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Choreographing research: Supervising the dancing thesis

Abstract:

From 2006-2008 three dance academics from Perth, Brisbane and Melbourne undertook a research project entitled *Dancing between diversity and consistency: refining assessment in postgraduate degrees in dance*, funded by the ALTC Priority Projects Program. Although assessment rather than supervision was the primary focus of this research, interviews with forty examiner/supervisors, seven research deans and thirty-two candidates across Australia and across the creative arts, primarily in dance, provide an insight into what might be considered best practice in preparing students for research higher degrees, and the challenges that embodied and experiential knowledges present for supervision. The study also gained the industry perspectives of dance professionals in a series of national forums in five cities, based around the value of higher degrees in dance. The qualitative data gathered from these two primary sources was coded and analysed using the NVivo system. Further perspectives were drawn from international consultant and dance researcher Susan Melrose, as well as recent publications in the field.

Dance is a recent addition to academia and consequently there tends to be a close liaison between the academy and the industry, with a relational fluidity that is both beneficial and problematic. This partially explains why dance research higher degrees are predominantly practice-led (or multi-modal, referring to those theses where practice comprises the substantial examinable component). As a physical, embodied art form, dance engages with the contested territory of legitimising alternative forms of knowledge that do not sit comfortably with accepted norms of research. In supporting research students engaged with dance practice, supervisors traverse the tricky terrain of balancing university academic requirements with studies that are emergent, not only in the practice and attendant theory but also in their methodologies and open-ended outcomes, and in an art form in which originality and new knowledge also arise from collaborative creative processes.

Formal supervisor accreditation through training is now mandatory in most Australian universities, but it tends to be generic and not address supervisory specificity. This paper offers the kind of alternative proposed by Edwards (2002) that improving postgraduate supervision will be effective if supervisors are empowered to generate their own standards and share best practice; in this case, in ways appropriate to the needs of their discipline and alternative modes of thesis presentation. In order to

frame the qualities and processes conducive to this goal, this paper will draw on both the experiences of interviewees and on philosophical premises that underpin the research findings of our study. These include the ongoing challenge of dissolving the binary oppositions of theory and practice, especially in creative arts practice where theory resides in and emerges from the doing as much as in articulating reflection about the doing through what Melrose (2003) terms ‘mixed mode disciplinary practices’. In guiding practitioners through research higher degrees, how do supervisors deal with not only different forms of knowledge but indeed differing modes of knowledge? How can they navigate tensions that occur between the ‘incompatible competencies’ (Candlin 2000b) of the ‘spectating’ academic experts with their ‘irrepressible drive ... to inscribe, interpret, and hence to practise temporal closure’, and practitioner experts who create emergent works of ‘residual unfinishedness’ (Melrose 2006) which are not only embodied but ephemeral, as in the case of live performance?

Biographical note:

Assoc Prof Cheryl Stock, PhD, is a researcher in the Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), lecturing in the fields of dance; interdisciplinary, intercultural and site-specific performance; and research methodologies. Cheryl was founding Artistic Director of Dance North (1984-1995), recipient of an Australian Artists Creative Fellowship (1994-1997) and QUT’s Head of Dance 2000-2006. In 2003 Cheryl received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Australian Dance Awards for outstanding contributions to dance as a performer, choreographer, artistic director, advocate, writer and leader in tertiary dance education. Nineteen cultural exchange programs in Asia, with twelve in Vietnam, saw her well placed to undertake a doctoral thesis, awarded in 2000, on issues of intercultural performance in an Asian context. She has created 45 dance and theatre works with her most recent collaborative work *Accented Body* comprising an interactive performance installation across seven Brisbane sites with distributed events in Seoul and London. From 2007-2008 she was a Chief Investigator on the research project *Dancing between diversity and consistency: refining assessment in postgraduate degrees in dance*, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). In 2008 Cheryl curated and convened the 2008 World Dance Alliance Global Summit and in 2009 was appointed Secretary General of World Dance Alliance.

Keywords:

dance practice—postgraduate supervision—embodied knowledges

The dancing doctorate is an interrogative endeavour which can but nurture the art form and forge a beneficial dynamism between those who seek and those who assess the emerging knowledges of dance. (Phillips, Stock & Vincs 2009)

Introduction: dance practice in the academy

In dance, perhaps unlike some of the creative arts areas in which – traditionally – practice and academic studies were separated, there tends to be a close liaison between the academy and the industry, with a relational fluidity, past and present. This partially explains why dance research higher degrees are predominantly practice-led (or multi-modal – an alternative term for those theses where practice comprises the substantial examinable component), and why the first wave of research higher degree (RHD) dance students has comprised predominantly emerging and mature artists entering the academy from industry, primarily to deepen and explore their practice.[1]

As a physical, embodied art form, dance engages with the contested territory of legitimising alternative forms of knowledge that do not sit comfortably with accepted norms of research. In supporting research students engaged with dance practice, supervisors traverse the tricky terrain of balancing university academic requirements with studies that are emergent, not only in the practice and attendant theory but also in their methodologies and open-ended outcomes, in an art form where originality and new knowledge arise from embodied, experiential and often ephemeral practices as well as collaborative creative processes.

This paper explores issues of practice-led or multi-modal theses where choreography or performance is the major outcome, through the lens of a national study, *Dancing between diversity and consistency: refining assessment in postgraduate degrees in dance*, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's Priority Projects Program. From 2006-2008 Maggi Phillips (Edith Cowan University), Kim Vincs (Deakin University) and I (Queensland University of Technology) investigated the complexities of supervision, candidature and examination of research higher degrees. Although assessment rather than supervision was the primary focus of this research, interviews with forty examiner/supervisors, seven research deans and thirty-two candidates across Australia and across the creative arts, primarily in dance, provide an insight into preparing students for RHDs, and the challenges faced. The study also gained industry perspectives from dance professionals in national forums in five cities. The qualitative data gathered from these two primary sources was coded and analysed using the NVivo software program. Further perspectives are drawn from international consultant and dance researcher Susan Melrose, as well as publications in the field. As an examiner, supervisor and former candidate of the first practice-based dance doctorate supervised in Australia (1996-1999), I also bring my own perspectives, experience and prejudices to this paper.

Findings from this research in relation to supervision point to the centrality of foregrounding 'performance mastery' (Melrose 2003) or advanced professional practice residing in the trained dancing body and the embedded knowledges that

brings to the academy. Ideally, therefore, supervisors need to possess expertise and experience in both embodied practice and academic studies. Since this is not always the case, the paper argues for the retention of a principal supervisor who commits to sharing the entire doctoral journey with the candidate, with a network of support for both her/himself and the student that encompasses relevant coursework, peer contact opportunities and collaboration, and industry partnerships. In particular, regular feedback from industry professionals in liaison with the supervisor will help to ensure that both the performative and exegetical components of the study are well-supported in an integrative relationship. Crucially, supervisors assist students to discover conceptual frameworks and language appropriate to their practice, so that they can integrate the embodied findings of the practice with written text and digital visual documentation, through a dialogue between the forms and modes of knowledge inherent in the study.

Questions of embodiment and alternative ways of knowing in the academy

While issues of the body and embodiment have been much written about, and experiential perspectives on the body have come from conceptually based performance art, the emerging epistemologies of deep physical and kinaesthetic practices of highly trained dancers, choreographers and physical performers are rarely acknowledged and valued even less. The academy seems uncomfortable with the idea that physical virtuosity and highly developed body and spatial awareness can be the stuff of conceptual advances. Elite embodied physical skill continues to be marginalised in academic research where the binary split between mind and body still seems to persist, despite the fact that it was in 1937 that Mabel Todd published *The thinking body*, on the relation of mind to muscle. Apart from its physicality, dance, as Gilbert (1992: 47) reminds us, is also ‘an expressive and transformational art form’.

Affective and transformational dance experiences are created through what Melrose refers to as ‘performance mastery’ (2003) by the ‘expert practitioner’ (2006: Point 4), which deals with ‘the specificity of arts-disciplinary performance-making processes’ (2003: Part 1, Question 1). These processes include ‘professional’ or ‘expert’ intuition (2006: Point 5) as well as ‘different types and modes of specialist knowledge-input specific to professional performance-makers’ engagement ... [and] the role of contingency and accident in performance invention’ (2003: Part 1, Question 9). This, she argues, is fundamentally different from ‘spectator mastery’ which reads the effects of the dance but cannot read the causes since spectators or scholars writing about/reflecting on the work can only experience the product and not the process. And even if they view a work’s creative process, they cannot ‘know’ it from the inside but merely speculate about it from the outside. As one of our interviewees commented, ‘practical research can give rise to new insights that can both lead to new directions in theoretical investigations of a practice, and give new “colour” to any theories under investigation ... recognised by neuro-scientists/physiologists as a viable way of researching ideas’ (DD/QQt01).

Performance mastery bridges a gap in the academy through what Melrose (2003: Part 1, Question 12) terms ‘mixed-mode disciplinary practices’. In dance, where articulation resides within the body, she notes how the ‘teleoaffective potential’ or ‘affective intensities’ (2003: Part 2) of dance are interrogated by dancers and choreographers who ‘articulate and reflect upon [it] from within the work’. Melrose proposes that ‘in this sense the work performs its own metacommentary on the affective’, which constitutes a ‘knowledge practice’ rather than the ‘knowledge politics’ prevalent in the contemporary academy.

The ability to create such ‘affective intensities’ requires an embodied dance knowledge practice that takes time, with performance-based apprenticeships requiring years or even decades. It is not surprising, then, that many research higher degrees are undertaken by mature artists and it is their considerable experience of practice, or high level of performance mastery, that often challenges the norms of both method and outcome in the academy and pushes the agenda ‘that the body has its own intellectual (as well as affective) capacity’ (SE/NOt01).

While the academy still often requires us to justify the validity of dance research practice and its particular processes, it is instructive to note the positive response of the dance industry (in the national forums conducted as part of our study) and its view of the importance of practice-led dance research in the academy. Comments from industry respondents centred on how such research enriches practice in providing time, ongoing feedback and resources for extended investigation which can lead to innovative practices. Other observations included how practice-led research ‘legitimises kinaesthetic intelligences’, ‘articulates processes that may normally be obscured’ and ‘assists in the transfer of embodied cultural knowledge across borders’ (summary of comments from Ausdance Forums).

Although those of us with a long history of dance practice can easily accept the unfolding premises of these modes of ‘knowledge practice’, it is not so easy to ‘translate’ them to non-practitioners of dance. For research to be effective it must be disseminated, arguably beyond its own field. So the dilemma remains of how to make this ‘body knowledge’ accessible to those who have not spent years or decades acquiring deeply embedded physical practices. To effect this translation, an academic interviewee of our study commented that it is necessary to

go beyond the personal acquisition of embodied knowledge, to an articulation of the ideas in either sophisticated written terms, or through workshops that disseminate the knowledge gained directly through practice, or through developing works that articulate the findings of the practical research ... Without it the research remains locked within the world of the researcher. (DD/QQt01)

For research higher degree students and their supervisors this means, according to one interviewee, ‘that you’re peddling twice as fast because you are dealing in two languages: the language of the body and art practice and the language of Academe’ (SE/VDe05). A Perth supervisor pointed out embodied research enables us to ‘question the form/develop the form/work through the form/add new moves (if you want to be really literal) – the vocabulary can be extended and changed and

contradicted, debated and enhanced. So that it keeps the dance alive' (SE/WMu14). However, not all such research is about form and it should also be acknowledged that embodied practices are not context free – embodied knowledge in Indian classical dance is in many ways fundamentally different from Western contemporary dance, even though some practitioners may acquire and blend both.

Pakes (2003) in 'Original embodied knowledge: the epistemology of the new in dance practice as research' argues, similarly to Melrose's theory of performance mastery, that embodied knowledge is knowing how (experience in), not only knowing what (experience about). Pakes (2003: 140) names this 'embedded intelligence', that is, intelligence 'embedded in the action itself', which goes beyond habitual repetition of learning and replicating a physical technique to integrate aesthetic and artistic criteria. In relation to practice as research, Pakes believes, like many others, that the intellectual endeavour of performance, while embedded in the action itself, also needs to be articulated in some way other than the action.

A dilemma arises not so much from the academy requirement of some kind of interpretation of the dance work through an exegesis, but in translating insightful knowledge arising from the embodied process in tandem with the embodied product or 'finished' examinable work. Evaluating *in situ* processes as well as product is not only impractical but also assumes that examiners have a depth of embodied as well as academic practice. A further challenge is the requirement of a durable artefact, which is difficult in live dance, for as Rye (2003) points out, the production of embodied knowledges 'cannot, by definition, be embedded, reproduced or demonstrated in any recorded document'.

Do these seemingly insoluble challenges suggest that live performance/choreography and other embodied explorations form an impossible research paradigm? Not necessarily, but it does suggest, according to Pakes (2003: 143), that the 'different knowledges that dance practice embodies warrant a much more detailed, epistemological exploration' with 'the claim to originality ... made on a case by case basis' (2003: 144) in different ways at different stages of the research journey. On an optimistic note, contributing to emergent dance epistemologies through practice and articulation of practice provides our research students with opportunities to be at the cutting edge of innovative research approaches.

Theory/practice binaries or creative practice/exegesis interdependencies?

In light of the challenges outlined, existing assumptions about the nature of the exegesis need to be re-examined. While a body of valuable work has already occurred around the changing nature and role of the exegesis that normally accompanies a creative work in practice-led research (Gray 1996; Barrett & Bolt 2007; Krauth 2002; Vella 2005; Rye 2003; Haseman 2006; Candlin 2000b; Stapleton 2006), this paper will also draw on both the experiences of interviewees – in particular supervisors – as well as on the philosophical premises above, which underpin the research findings of our study. The ongoing challenge is to find ways to dissolve the binary oppositions of theory *and* practice, especially for 'mixed mode disciplinary practices' (Melrose

2003: Part 1, Question 12) where theory resides in and emerges from the doing. How do supervisors deal with not only different *forms* of knowledge but indeed differing *modes* of knowledge, in guiding practitioners through the academy? How can they navigate tensions that occur between the ‘incompatible competencies’ (Candlin 2000b) of the ‘spectating’ academic experts with their ‘irrepressible drive ... to inscribe, interpret, and hence to practise temporal closure’, and practitioner experts who create emergent works of ‘residual unfinishedness’ (Melrose 2006: Point 3) which are not only embodied but ephemeral in the case of live performance?

Candlin (2000b) argues that practice-led students are locked in an anxiety borne out of struggling to work with these two ‘incompatible’ practices: ‘one that satisfies the demands of the university, and one that looks to the non-academic structures of art production’. Even though anxiety is probably a condition of most doctoral study, it is part of the supervisor’s role to minimise that anxiety through developing, with the candidate, methodologies borne out of their practice rather than adapting existing academic methodologies to ‘fit’ their practice. This necessitates dissolving the binaries of theory and practice through rethinking how exegetical perspectives can support the research findings embedded in the practice itself.

Appropriate exegetical perspectives seem best served by an ongoing dialogic process in which the practice develops emergent theory and at the same time theoretical perspectives from the field and the candidate’s own experience and reading/viewing inform aspects of the practice. A Brisbane supervisor described this as ‘an iterative process between those two components [practice and exegesis] of the work ... which means that there’s got to be writing going on and there’s got to be practical work going on in some kind of continuous loop such that the one informs the other’ (DD/QQt16). This view is supported by a Western Australian supervisor who points out the ‘difficulty in conceptualising the relationship between the practice and the writing ... You need to start tackling it right from the word go’ (SE/WEc09). Similarly, Richard Vella (2005) sees the supervisor’s role as ensuring ‘the exegetical perspective is in dynamic relationship with the creative work’. Opposing views about the writing/practice nexus included a comment by one respondent who insists ‘The practice comes first and then the writing as a form of reflection’ (SE/NSy01), while a further contradictory view was that ‘[as] a supervisor, I try to get the candidate to write a full draft of the exegesis before we even think of doing the performance’ (SE/VVc03).

I would argue that the latter two views perpetuate the theory/practice binary, especially in dance, where so much of the theory is embedded and emergent through the embodied experiences in the studio and in the final staged outcome. This brings up the vexed problem of suitably qualified supervisors in danced theses, where the ideal would seem to be somebody who has been physically immersed in dance practice outside the academy and also has experience as an academic inside the academy. Such supervisors exist but there are currently very few of them. More commonly, practice-led supervisors are what I term ‘academic artists’ whose practices exist primarily within the academy and are often informed by theory in such a way that their practices frequently become a vehicle for exploring a theory rather than producing new

knowledge from the practice itself. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, it is important not to conflate these two differing research processes in discussing multi-modal RHDs.

Intertextuality, alternative forms of exegetical representation and documentation [2]

If we accept that practice and exegesis are interdependent and indissoluble, resulting in an holistic thesis, what should the exegesis encompass and is text the only way to represent the exegetical component? This continues to be one of the principal challenges for supervision. At present, few dance supervisors support the simplistic model of the exegesis describing and explaining the practice, or merely reflecting on the practice. Rather, a complex debate exists around what an exegetical perspective comprises. Certainly, it is generally seen as a way of illuminating the practice in which ‘the writing serves the expert practice rather than try to replicate existing conventions of thesis writing’ (Melrose 2008: 15). The exegesis also serves the purpose of situating the practice in the field, providing a context for the study. Our study demonstrated that ‘supervisors and candidates believe that there could be more flexibility in matching written language with conceptual thought expressed in practice’ (Phillips, Stock & Vincs 2009). In textual terms this may mean allusive, poetic and metaphorical forms of written expression to articulate in some way the unnameable. Grappling with an appropriate textual mode is a challenge, but too often we forget it is also an exciting opportunity to articulate and innovate through what Jill Franz (2009) calls ‘the potentiality of constraints’.

Even though it may not be possible to avoid written outcomes altogether, exegesises comprising intertextuality in terms of a combination of written, visual and digital movement texts are becoming more common. Haseman (2006) advocates an approach in which ‘research inputs and claims to knowing’ are made ‘through the symbolic language and forms of their practice’ interwoven with outcomes reported through the ‘material forms’ of that practice experienced ‘in direct (co-presence) or indirect (asynchronous, recorded) form’. Vella (2005) similarly argues that ‘the symbolic representation of a creative work is the artist’s primary mode of communication’. His style of supervision encourages informal verbal communication before what he calls the ‘naming’ process begins, followed by the articulation of the research through carefully worked evaluation ‘criteria’. The latter form the basis for developing a ‘singular or hybridised’ methodology assisting the ‘creative research candidate ... to formulate an exegetical perspective, a lens that provides discovery and coherent understanding yet at the same time embraces the creative work’s contradictions, anomalies and ambiguities’. Vella takes this further, arguing for a form of exegesis that is another creative work by the candidate in dialogue with the primary creative research output, ‘that provides critical context.’

Vella is talking primarily about music, but what about choreographic outputs and their exegetical articulation? While choreography could still be argued to primarily involve creating dances through manipulating the moving body (or bodies) in time and space,

it has increasingly taken on its own form of intertextuality within its practices. The choreographic environment now embraces concepts of connectivity and interactivity which extend beyond the physical to the mediated and virtual. Managing and manipulating complex interdisciplinary systems and elements have become common in emerging twenty-first century choreographic practices. Contemporary choreography increasingly deals with multiple patternings within and across bodies, as well as immersive environments encompassing a polyphony of possibilities – conceptual, cultural, technological and social – expanding its reach and scope well beyond movement in time and space.

Decreasing resources make it difficult to support not only more conventional live performance but also these new forms of choreographic practice. It is not merely a question of adequate studio space and ‘staging’.[3] More fundamentally, it is difficult to find collaborating artists at a suitably high level of practice, essential when ‘interpraxiological observations by the choreographer’ are often ‘enabled by the virtuoso status and potential of the dancers themselves’ (Melrose 2003: Part 2). The reality is that many choreographers entering the academy have to rely on undergraduate dancers who may have high levels of technique and creativity but who lack the sophisticated embodied understandings, maturity and experience of older professional dancers. Although there are notable exceptions, it is not normally feasible to ask professional dancers either to work unpaid or to commit to a journey of two or more years. Lack of resources also hampers the possibility of international evaluation since examiners need to travel to view the creative work in its original form and setting. Part of a supervisor’s challenge is to help overcome these serious constraints, through developing partnerships with industry, conducting effective advocacy to the university and assisting the candidate to procure in-kind resources and, if possible, funding.

Even when resources are adequate, there is also the question of documentation and how to represent the live embodied work or mixed-media work as a durable artefact. Since live embodied knowledge disappears as soon as it has been performed, how can we ensure that this knowledge is captured, stored and retained (albeit in an altered form) as demanded by research imperatives? A good quality digital representation may remind examiners and scholars of what they saw but it cannot reproduce the three dimensional performance, its affective visceral qualities or even its dynamics, which are ‘flattened out’ by the two dimensionality of the screen. The choice of multiple points of view for the live audience, particularly when parallel events occur, cannot be captured in the same way by the fixed point of view of the camera, even with a number of cameras and a clever editing process. So in addition to the artist producing the creative work of the thesis, s/he must produce an alternative work in another medium, one that cannot reproduce the original work but one that can, if well-constructed, provide another lens through which the study can be viewed.

With ever-increasing advances in technology, Rye (2003) has proposed a ‘multi-view’ digital record ‘which resists its ability to erase the original performance’ through split screen, ‘poly-optic viewing positions’ and interactive capabilities that construct a different but rich, non-linear experience of the original work and can be linked to

relevant sections of the exegetical text. Rye (2003) admits that the multi-screen documentation with its layered and fractured elements may ‘not be easy or comfortable to watch’. However, digital formats can provide a presentational format that allows ‘both discourses [of practice and exegesis] in the same viewing space’ (Rye 2003) with the ability to move between them, thus further dissolving the theory/practice binary.

Beyond the practice/exegesis duality: the paradox of process as outcome

Dance supervisors need to work with candidates towards the most effective way to develop this three-part integrated thesis of live performance, durable artefact of the re-articulated and repackaged work, and the exegesis. Another crucial consideration is whether the examinable research findings are indeed embedded and embodied only in the outcome of the practice. Does not the creative in-studio process fundamentally inform the work, and produce its own findings, related to but differentiated from the live performance? Capturing the experience of how the work develops over time, albeit necessarily partially and provisionally, is therefore the other challenge faced by supervisors and candidates engaged in dancing theses.

Stapleton (2006: 80) proposes a way out of this dilemma through viewing ‘the ontology of liveness’ within a research context ‘less by its temporal nature (its disappearance or reproduction) than by its ability to interrogate and articulate provisional insights’, which are themselves performative. Expanding on Rye’s multi-view digital presentational format, Stapleton (2006: 82) suggests a ‘multi-voiced audio visual document’ that gathers diverse perspectives of the creative process including a media archive of rehearsals and studio activities, formal audio interviews with questions shaped by the practitioner/researcher and recordings of informal conversations. This, he argues (2006: 82), produces a ‘dialogic account of the creative process’ encompassing ‘subjective diversity’ from collaborators and spectators. In this process, as in all research, the intertextual material is edited and shaped by the practitioner/researcher and ‘focused by the project’s investigation, but simultaneously allow[ing] for complex and provisional nuances between perspectives to emerge’ (2006: 83).

Supervising the dancing thesis

Given the multi-dimensional nature of dancing theses, and the surrounding issues explored above, what modes of supervision will best support choreographers and dancers? Can an academic supervisor guide the candidate through all these competing tensions ‘without a clear map of what is expected and without established criteria for competence’ (Candlin 2000b)? Lack of structure and established criteria can, on the other hand, be liberating, providing practice-led supervisors and their students with ‘an opportunity to re-think academic norms’ (Candlin 2000a: 101). Of course, it is more manageable for university systems to adopt generic, streamlined and easily tracked approaches to supervision. Universities, in recognising the need for ongoing training for supervisors, have put in place courses, seminars, online advice and

information, and other support mechanisms. However, apart from university protocols, milestones, management, cultural diversity and equity issues, crucial supervisory skills come predominantly from discipline-specific skills and understandings, a view supported by Sinclair (2004: iv), who suggests that ‘research discipline has more influence than university type’ with regard to successfully supervised doctorates. Certainly in practice-led research, approaches are engendered from within the discipline looking outwards rather than from the generic applied to the specific. While interdisciplinary practices are highly valued in the current research climate, and dance is an enthusiastic contributor to this type of research being by nature a highly collaborative art form, it is also important to value and support discipline specificity. This view is reinforced by a Brisbane supervisor who commented that there were

few people with PhDs, and a handful of people in the country who have expertise in individual areas within dance. I think this is one reason why practice-led degrees are so important to put in place, because this way we manage to keep the research truly in dance ... that’s the real value in it. (SE/QQt07)

Given the specialised territory of the dancing thesis, the alternative to generic supervisor training proposed by Edwards (2002), that of empowering supervisors to generate their own standards and share best practice, will be more effective in providing support for dance supervisors. This is the premise behind our study, *Dancing between diversity and consistency*. Modes of supervision are changing in many areas and it is generally recognised that the sole ‘guru’ style supervisor is no longer so appropriate, and in fact can be a negative factor, a point strongly made by one of our interviewees:

I think to have a PhD student and a supervisor isolated is the worst thing you can do, because they just start to perpetuate each other’s reading and process ... You need to have a collection of colleagues. (SE/QQt10)

There is currently strong encouragement for collaborative supervision, both in terms of broad support and in considering a team approach to supervision, a long-established tradition in the natural and physical sciences. Love and Street (1998: 149) advocate ‘reframing supervision as a collaborative problem-solving process’ but Sinclair (2004: vii) argues for ‘hands-on’ supervisors who will support simultaneous multitasking in their candidates, ‘which involve[s] academics and other experts’. Both of these approaches are extremely pertinent to practice-led dance degrees.

In my view, it is crucial to appoint a principal supervisor who goes on the entire research journey forging a dynamic relationship with the candidate, one that involves a reciprocal negotiated and integrative learning process. This is best served by other advice and support including relevant coursework options such as introduction to a variety of research approaches, a range of contemporary conceptual frameworks, ethics and other academic protocol considerations. Coursework and seminars connect students to their peers – via a healthy diversity if the offerings are faculty-wide – and provide a broad range of views and practices to open up possibilities and to induct students into a research environment. In the case of practice-led researchers, a glimpse

into existing methodologies may be used in a bricolage fashion as part of their practice-led research design, especially if the project documentation includes a record of participant interviews and audience reception. Despite what may seem to be a tension between open inquiry and the requirement for methodological rigour, Pakes argues (2003: 138) that the latter can occur ‘without compromising the intuitive development of a creative work’ since ‘critical judgement is an integral part of the creative process anyway’.

Feedback from our study suggests appointing ‘associate supervisors that speak the language the student needs’ (SE/QQt08 and SE/QQt09). In this regard, industry supervisors could be immensely helpful, especially in terms of feedback on embodied dance practices, with their critique providing another perspective for both student and supervisor. This is not to abrogate the responsibility of the principal supervisor from attending rehearsals. Unless s/he is immersed in the experiential process and practice that are the crux of the research, the binary nature of practice/exegesis research will be perpetuated. Vella (2005) points out that supervision ‘necessitates an understanding of the artist’s creative process’, which embraces observation of the ‘idiosyncracies of the practice’, identifying ‘salient features’ as well as ‘hidden strengths, patterns and weaknesses’ in tandem with ‘addressing technical issues’ and reviewing the candidate’s previous works, which guides the research journey through ‘a continual series of questions arising from the work’. In this way, analysis takes place in iterative cycles of the creative work. These and similar approaches encourage the candidate not only to be self-reflective but also to engage in what Street and Love (1998: 151) refer to as ‘self-appraisal’. This mode of supervision, they argue, develops the ‘whole person’ through a triangulation of technical skills, metacognitive skills and personal development. In the dancing thesis, deepening and articulating intuitive, kinaesthetic and embodied ‘knowledges’ need to be integrated with the above attributes.

Key attributes of a practice-led supervisor

Supervision thus entails multiple roles, including those of manager, mentor, listener (and therefore learner) and, as Love and Street (1998: 153) point out, ‘modelling for the candidate an appropriate resilience and coping in the face of uncertainty’. In analysing our supervisor interview data, it is interesting to conject that what they look for and value in candidates are the attributes they themselves embrace or aspire to possess. These include above all the spirit of inquiry that entails openness, curiosity, ‘a willingness to explore and to interrogate ideas and artistic practice’ while at the same time ‘demonstrat[ing] independence of thought in both creative practice and theoretical debate’ (SE/QQt01), which involves being ‘brave and adventurous’ (SE/Wed16). Primary data from our study also reveal that supervisors want their students to have a passion for their chosen topic to sustain them on the long journey, and thus seek students who ‘are resourceful, tenacious and determined’ (SE/QQu01), ‘and completely embedded in what they’re doing’ (SE/QSq01). At the same time, supervisors value an ‘interdisciplinary outlook, engagement with process and history of ideas’ (SE/QGr02).

One of the criticisms around a presumed lack of rigour levelled at practice-led RHDs has been that in interrogating their own personal practice students are merely ‘naval-gazing’. However, our interviews reveal that supervisors see it as their responsibility to take artist researchers beyond the obsession with their own practice and their personal experience to that of a broader field. A respondent in the Perth Industry Forum spoke of ‘embracing other disciplines’ through academic study in order to ‘break down practitioners’ inclinations to self-referentiality’. This point of view was reinforced by a Melbourne supervisor who commented that ‘the questions that circle around practice are the things that I think need to be related to wider issues, rather than the person’s own personal experience’ (SE/VVc03). A crucial aspect of the supervisory role is therefore to assist the candidate move beyond their personal perspectives, ‘to understand that lived experience, the particular problem they’re facing, or the area they want to explore ... can actually illuminate the broader field for artists or thinkers’ (SE/VDe06).

A supervisor of a dancing thesis should also have an ability to think across multiple genres and aesthetics so as to support a diversity of practices and processes. Generally, supervisors interviewed expect candidates to have a high level of technical proficiency in dance as well as be able to position their work in the field. This assumes that the supervisor her/himself is on top of both established and emergent epistemologies of practice and experiential knowledges at the site of the body and can develop strategies to challenge the candidate’s disciplinary skills. In addition, the supervisor has a responsibility to assist artists entering the academy ‘conceptualise what they are doing, to actually see what they’re doing as research’ (SE/SAd01). One strategy, recommended by a Melbourne dance supervisor, is to ask students to focus on the question, ‘what did the studio inquiry reveal that could not have been revealed by any other kind of research? I set them up in such a way that they are looking for something they didn’t know before. And I think that’s important because that’s the new knowledge component’ (SE/VDe06).

In summary, the research outcomes of *Dancing between consistency and diversity*, as well as my own experience and that of contemporary colleagues and scholars, reveal that practice-led supervision requires a high level of organisational and managerial skills, flexibility and adaptability to changing needs through a constant juggling ‘of both outcome oriented and process oriented goals’ (Love & Street 1998: 153). For those supervising a dancing thesis, a deep and broad disciplinary knowledge that is experiential and embodied, as well as theoretical, is essential. Increasingly supervision also entails a willingness to facilitate the building of a collaborative team that can support candidates in all aspects of their candidacy. The reward for this complex and time-consuming journey is to witness and participate in the transformative experience of a successful completion and the enriched practice of the dance artist.

Endnotes

- [1] Dance is a recent addition to academia, with the first fledgling Australian degree course in dance studies founded in 1975 by Shirley McKechnie at Rusden College (now Deakin

University). This was followed by the establishment of other tertiary courses at Victorian College of the Arts (linked with Melbourne University), West Australian Academy of Performing Arts (Edith Cowan University) and Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the majority of which were primarily conservatory courses to train professional dancers and choreographers, with studies in dance education for those training to be teachers. The first dance-specific Master of Arts research degree was established at QUT in 1993, and by the mid 1990s a small number of masters and doctoral students ventured into the unknown territory of what has come to be known as ‘practice-led/based/as/through research’ or multi-modal higher degrees, where dance practice is an examinable component of the award.

- [2] By the term ‘intertextuality’ I am not referring to the relationship between written/literary texts but rather the interweaving of different mediums of expression and communication: written, visual, aural and kinetic. These can be argued to be textual modes since they can be ‘read’ to produce multiple meanings through seeing, hearing and/or experiencing their form and content.
- [3] By the term ‘staging’ I am referring to how the creative practice is presented. This entails aesthetic, practical and resource considerations around choice (and/or adaptation) of venue, design elements such as lighting, sets (including use of media), props (objects) and costuming, as well as live or recorded music accompaniment.

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