supervisors' ability to gauge accurately certain kinds of possibility in the research degree process. At a general level, this involves projecting into the future and assessing the possible import of a student's intended work. Initially, supervisors ask themselves if the project is feasible, not just in terms of its aesthetic potential but also in meeting the specific criteria of a research degree, such as autonomy and originality. This capacity of forward projection related not only to an initial positive or negative evaluation of the overall project, but also to the developing shape of the project. Hence, not just the outcome is conceptualized, in terms of the eventual combination of practical and textual work, but also the building blocks that give that combination its eventual structure. Depending upon the kind of research concerned, these building blocks included: objectives, theory construction, methodology, data accumulation and analysis, hypothesis building/falsifying and literature surveys. Such ability to envisage the outcome and form of the research project developed during the experience of supervision itself. Inevitably perhaps, novice supervisors possessed little of the capacity to project forward.

   Whilst the practice of envisioning student projects was important, so was the process of envisioning the potential of individual students. The great majority of students were recruited by interview, during which they were interrogated by supervisors who sought to identify certain positive characteristics necessary for advanced study. Enthusiasm for their practice, for the disciplines that surround it, together with evidence of considerable motivation were all sought by supervisors. And an intellectual capacity to handle the cognitive complexity of linking practice with textual analysis was also sought. This capacity was regarded by supervisors as crucial, as its presence was vitally important for the long-term health of the intended research project; without it the sophisticated manipulation and juxtaposition of such linkages would not be possible:

> By serious, I mean somebody who is seriously interested in her own reflexivity . . . Someone who has a serious intellectual curiosity about her own creativity. It is possible

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for a very creative individual to be creative and actually not have a great curiosity about their work, in terms of how they do it . . . What I mean by that is they know how they arrive at what they produce, but they are not curious enough to take that knowledge any further in a formal sense, nor to reveal it to a wider audience in great detail. It's the order of that revealing which is crucial for completing a research degree.

The practice of envisioning does not mean that supervisors conceptualized *a priori* the full potential of students to flourish in their research endeavour, nor the exact eventual conclusion of research projects, nor the precise minutiae of students' work. Rather, what it did allow was a much more realistic and wide vision of the research process than students themselves normally possessed, which in turn helped supervisors to manage the project towards successful completion.

SUSTAINING CONTINUITY

A major problem for many practice-based students is that the formal demands of a research degree propel them into grappling with an essentially literary domain of expression, in which they are largely inexperienced. This form of expression is not inconsequential for it constitutes a principal medium though which the import of their practice is ultimately communicated to external examiners. Students are therefore on unfamiliar terrain, facing unfamiliar problems, and so confidence in their ability to surmount such problems will on occasion be at a very low ebb. Moreover, in such situations what they have achieved in the past tends to be disconnected from the present, so that lessons learnt from past creative situations are not applied to present research degree scenarios. On occasion then, students encounter points in their research where intellectual momentum ceases. The interviews revealed that supervisors learned to recognize such blockages, and in response devised a series of ploys designed to overcome stasis and re-create momentum. These ploys were often aimed at connecting students to particular strengths that they already possessed in an attempt to sustain a kind of biographical continuity. For example, a supervisor articulated how he dealt with students who had a major blockage with academic writing:

> They get blockages in their practice, and they learn to get over them. That's their experience, so I point out the similarities with writing. I point out there is a parallel process, and if they can do it in one area, they can do it in another. It's a question of making the links for them, and once they can see that for themselves it cultivates a bit of confidence, which helps them get over the problem with writing.

Whilst the interviews revealed supervisors grappling with student blockages with academic writing at the fine art end of the creative spectrum, there were also problems to be resolved at the quasi-natural science end of that spectrum

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(design ergonomics, materials development in ceramics and so on). Here, the desired forms of portraying practice analytically tended to be less literary and more akin to the report-writing characteristic of many of the science-based disciplines. Precise and systematic documentation of evidence is integral to this kind of writing, and supervisors described striving to inculcate this practice in their students, who often found great difficulty in amassing systematic documentary evidence. A ploy used with students was to stress that one of the attributes they had already developed was disciplined effort, inherent in their practice. Consequently, supervisors pointed out, the discipline of rigorous documentation was not such a major or difficult task:

> You cannot effectively operate in a (print) work-shop without having your basic routines . . . Just the mundane stuff of keeping everything tidy and the equipment maintained properly, very simple really but crucial for preventing accidents with one's work. That's a practice which students learn very early on, it's a taken-for-granted thing . . . I point it out to them that they have the discipline needed to do that. So keeping up with their documentation is not a big deal. They seem to respond positively when I reveal those connections to them.

The interviews revealed many variations of this supervisory practice, all aimed at sustaining continuity between the biographical strengths already established, and their application to new research forms. These ranged from vital but routine documentary tasks, to more obviously creative work such as constructing extended chunks of text.

FACILITATING VISION

The research students with whom supervisors engage are skilled, in the sense that their previous study has been focused upon developing and refining the practice of their particular making. However, there was much evidence from supervisors that their students had little training or experience in the practices of research, except for a very small minority who had some background in art history. This is in contrast to research students in other disciplines, such as the Social Sciences, who encounter research at a much earlier undergraduate stage, often in some depth. As a result, supervisors devoted much energy to facilitating amongst their students a research vision, at the core of which is an imaginative grasp of 'research' as an intellectual entity and a logical grasp of it as a social process with numerous dimensions.

Supervisors encouraged students to develop a particular, academic way of seeing. One of the problems for students at the time of interview was the lack of research literature (or training courses) specifically orientated to research in art and design. As a result, supervisors were aware of considerable student difficulty in seeing what one supervisor termed 'the big picture'. In

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an attempt to remedy this, supervisors often made efforts to point students towards historical material validating a tradition of research in art and design, which in contemporary times has become relatively submerged (Frayling, 1993/4). At another level, supervisors attempted to ease student concern about the lack of previous case studies or of methodology specific to art and design by presenting practice-based research study as a major opportunity, with few precedents:

> A lot of our students have done courses at Master's level based on their own practice but that does not mean they know anything about research. As a consequence they cannot usually in their own mind see what they are embarking on, they cannot usually picture their own relationship to it. I usually say something like 'go and look at Leonardo's note-books', that way they can start to place themselves intellectually within a particular framework . . . Another thing which really worries a lot of them is the lack of previous empirical work and things like the lack of specific methods texts. I try and turn that lack on its head and say it's an exciting and emerging field in which boundaries are presently still fluid. I try and get them to see it's a creative opportunity which allows them to evolve their own ways of doing things.

Another variation on this practice of facilitating research vision was applied directly to students' creative work, the objective being to develop the students' capacity to perceive their work analytically in addition to aesthetically. Supervisors interrogated students about the substance of their practice, demanding that they articulate it analytically both verbally and in writing. Through this form of interrogation supervisors aspire to enhance students' capacity to see in an academic manner:

> When he started he was still seeing and thinking solely like an artist . . . His work was installations but he did not seem to be able to examine what he was doing critically enough. He gestured to it, sort of a magic ladder or a rope, gesturing, making allusions to theory and that sort of thing. But he did not have that extra grip that means he could argue in a rigorous academic fashion . . . What I mean is, he thought he was being analytical but it was a kind of gesturing that is not sufficient for doing research formally. So I've spent over a year pushing him, asking him all the 'why, where, when and how' questions.

The data revealed that more of this envisioning work was done by supervisors whose students' work was located towards the fine art end of the spectrum. Students at the design end of the spectrum were thought to require less of this kind of input, as their work often found some affinity with theoretical positions and methodological techniques emanating from scientific disciplines. In the ways depicted here supervisors attempted to help students enhance their capacity to locate their work, as researchers within a particular intellectual tradition, to envisage its present possibilities for creative output and to develop a truly analytic view of their own practice.

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MAINTAINING COURSE

For research degree students, the intellectual and creative pursuit of their research objectives constitutes a journey into unfamiliar territory, particularly so in relation to the formal analytical dimension of research at this level. Some of the practices that supervisors employ to help students with this have already been discussed. In addition, the territory is unfamiliar to students in terms of its bureaucratic demands. There are of course institutional codes of practice that provide a regulatory framework within which students must operate if they wish to complete the research degree successfully. Conforming to them is not always easy for students generally, due to their unfamiliarity with an impersonal and occasionally complex codification. And examination of data from interviews with supervisors and students (Hockey, 1999) revealed a further problem particular to art and design doctoral students. These students' self-conceptions sustain identities that are felt and perceived to be essentially 'creative'. Creativity constitutes the concrete expression of identity, and that expression is in the form of their 'making', which is, in turn, correlated with freedom to create and express themselves through their practice. The imposition of a regulatory framework is viewed as a constraint upon that freedom, and constitutes something of a 'shock' when they first engage with it. The constraints take a number of forms, ranging from completion of registration documentation to fit particular institutional specifications, to the particular kind of language demanded (abstract, impersonal and so on). Further on in the process of study, this kind of bureaucratic procedure may again be demanded: for example, at the point of upgrade from MPhil to PhD. Moreover, research degrees also have their own temporal dimensions, with the length of time allowed for thesis submission varying between the kinds of degree and the part-time/full-time status of the student. Given the identity salience (Stryker, 1987) of their creative self, there was often a reluctance to conform to such regulation.

Supervisors were well aware of this disposition and throughout the study process were energetic in their efforts to persuade students that such conformity was necessary for a successful outcome. This they did by persistently informing students of particular regulatory deadlines, and guiding them towards previous examples of work that had passed through the various bureaucratic processes. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, supervisors attempted to persuade students to view the regulatory process in a positive rather than a purely negative light. This was effected by repeatedly emphasizing that whilst the students' practice might gain acclaim and esteem via 'shows' of their work, it was only by conforming to the formal regulatory process that their work could gain the requisite academic acclaim to, in turn, substantiate its creative reputation:

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> I try and convince them [students] to view the organizational hoops . . . as a process
> which ultimately will result in the wider art and design community taking their work
> more seriously. Not only is there the work to judge but also the detailed explanations of
> that work, which I explain to them will give their making more power. All this has been
> created under rigorous conditions which is the purpose of the regulations.

Through this kind of interactional work of guiding and informing, supervisors endeavour to ensure that their students maintain a positive course as the process of the making and analysis unfolds, within the constraints of particular bureaucratic frameworks.

CONCLUSION

In attempting to propel their practice-based research students to successful completion, UK art and design supervisors engage in various reflective craft practices, some of which have been portrayed in this article. These practices are not independent but operate in an interactional fashion, influencing and informing each other. Data analysis revealed that supervisors evolved these practices, and became skilled at them, essentially by trial and error. Practices developed as experience grew, and supervisors became reflective practitioners of their craft (Schön, 1987). As Collins (1985) has pointed out, skills-based knowledge is transmitted best via practitioners who are accomplished. Much, if not the majority, of supervisory craft knowledge is tacit, taken for granted, assumed, and rarely communicated explicitly (Gerholm, 1990). Newcomers develop craft knowledge by practice, and gradually claim ownership of it (Dormer, 1994). Consequently, it is most important for supervisory training programmes to embrace a form of mentorship (Lyons et al., 1990).

At present, practice-based art and design research degrees can be said to be at a relatively early stage of development in the UK, a state of affairs experienced at one time or another by all disciplines (Simpson, 1983). Consequently, at the moment, the pool of supervisors experienced in dealing with the combination of creativity and analysis characteristic of practice-based study is not large. To broaden this base, effective mentorship is imperative, as it is by this means that craft knowledge is best communicated. And for such schemes to be effective an adequate level of resource is required, for mentoring of novice supervisors is a pedagogic task additional to the actual supervision of research students. Given the relatively recent proliferation of practice-based research degree studies, and in turn of supervision, this issue of resource is crucial. At present there is evidence from the Social Sciences, with their relatively long history of research degree supervision, that resources for mentorship are inadequate (O'Brien, 1995). This is therefore an issue that needs to be seriously addressed by the art and design research community, for, as Van der

Lem (2001) has pointed out, research in art and design can only really develop
if there is an adequate infrastructure to support that development.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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