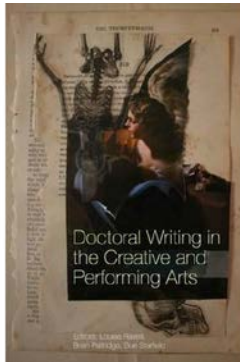


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Doctoral Writing in the Creative and Performing Arts [review]



Louise Ravelli, Brian Paltridge and Sue Starfield (eds)
Doctoral Writing in the Creative and Performing Arts
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Next year, 2018, will be thirty years since creative practice was included as a field of postgraduate research in the so-called *Strand Report* (1998). Since that time, the acceptance of creative practice research degrees has flourished both in Australia and internationally. This important and substantial book represents many of the key researchers in the Australian higher education sector for the creative arts, and thus is worthy of a re-examination in the light of a collection of articles dealing with the current state of the creative practice PhD. Many of these authors have, indeed, won government funding to pursue research projects in this space and the wealth of their knowledge and experience shines through in many of these chapters. The editors must be commended for the breadth of perspectives and expertise they have secured in this text.

In her review of this volume, Lockheart noted the Australian focus of the book, pointing towards the use of the term ‘exegesis’ as less common in the United Kingdom and further afield (Binder, Pearse and Lockheart 2016). It is worth noting, however, the long history of Australian research in this space: consider the 2004 special issue of *TEXT* ‘Illuminating the Exegesis’, for example. While there are, of course, national contexts around policy and practices, many of the concepts in this book are broadly applicable across the creative arts higher education sector, and it is impossible to ignore

the significant contribution the Australian landscape of creative arts research degrees has made in this space.

The book benefits from what appears to be a long gestation; an acknowledgement in the introduction notes many of the chapters were first presented at a 2011 conference. Published in 2014, its editors suggest the doctoral thesis in the creative and performing arts is becoming normalised, and ‘certain forms of ‘stabilisation’ can be seen’ (2). When revisiting this work in 2017, it is possible to suggest the field has only continued to bed down its foundations and even start moving beyond them. In fact, some researchers and doctoral students are seeing opportunities for experimentation pushing beyond the traditional methodologies of creative practice. For instance, Sempert et al. (2017: 206) argue there is scope to challenge what they consider ‘traditional’ doctoral theses in the creative arts – those that use ‘a practice-led approach resulting in the writing of a novel and an exegesis (i.e. two parts; two documents)’.

It is therefore difficult to deny the importance of a comprehensive, three-part book like *Doctoral Writing*. The sometimes murky space in which the creative practice thesis is located is prioritised and carefully considered in this work. By incorporating significant voices from a number of disciplines and contexts, *Doctoral Writing* attempts and succeeds to find cohesion and coherency. Its editors suggest that the fundamental questions that frame the work are: ‘how should we manage the clash of cultures, avoid constraining creativity, and equitably evaluate new modes of expression and new conceptions of the doctoral thesis genre?’ (6). While not all of these questions are emphatically resolved (and indeed, could they really be?), the collection does provide comprehensive explorations of possible resolutions and strategies for navigating the researcher/practitioner nexus.

Doctoral Writing is split into three sections:

- From the Outside: Institutional and Disciplinary Perspectives
- From Within: Student Perspectives and Experiences
- Reflecting: The Nature of the Doctoral Thesis – Researching, Writing, Thinking

This approach establishes perspectives from both the institution and supervisors, a technique that proves useful. I note that a number of the contributors to Part III are also practitioner/supervisors (including Phillips, Stock, and Vincs). And many of the authors reflect on their own doctoral experience, even though they may now have completed the journey.

Part I comprehensively maps the landscape of the creative arts doctorates, both in a practical and conceptual sense (see the chapters by Elkins, Baker, Barrett, and Buckley, in particular) as well as specific components of doctoral writing (including questions around ethics from Bolt, MacNeill and Ednie-Brown; and, importantly, the examination process by Brien, Webb and Burr). This first section provides dialogue and insights into some of the key challenges facing the creative arts research space, and is of use for students, supervisors, and research managers.

There is a clear appeal in the personalised experiences that many of the authors relate in their chapters. Part II particularly seems to capture some of these; for example:

Thornley's personal case study of the tricky manoeuvring between creative artefact (film in her case) and the exegesis; or Beattie's description of the power of her doctoral writing circle throughout her own process and onwards. The inclusion of these considered, reflective chapters is really vital. Interestingly, it appears Jenny Wilson was – at the time of publication – the only current doctoral student included in the collection. While I suspect this speaks more to the longevity of the publication process rather than any intended silencing of student voices, it does attest to some of the ruminations of Part III and what happens to transform a doctoral student into an academic and/or practitioner upon completion of their degree.

Part III includes some fascinating, discipline-specific discussions around the doctoral experience and I see these chapters as particularly relevant for supervisors in these fields. As an early career researcher, I found myself drawn to Ken Friedman's chapter that attempts to find the necessary points of cohesion across the diverse array of doctoral degrees. It is a useful chapter for emerging supervisors with a combination of practical strategies (especially around writing and citation practices) as well as a reminder of what the doctoral degree does: provide a license to teach and research unsupervised. The rest of Part III offers a pleasing array of complementary works that show the power of writing techniques less grounded in traditional academic discourse: the embodied, the performative, and intuitive for instance (see the chapters by Phillips, Stock, Conroy, and Hamilton as just some examples in this section).

Doctoral Writing is a rigorous and accessible text that should be of great use for students, supervisors, and academics engaging in creative practice research. In the three years since its publication, the field has only strengthened and the inclusion of these key voices provides much-needed longevity to the text.

Works cited

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