



# THE CREATIVE PHD

Challenges, Opportunities, Reflection

Tara Brabazon, Tiffany Lyndall-Knight  
and Natalie Hills

EMERALD POINTS

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Reflection

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Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83982-793-8 (Print)  
ISBN: 978-1-83982-790-7 (Online)  
ISBN: 978-1-83982-792-1 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# PROLOGUE

*Tara Brabazon*

I am 28 years of age and sitting in a university higher degree committee as a faculty representative. Three examiner reports are being discussed by the committee for a performance-based PhD. The results were a B (minor corrections), a D (restructure and re-examination), and F (predictably, a fail). The thesis was composed of an artifact and exegesis, a live performance and 40,000 words of a research frame to contextualize it. The examiners were sent a video of the performance, and the D and the F results offered a commentary about the quality – or lack thereof – of the recording. Also, the exegesis appeared to re-tell the script of the performance rather than explore why and how this performance created new knowledge. The quality of the “art” was irrelevant. What was the research? Where was the research? What was the object of discussion? How was originality created, proven and verified through such a doctoral thesis?

It was a mess and because of the nature of the performance, it was impossible to re-create the event in a way that would satisfy the examiners. How could a thesis such as this be “re-examined” – as required by one of the three examiners?



I was a young researcher and early career researcher given an opportunity to be on a university-level governance committee. I was inexperienced and privileged to be learning from more weathered colleagues. Yet, there was no resolution from these senior academics, gathered from an array of disciplines. The problems were multiple: what was being examined and what were the relationships between the two components?

Cut to a decade later. I am 38 years of age. A PhD student has been bounced around the University of Brighton where I am Chair of Media. Supervisors have walked away from this project as if the student is carrying a contagious, air-borne disease. Her four films have been demeaned and dismissed as “lacking quality.” The exegesis remained unread, but explained the nature of the films and the research within them. As the document had never been read, the films were being evaluated with profoundly subjective criteria. Her institutional PhD file was thick with commentary from research managers questioning the “quality” of the “art.” The student had a different purpose and inflection. The candidate had written the thesis with a very clear frame around the films. These visual and sonic objects were not self-standing works of “art.” The sonic and visual artifacts were ways of thinking.<sup>1</sup> The student had produced the films and written the exegesis concurrently, so they dialoged tightly and effectively. The artifacts informed, framed and developed practice and iteratively created knowledge, as demonstrated through the exegesis. But even with my leverage as a professor, I could not support the student through to completion at this university. Instead, she submitted at a different institution and passed easily and without corrections or caveats. Therefore, the research leadership at the time was incompetent and wrong. Yet, the consequences of that error – if the student’s supervisor had not been senior and experienced enough to recognize the quality of the thesis and have the capacity to recommend admission and submission

at another university – is that the student would have walked away, another statistic in the overwhelmingly shameful attrition figures emerging from doctoral education. But in this case, unsubstantiated statements about “art” were used to demean the student and research. A good outcome was reached through these conflictual interpretations of cultural value by leaving one institution and submitting at another.

The clock hands circle one more decade. I am 48 and the Dean of Graduate Research at Flinders University. PhD students – their admission, candidature and examination – are now my responsibility, focus and priority. Once more, I see a soap opera of assumptions, errors, flaws and debates about “quality” in the discussion of creative-led thesis. The difference this time is that I can do something about this situation. What has been revealed through my academic career is that silos of “creatives” have been built, filled with (over) confidence and dated assumptions of cultural value. The research has been lost through the propulsive focus to create “art.” There are proxies for these problems. Long candidatures. Mental health issues from the students. Multiple changes in supervision. Attrition. Yet, the goal remains: blame the student for the “failure.” Each individual student is to blame for their own inability to complete, rather than the institution, supervisor or system.

That individualization of student blame ceases in this book. Three people – an academic and dean of graduate research, a creative-led, successfully graduated PhD student and experienced and awarded actor, and a professional staff member who heads doctoral examinations in a university – have aligned to create the book in your hands. Whether you are an administrator, academic, student or supervisor, the time has come for all of us as a community to improve the situation of the creative-led, practice-led, practice-based PhD. The conflation and bagginess of phrasing is challenging enough.

How we implement standards and international protocols of accountability, rigor and transparency remains even more complex. Unfounded, ambiguous, class-ridden assumptions of “quality” and “art” must be discredited. Theories of research and originality must be centered. We are now post-post-poststructuralism. We are now post-post-postmodernism. Indeed, we have never been postmodern.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we are supervising, learning and managing in the simulacrum. We open the door to the post-art PhD and show how research values will transcend and transform cultural value. Artistic “quality” cannot be examined. Research can be examined. This book guides scholars, students and managers through implementing and understanding that difference.

## NOTES

1. Ambrozic, M., & Vettese, A. (Eds.) (2013). *Art as a thinking process: Visual forms of knowledge production*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
2. Redhead, S. (2011). *We have never been postmodern*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.