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Feature: “Reflections on the arts & humanities doctoral thesis & training”

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BY ROBERTA MOCK

In the UK, we are moving from a position in which the doctoral thesis, programme, research and examination are largely homogenous and singularly focused to one in which they are increasingly divergent, in order to meet a variety of external drivers. This shift has significant implications for the ways that arts & humanities PhDs are now presented and doctoral researchers are trained.
Back in the olden days, like 20 years ago, in the 20th century, we knew what a PhD looked like in the arts and humanities. There was something like consensus. It looked like what is now called ‘a real book’ (as opposed to an electronic one) and was in fact – weighing in between 80000 and 100000 words – longer than most published books.

The chair of the department at which I did my PhD told me that you didn’t have to write this much – a perfect sentence would do, he said. But I didn’t believe him. Or know what a perfect sentence could possibly look like. I still don’t. And, of course, as I found out later, there were music and creative writing PhDs, under the general radar, that had their own things going on but they seem to have been largely left unmentioned and unmentionable outside their disciplines.

And then. And then. The ‘practice turn’ that had been creeping into academic disciplines since the 1960s made its presence felt. Baz Kershaw has characterised it for us: instead of structure and representation, activity and action were valorized; in place of fixity, process; collectivity replaced individualism and reflexivity blew away self-consciousness. Grounded in this lineage, some PhDs began to look, well, weird. Kershaw describes them as a combination of “creative doing with reflexive being, fashioning freshly critical interactions between current epistemologies and ontologies.” However refashioned, they remain philosophical exercises as claimed on the tin.

The words are still there – but usually fewer of them and in the place of those that are missing are manifestations of embodied knowledge, and/or their representation in the form of documentation. What has changed is the location, nature and value placed on different ways of generating, authoring and sharing knowledge. The late performance studies scholar, Dwight Conquergood, nailed it:
The dominant way of knowing in the academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective: ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing about’. This is a view from above the object of inquiry: knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print. This propositional knowledge is shadowed by another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing who’. This is a view from ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice …

In the past few years, one of my students, Maggie Irving, had her examiners follow her around Plymouth city centre at dusk while she clowned. It was not the sort of clowning that anybody was supposed to find funny. Another, Dani Abulhawa, played in the street dressed as Alice in Wonderland and spent two days stalking her examiners outside their homes and places of work to perform the gendering of urban environment.

While these creative practices may seem slippery, their positioning as an element of a PhD thesis is largely no longer an issue in the UK, as long as that thesis as a whole makes an original contribution to knowledge or understanding as the result of a rigorous research process.
However, we are still struggling with the precedent set by my colleagues, Lee Miller and Joanne ‘Bob’ Whalley, whose rather infamous collaborative PhD in 2004 at MMU Cheshire included the staged renewal of their wedding vows at a motorway service station in front of two different sets of examiners. The written element of their thesis was jointly produced as well. To the best of our knowledge, this production of a thesis using a conjoined first person ‘I’ has not been attempted since. This is probably due to the nightmarish renegotiation of protocols, supervisory support and assessment processes this entails for institutions, although we do have two couples at Plymouth who have both embarked on collaborative research degrees this year.

The attempt to do away with traditional academic text and argument as part of a thesis entirely is regularly discussed in practice research circles. A few years ago, Columbia University awarded a doctorate of education to Nick Sousanis who produced his thesis in graphic novel form. It has since been published by Harvard University Press. Comic Grid describes Sousanis’ thesis as presenting “a defiant challenge to conventional Western thinking about words and images” as well as “a deep interrogation of comics as both an art form and a critical practice.”

The practice turn has affected more traditional theses as well, sometimes by students who do not consider themselves practitioners. Alan Butler, for instance, has recently completed an AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctorate Award (CDA) co-supervised by Plymouth University and Plymouth City Council. His topic was ‘Performing LGBT Pride in Plymouth’ and in the first year of his PhD he contributed to an oral history project leading to a local LGBT archive to be housed in Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, as well as an exhibition at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

The interviews served as Alan’s main data source and the exhibition, which was intended as public engagement, ended up being discussed in the final chapter of his thesis in terms of both research methodology and its production
of pride for the city’s queer communities. In other words, a pathway to impact ended up rolling back into the production of knowledge and simultaneously became part of the subject matter of the thesis itself.

The AHRC is withdrawing its CDA scheme next year. One of the reasons given is that the panel found it difficult to award all of the funding in the last round but I can’t help feeling there’s more to it, including the onerous processes of evaluating and awarding these studentships. Indeed perhaps there is a catch-22 in that the development of robust CDA proposals was exceptionally time-consuming for both the supervisor and the collaborating partner organisation and this may have led to less viable speculative applications to the council. The premise of the CDAs are to be taken up by the AHRC’s Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) but the extent to which this will be considered mandatory, and how it will be resourced, still remains vague.

There is no doubt that schemes like the CDA fulfil some of the key expectations embedded in the AHRC’s framework for doctoral training – in particular, to ‘counter the view that academia is the only meaningful career for doctoral researchers’. The AHRC is the largest funder of postgraduate research in the arts and humanities in the UK and therefore drives the agenda. And this means that we all listen carefully when the council expects the research organisations that host its funded students to enable them to development of “skills, knowledge and expertise outside of individual subject disciplines”.

Equally, however, those pursuing an academic career, in the UK at least, need to be prepared to identify and then pursue the potential ways in which their research could have an impact and benefit beyond the academic sphere. I think that one of the reasons why the AHRC is withdrawing its CDA scheme is because this seems to imply that working with non-HE partners is
something that only a few students do whereas the most recent expectation is that this is for all.

It’s not hard to see where all of this is coming from, both home and abroad. In March 2014 the Atlantic published an article titled ‘What can you do with a humanities PhD anyway?’ Its subtitle read ‘the choice to leave academia does not mean a life as a barista’. The purpose of the article was to counter the increasingly noisy, and rightfully angry, narratives in America of insecure adjuncts teaching on zero hour contracts with no hope of tenure as well as prevailing wisdom that, in the words of one English professor, “a humanities Ph.D. will place you at a disadvantage competing against 22-year-olds for entry-level jobs that barely require a high-school diploma.”

The Atlantic article also suggests that one of the reasons why humanities PhDs outside academia are so invisible is that within academic departments there is a culture of stigmatizing doctoral candidates who take non-academic posts, making them less inclined to stick around and contribute to debates about the future of the field.

The executive director of the MLA observed that “There is a discourse of failure and shame that intimidates Ph.D.s and makes them feel not good enough if they don’t get an academic job.” The Atlantic proposed that this dynamic is a byproduct of a value system that prizes intellectual pursuits over business and industry despite the fact that over the past decade in the US, 24% of history PhDs and 21% of English and foreign language PhDs took jobs in business, museums, publishing houses and other industries.

This is something I recognise in the UK as well, although I’m as likely to attribute some of the affect to the fact that many supervisors simply do not have sufficient, if any, experience of business or industry or even work in the subsidized or public sector, to adequately guide their students. And this may
give the impression that it is simply not valued, especially if a PhD is considered almost an apprenticeship with the supervisor as a role model.

For 10 years, I developed and managed the doctoral training programme for arts and humanities students at Plymouth University, with responsibility for about 200 students at any given moment, some of whom were based in our ‘nodes’ outside of the UK. I never had trouble creating flexible models for the credit-rating of training or the development of critical thinking or presentation skills for scholarly and non-academic audiences or providing information about potential career pathways in higher education.

What stumped me was the provision of training to prepare students for careers outside of academia. Every year I asked the students what training they felt they needed to meet their ambitions: by email, on their annual report forms, via student reps. And every year I was met, more or less, with silence. One of the things this implies is that the first step in preparing new PhDs for careers beyond teaching and research in higher education is to simply facilitate a better sense of the options available.

The one suggestion I did receive and could act upon was a workshop on applying for funding for artist-scholars beyond the usual research sources like the Leverhulme, AHRC and so on. But the students were disappointed with it, since they discovered that they couldn’t really apply for the EU funding that was discussed at this stage in their careers and they realized that schemes were likely to change by the time they could.

In October 2012, the AHRC published a report on the career paths of their funded PhD students. I am aware, of course, that the majority of PhD candidates in the arts & humanities in the UK are not funded but still think that the findings are worth considering. The sample was taken from students who started their PhDs between 2002 and 2004 and of these, 20% had a previous career. The majority of respondents (72%) were in full-time employment (30
hours a week or more), 12% were in part-time employment (less than 30 hours a week), 8% were self employed and 5% were unemployed and 3% fall into other categories. In 2006, slightly more respondents at 78% and only 1.5% were unemployed.

The majority of those in employment and self employment, 72%, were working in the university sector. This was up from 69% in 2006. Over 75% of respondents stated that the skills that were most important in their current job were developed from or during their PhD.

The significant exception to this were verbal presentation skills – indicating to the report writers the importance of allowing students as much opportunity as possible to present and teach during their PhD. When asked what skills should have been given greater emphasis during their doctoral programme, the top five were career management, networking, archival research skills, working as part of a team and digital/media technology skills.

While I agree that teaching opportunities for PhD candidates can be invaluable, organising them is not without difficulties. Some are not good teachers – possibly yet, possibly never – and I have found that my colleagues are hesitant to entrust our undergraduates to them. This creates more work for staff who have to team teach or sit in the teaching space with them.

At Plymouth University, we encourage our PhDs to complete a Graduate Teaching Associate course which leads directly to a PGCAP in teaching and learning in HE should they wish to be formally assessed. Most of my students are surprised at just how time consuming and intensive this is, and usually become concerned about the energy and resources being diverted away from the completion of their programme of study.

I also tend to supervise a great number of interdisciplinary PhDs – the majority of my PhDs have come from visual arts or other disciplines because they are interested in pursuing performance as a method and/or subject of
enquiry within a multivalent practice. It often difficult to find these students teaching in my own department, Performing Arts, and teaching opportunities usually arise through the supervisor. Unlike the North American PhD system as I understand it, in which candidates need to pass generic survey courses in their disciplinary areas prior to embarking on the thesis, many of my doctoral researchers lack the general knowledge or broad-based discipline specific skills required to take on undergraduate syllabi without having to do a massive amount of catching up (thus eating into the time available for their research).

In summary, I suppose what I’m saying is that there are significant tensions between what is desirable and what is essential given our current research environments and examination processes for doctoral students. With multiple expectations and destinations for the PhD – even, or especially, if these cannot be articulated at the start of the process – we cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all approach to the either the doctoral thesis or training of arts and humanities candidates.

The above text was originally presented at the UKCGE Event, “Opportunities and challenges in the Development of Doctoral Education in the Arts & Humanities,” held in Glasgow on 1 February 2016.

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