**Understanding Doctoral Communities in Practice-Based Research**

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**Summary**

Practice can be the mode, method, tool, object, subject and/or embodiment of research in a doctorate. This changes the traditional assumptions of a written text as the thesis and of doctoral education as being designed to support the production of text, how can institutions develop doctoral provision that supports practice-based research? To address this question, this chapter draws on the findings from semi-structured interviews with centre directors and coordinators of doctoral education in a number of institutions worldwide that represent a diversity of approaches to doctoral education in the broad fields of art, design and performance. As there is a growing emphasis on cohort-based approaches to doctoral education, particularly in the UK, the chapter includes an exemplar of how a multi-institution Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) has supported practice-based research. My focus is on lived-experience of supporting doctoral researchers engaging in practice-based research.

**Introduction**

The growth in practice-based research at doctoral level means that the thesis (as an argument and contribution) can now be articulated through a range of physical and even virtual forms. This complicates traditional assumptions of a written text as the thesis and of doctoral education as being designed to support the production of text. So how can institutions develop doctoral provision that supports practice-based research? Investigating provision and community for doctoral researchers also provides a lens for understanding the needs of practice-based research in academia more broadly.

This chapter draws on the findings from semi-structured interviews with centre directors and coordinators of doctoral education in a number of institutions worldwide which focused on initiatives and developed models to support building community in the particular institutional settings for practice-based research.[[1]](#endnote-1) The institutions selected represent a diversity of approaches to doctoral education in the broad fields of art, design and performance, although the initiatives developed to build community demonstrate that disciplinary boundaries are productively porous in practice-based research. The institutions are: Edith Cowan University (Australia); Goldsmiths, University of London (United Kingdom); Queensland University of Technology (Australia); the University at Buffalo (USA); the University of Plymouth (UK); and my own, Birmingham City University (UK), where I have personally been involved in trying to build community amongst doctoral researchers in a Faculty of Arts, Design and Media with many practice-based researchers. Given a growing emphasis on cohort-based approaches to doctoral education, particularly in the UK, the chapter also includes an exemplar of how a multi-institution Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) has integrated support for practice-based research.

My focus is on lived-experience of trying to support doctoral researchers engaging in practice-based research. The quotations from the interviews included reveal human and individual perspectives rather than emphasising formal institutional policies or theoretical interpretations. The honesty with which interviewees responded also highlights some of the challenges in building community in practice-based doctoral research, with open discussion about what have been perceived as less successful interventions and thorny issues that have not been resolved. Whilst the chapter focuses on institutional perspectives on doctoral education, this only emphasises that community for those engaged in practice-based research is an imperative that is not only an institutional responsibility. It is an imperative that we all have multiple roles to play in building and supporting - as supervisors, as PhD leads, as academics and researchers, as students and peers.

**The role of community in doctoral education and practice-based research**

A doctorate entails a contribution to knowledge, and by default this implies a community. A contribution to knowledge is a contribution to discourse and a community engaging in that discourse. Doctoral researchers are learning how to join and belong to those discourse communities as they are learning how to undertake research. As Mantai has stated, doctoral researchers need: ‘a growing sense of belonging to a scholarly, academic, or research community. This sense of community is a well-established requirement for the doctoral student’s scholarly development’[[2]](#endnote-2).

Practice-based doctoral researchers have specific needs alongside those of other doctoral researchers due to the position and nature of practice-based research itself. Frick has described doctoral education as a process of doctoral becoming that is ‘an ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological concern’[[3]](#endnote-3). Practice-based doctoral researchers are grappling with the epistemology of practice as a form of knowledge and of the inter-relationship of engagements with theory, practice and text as methods in a practice-based methodological approach. They are learning how to frame their creative and research interests in relation to the values and ethics of an academic discipline, frequently challenging the axiology of one or more disciplines through their research. Often however, the most challenging aspect for practice-based doctoral researchers is the ontology of becoming a researcher in the academy alongside maintaining an established identity as a creative or professional practitioner[[4]](#endnote-4). For practice-based doctoral researchers understanding the relevance of doctoral processes and the requirements of academic research can be particularly challenging and a source of stress precisely because of the ontological challenge. Collinson’s research found that practice-based doctoral researchers:

initially perceived the combination of bureaucracy and research protocols as fundamentally detrimental to their creative activity and consequently to their creative selves […] The intuitive, emotional, spontaneous and ‘open’ self was confronted by institutional processes and academic demands, which seemed intent on limiting, managing and packaging creativity into tight timescales and pre-defined forms. [[5]](#endnote-5)

﻿ In many ways, for practice-based doctoral researchers resolving this perceived tension with doctoral processes in relation to their own research is a moment of conceptual threshold crossing in their doctoral becoming[[6]](#endnote-6). As Newbury has highlighted in arguing for research training specific to doctoral researchers in the creative arts and design, it is imperative that ‘the development of research skills takes place as part of an active research culture’[[7]](#endnote-7). As part of such an active research culture, practice-based doctoral researchers can be encouraged to share experiences, collectively negotiating ontological challenges alongside developing their understandings of the epistemological, methodological and axiological positioning of practice-based research. To put it more simply, feeling part of a community can provide reassurance as well as opportunities to test out ideas and learn from others.

**Community as legitimising**

Building a sense of community can have particular benefits for practice-based researchers within a doctoral education context. Opportunities to share experiences and to “think aloud” about the articulation of practice-based research can be beneficial in that they increase the confidence of individual doctoral researchers as well as increasing the visibility of practice-based research in the institution. This is important because, despite several decades of precedent, practice-based doctoral researchers can still face anxiety about the legitimacy of their research and perceive university structures for doctoral education as disadvantaging and othering, which can be interpreted as prejudicial in turn creating further anxiety.

At Goldsmiths University in London, concerns around support for practice-based doctoral researchers and a wish to influence the institutional ethos of practice-based research led to the creation of a forum in which these concerns could be explicitly explored. *The Goldsmiths Forum for Practice-Based Postgraduate Research* (2009-17) operated across the arts, humanities, engineering and physical sciences, encompassing studio arts and computational programmes as well as the social sciences. A key aim was to build community to support the heterodox nature of practice-based research at Goldsmiths, and balance this with its communicability as an ethical ethos that could be owned and promoted by the university. As founder Prof Janis Jeffries remembers:

Initial discussions and observations suggested that whilst practice research was thriving amongst the PGR community at Goldsmiths and being supported in many different ways by individual supervisors, there was not a coherent strategy for its wider understanding within Departments, its support (financial and in terms of resources), and its strong promotion. This left some researchers feeling vulnerable and staff feeling confused about how to articulate practice research in a cohesive sense. The fact that there was a reluctance to articulate the relation between practice and theory on a postgraduate research degree signalled a deeper concern with the balance between individual inventiveness (on the part of staff and students) and the sharing of this across the institution and outside academia. It may also have signalled a concern about homogenisation of values and individual approaches.[[8]](#endnote-8)

As well as having established the first practice-based PhD across Arts and Computational Technology in 2007 for the Department of Computing at Goldsmiths, Jefferies was also part of the team with the Graduate School who offered training and induction workshops to doctoral researchers and she was aware of the lack of explicit provision for, and acknowledgement of, practice-based researchers.

*The Goldsmiths Forum for Practice-Based Postgraduate Research* was created with an explicit cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary focus. Doctoral researchers from Art, Computing, Sociology, Music, English, Comparative Literature, and Design attended Forum events, and Jeffries was assisted in the later years in running the Forum by Dr Katrina Jungnickel from Sociology. Jeffries recalls the key themes that motivated discussions within the Forum:

What does it mean to do a practice research PhD?

What is the status of the value of practice within research?

Wherein lies the speculative? Wherein lies reflectivity?

What are some of the models and methods and forms of public engagement and forms of judgement across discipline boundaries?

What does a Goldsmiths practice research PhD look like?

This agenda clearly reveals concerns around the identity and status of practice-based research, which persisted throughout the life of the *Forum*. In the last year of the *Forum’s* activities in 2016/17, for example, events led by doctoral researchers, staff and invited speakers focused on: life writing and narrative emotions; the ethics of collaboration in computing and design; rigor in practice research; the possibilities of presenting, exhibiting, installing practice-based work; and the challenges of the documentation of live performance. Events varied between the more traditional seminar format of presentation followed by discussion to more interactive sessions. Two more informal *Unblocking the Blocks* workshops were also run by the Forum in 2017, as explicit opportunities for doctoral researchers to be open about the challenges they were currently facing and to ask for peer support. Such sharing encompassed critical, creative and practical issues relating to practice-based research. One former participant, Dr William Goodin, was explicit about the benefits of these sessions:

It was in one of these sessions that I had the breakthrough that helped me create what I feel were the best artistic works I used in my PhD and contributed to an entire chapter of my final thesis. One of the presenters at an *Unblocking the Blocks* event had an image in their PowerPoint that started a chain of events that helped me to find the key elements that I felt were missing in my practice up to that point. In addition, after speaking to this presenter about my research, they suggested a book that was well outside of my current cannon of texts. It was this book that ended up being critical to tying up many of the principal aspects of my research in to a tighter and more solid logical flow of ideas and concepts.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Goodin demonstrates how the sharing of individual problems can have resonance for other practice-based research projects and how such cross-disciplinary discussions can be productive as resources and approaches are shared across disciplinary boundaries. Such sharing of experiences and approaches to the articulation of practice-based research can assist in an ongoing individual and collective renegotiation of progression and monitoring processes, developing understanding of the presentation and publication of practice-based research. The benefits are obvious in terms of the increase in an individual’s confidence, but also in avoiding unnecessary “redesigns of the wheel” as success and failures in approach are shared and reflected upon.

Other institutions have taken a similar approach to Goldsmiths in addressing perceived gaps in provision for practice-based doctoral education by creating discussion fora. At Edith Cowan University in Australia, contemporary artist Lyndall Adams, design strategist Chris Kueh, performance maker Renee Newman-Storen and environmental writer John Ryan collaborated to create *This is Not a Seminar* in 2012[[10]](#endnote-10) as a multidisciplinary forum ‘to assist postgraduate research students in connecting their creative practices to methodological, theoretical and conceptual approaches whilst fostering an atmosphere of rapport across creative disciplines’[[11]](#endnote-11). Whilst the Graduate Research School and library provides generic training and support including seminars and workshops on topics such as writing, qualitative and quantitative research methods and data-management, Adams and her colleagues had recognised a lack of provision specifically for practice-based doctoral researchers. This was despite the fact that in the School of Communication and Arts, and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), two of the three schools in the Faculty of Education and Arts, the majority of doctoral research students were engaged in creative research projects. The key initial questions that *This Is Not A Seminar* set out to explore were:

What is research and what are the limits to what might be considered research?

How can we develop creative research skills across a range of disciplines?

How can practice-led research students benefit from a transdisciplinary and

dialogic learning environment?

What are the problems that practice-led creative researchers often experience, and

are these issues related to feelings of isolation and inadequacy in the academy?[[12]](#endnote-12)

There are clear similarities here with the concerns around articulation, legitimacy and practicalities that had informed the creation of Goldsmith’s *Forum* a few years earlier. It is significant that in both institutions, the response was to create community-building events and spaces for conversations to explore these issues, rather than training to provide answers and solutions.

Reflecting the disciplinary diversity of its founders, *This is Not a Seminar* was established as a weekly forum with a distinct focus on cross-disciplinary conversations:

In naming the forum *This is Not a Seminar*, we set out to foster an environment of egalitarianism, dialogue, exchange and questioning between facilitators, guest practitioners and participants, rather than a traditional learning structure of ‘students working with a professor […] As a ‘breeding ground’ (the botanical connotation of ‘seminar’ and indeed our preferred one), TINAS conversations were often unscripted and rhizomatic, leading to unforeseen realisations about the nature of creative research through a synergy of ideas.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The weekly forum included a mix of different types of events. *In Conversation* sessions were open conversations held between academics and doctoral researchers from across creative disciplinary fields. The team soon realised that these were more successful if there was more than one panellist and if different disciplines were represented, as this broadened appeal and increased attendance, as well as providing fruitful cross-disciplinary fertilization and reflection. The *This is Not Theory* series was a set of critical reading exercises, each based on a few paragraphs of theoretically dense text: ‘These sessions were fun, engaging and, best of all, noisy debates about meaning. Everyone dug in to unpack the dense material—to get to the heart of challenging concepts’[[14]](#endnote-14). *This is Not Rocket Science* workshops had a more practical focus on training specific to practice-based research; topics have included reflective journals, public speaking, copyright in creative practice, ethics and even how to wrangle Microsoft Word to include film as well as images.

Adams and her colleagues have identified numerous benefits to *This is Not a Seminar* which have repaid their investment of time and resources in the initiative:

[it] has enabled a heightened rapport and a greater sense of community amongst researchers across creative disciplines; a broader acknowledgement of the range of work that constitutes practice-led and practice-based research; confidence in the development of documentation, communication and methodological skills; an appreciation for the modes through which creative practices can be theorised and contextualised in academic terms; and a stronger representation of practice-led and practice-based researchers in academic environments.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The benefits are individual and institutional. As with the *Forum* at Goldsmiths, confidence both in articulation of practice-based research and its legitimisation via the institutional value accrued through the profile and visibility of the community have benefited academic staff as well as doctoral researchers.

Whilst the *This Is Not A Seminar* initiative continues and evolves at Edith Cowan University, *The Goldsmiths Forum for Practice-Based Postgraduate Research* effectively came to an end in 2017, prompted in part by the retirement of now Emeritus Professor Jefferies. As former participant Goodin, perceptively states:

Initiatives and communities like this can only be sustained through the dedication of the presiding faculty members and with the support of the University. It takes actively engaged faculty members that believe in the process and stay engaged with the community at large to keep initiatives like these alive. Communities like these have to constantly evolve as the crop of students, their projects, and their individual needs change.

Whilst arguably the practice-based research environment at Goldsmiths had evolved during the nine years of the *Forum’s* existence and the needs were different in 2017, the central role played by Jeffries is evident and this points to questions of sustainability of community for practice-based doctoral researchers. It is a difficult balance to achieve, enabling and responding to a fluid group of doctoral researchers whose needs may change from year to year, whilst ensuring that community initiatives become embedded and sustained by the institution and participants. Currently there is more of a disciplinary focus to doctoral community events at Goldsmiths, for example the PhD Art programme running regular *Flashpoints* where doctoral researchers share their research and its challenges. This points almost paradoxically to the success of the *Forum*, in that the benefits of the activities have been recognised and replicated at disciplinary level removing the gaps that the *Forum* filled in provision. However, arguably the potential for of cross-disciplinary exchanges the *Forum* embodied has diminished.

Opportunities to share experiences and to “think aloud” are beneficial for practice-based doctoral researchers and can increase an individual’s confidence and understanding of their own research project. Both at Goldsmiths and Edith Cowan University facilitating discussions via seminars and workshops with cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary communities had particular benefits in raising the visibility of practice-based research in the institution as well as addressing specific methodological challenges and training needs. There are challenges however in balancing the benefits of disciplinary communities based on shared language and understanding, with the benefits of outsider views and reconceptualization via the effort of translation that come from interacting with researchers from other disciplines.

**Spaces for community building across disciplines**

Creating spaces for interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary communities to mix and form can be challenging as well as fruitful. Described on its website as ‘an Open Research Lab for playful experimentation with creative technology’ (i-DAT 2019a), i-DAT at the University of Plymouth on England’s South Coast is an evolution of the Institute of Digital Art and Technology established over twenty years ago. i-DAT hosts doctoral researchers from a diverse range of disciplines which can include digital design, communication design, sonic arts, digital art, interactive media, curating and architecture. Through relationships with other research institutes and groups at Plymouth and internationally, the broader pool of doctoral researchers with which i-DAT’s academics engage includes those in the medical humanities, robotics, education and performance. Across this rich mix and key to i-DAT’s research activity is the ethos of, and spaces for, openness and play.

As well as more traditional seminars in which doctoral students can present their work-in-progress and prepare for conference presentations, ‘workshops are a fundamental weapon in i-DAT’s creative arsenal’ (i-DAT 2019b). This spirit of openness and playfulness is evident in the organisation of these workshops, in which the doctoral students are joined by academics and post-doctoral researchers not only from the design disciplines but also from the University of Plymouth’s Sustainable Earth Institute and Impact Lab, and industry contacts through the South West Creative Technology Network[[16]](#endnote-16). Mike Phillips, Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts and Director of Research at i-DAT, explains what he sees as the importance of a playful, interdisciplinary mix for the workshops:

They feed off each other and other projects feed in […] It is proactive thing to do the workshop methods, especially when you’re doing a very practice-based work-shopping method. It breaks down so many kinds of boundaries between disciplines. Just the making of things is really crucial to what we do, and it does get quite disruptive and it breaks people’s isolation. You know often peoples’ PhD is to disappear into a cupboard for a time and things like that. The workshop method really challenges people in a very, I think, productive way because it’s not like you’re forcing people to do things, it’s just that to engage you have to do something.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The workshops i-DAT organises and hosts are designed to be hands-on, and often include elements of training and exploration with particular types of software, coding or technology that is framed as experimental and playful. For example, a workshop hosted by i-DAT as part of the University of Plymouth’s Design Research series in November 2019 which was on data to support applications to a funding call from the South West Creative Technology Network, was called the *DATA TA-DA!* and its schedule included a half-hour slot for what was described slightly tongue-in cheek as ‘pizza & more fiddling’[[18]](#endnote-18). As well as the particular project, technology or strategic aim for an individual workshop, Phillips sees the interactive, practical nature of the workshops as serving a strong community-building focus:

I take a lot from knitting groups actually where there is that tinkering process where you’re doing something and talking at the same time. You need the seminar and more intensive things as well, but this is a great way of starting those things off and so it’s quite agile as a way of engaging people from different backgrounds as well certainly the interdisciplinary thing which is quite important to us. Work-shopping with mathematicians, also stats people, it just sort of brings them together and also if they don’t know how to make things which often other disciplines don’t (like the humanities) they are scared of making things or breaking things. And, actually, it starts interesting dialogues between two individuals that can then enrich the symposia-type kind of model.

Not all of the doctoral researchers connected with i-DAT are practice-based researchers, and as Phillips suggests, the practical workshops can encourage skills exchange and respect across the different disciplines. The workshops are often led or facilitated by practice-based doctoral researchers as Phillips believes that ‘it gives them the chance to focus and to explain their research in a very pragmatic way to an audience who are keen to learn’. His analogy with knitting groups emphasises the discursive nature and sociality of the workshops, in which the doing facilitates discussions of different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives.

As well as the playful and open ethos, provisioning the environment has been a central feature of the research culture of i-DAT. Phillips reflected on the pitfalls of i-DAT’s previous physical spaces, where the offices, workshop and lab spaces were too far away from each other, even in different buildings, and where it was difficult to build a sense of a cohesive community. i-DAT now has collocated office, lab and studio spaced and he revealed:

We’ve actually sort of been liberated by the space that we just moved into, we have a new office-lab space and conversations are happening in that space much more kind of in a self-generated thing where you might run a workshop and the remains of the workshop are there, you know the bits, and then other things take place so we have little pop-up things happening as well so it’s becoming a more dynamic space.

Each full-time doctoral student has an allocated workspace, and there are hot-desks shared by part-time students and visitors. Phillips did offer a note of caution based on a previous experience:

Well I think that probably the most destructive thing that can happen is when you mix PhD cultures in space. When you have very theory-based students who want to spend a lot of time reading and that sort of quiet stuff […] that then became almost like fistfights in the office space, the shared space. Literally because someone was trying to make an Arduino squeak and somebody was trying to read something. And then you know people tried to create house rules, as soon as you started to do that it became, not an enforcement, but something that you were aware of all the time. That started to become unproductive I think.

It is important to Phillips that the research spaces and the research students are self-governing in their use of them. As he pointed out, there are plenty of quiet study spaces provided across the university:

But there are actually very few kinds of cohabited making-spaces where you can exchange ideas. So that’s I think the priority. I mean we do have quiet times there and occasionally an email has to be sent, you know which is usually when there’s maybe a mass of students getting rowdy. But it’s minor stuff but it’s always done in a very open way as well.

For Phillips as Director, is it important that i-DAT maintains an open and playful ethos as a creative community, and that the environment reflects and enables the experimental, fluid interdisciplinary practice-based research that is i-DAT’s research agenda. Doctoral students are entangled with academics, artists and industry contacts as an integral part of this community through shared spaces, events, seminars and workshops.

At Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Australia, both the use of space and encouraging disciplines to mix have proved challenging, in ways that resonate with the experience at i-DAT. Established in 2016, the QUT *Design Lab* is the research centre in the School of Design in the Creative Industries Faculty. The *Design Lab* encourages transdisciplinary collaborations and the website claims: ‘our approach to research removes disciplinary silos and brings together all higher degree research students’[[19]](#endnote-19). The research environment into which doctoral researchers are embedded includes regular workshops, seminars and more experimental exploratory events described as rumbles and mudpits.

In contrast, QUT’s *Creative Lab* whilst being established for a similar period of time, is a more dispersed amalgamation of disciplinary communities including art, theatre, dance, music and creative writing. Professor Gavin Sade, currently Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) in the Creative Industries Faculty has an informed perspective on both research labs. As an artist and designer specialising in interaction design and electronic arts, he has supervised doctoral researchers in both the *Design Lab* and the *Creative Lab*, as well as being Interim Director of the *Creative Lab* in 2018. Sade[[20]](#endnote-20) noted that whilst *Creative Lab* also runs seminars for doctoral researchers and workshops, there was less sense of a cohesive community. He admitted that when he became Interim Director it was a challenge that he tripped up on. One of the first things he did was to bring all the PhD students in Creative Lab together to speak about research community but “many of them hadn’t even seen each other, didn’t even know who each other was, some of them didn’t even know that they belonged to a research group called the *Creative Lab”*. He concluded that in this context his “sort of elbow-forcing” approach to seeing community through the lens of an organisational structure was not appropriate. The *Creative Lab* contains a higher proportion of the practice-based researchers, yet Sade had to recognise that the *Creative Lab* was ‘still a little bit earlier in that evolution’. Whilst within the disciplines there were established and supportive doctoral research community events, it would take longer to build community across the *Creative Lab*.

The issues of both size of community and space for community building have been key at QUT. For example, in 2017 there were 175 higher degree researchers across the Master of Philosophy, Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Creative Industries programmes attached to *Creative Lab*[[21]](#endnote-21). Sade reflected on the issue of lab size and the optimal size for a research community:

They’re almost too large to be singular communities, there’s a few different sub-communities in there, clustered around things, so some of those thematically organised groups have been very successful, especially where they have a culture of almost self-generating activity, so some of the really successful groups have had the students running a lot of the community style activity.

Sade gave as an example the *Design Lab’s* *Rumbles*. He explained that the *Rumbles* were started with the directors and supervisors programming them but that over time, doctoral researchers in the group took on organising them.

Whilst acknowledging that the provision of physical space is a vexed institutional issue that he personally tries to keep out of, he identified the benefits of colocation for doctoral researchers. He also identified the key role played by academic staff in investing in building community and gave the example of an urban informatics group within QUT’s *Design Lab*:

They had a director and associate director who were just dedicated to the lab, that were co-located, every Friday they ran things, they asked their students to be present, in the space which they fought very hard to keep, so they put a lot of effort into bringing their HDR students together, they worked with them together, they ran reading groups, they started this, and once that had happened consistently and regularly over a period of years it became a habit.

This example highlights the importance of staff engaging to create the impetus for community building and to boost activity until it becomes embedded when there is the potential for community to be self-sustaining. It is also clear that the issue of space, and the colocation of academic staff and doctoral researchers was important in enabling the building of community. It is also interesting to consider the disciplinary differences that may affect the provision of space for doctoral research communities. Sade pointed out that practice-based research is less prevalent within QUT’s *Design Lab* which has more of a focus on written outputs, journal articles and monographs even where creative practice is part of the research. In *Creative Lab*, practice-based research is much more common. Undoubtedly providing space enables community:

The urban informatics group that was very successful had an open plan office space in the same area of the building where the director and associate director and all the other researchers were, so they were part of that culture. Physically they were located there, so we do, we try and embed them into the research culture, but when it comes to it - the space conversation gets in the way a bit.

Resourcing practice-based research with physical space can be more difficult institutionally, as more than just desk space is required.

The provision of space for doctoral researchers can help to create a sense of community and belonging, and for practice-based researchers these spaces need to enable both quiet study and the making, doing and sharing of practice. As Phillips found with i-DAT in Plymouth, when space for collaboration and creative practice can be provided, it can be transformative and it is an important enabler of community. The experiences at i-DAT and QUT demonstrate also the importance of academic staff being present and visible within the spaces, yet without imposing regulation or hierarchies with the spaces.

**Doctoral researcher-led and inclusive communities**

Whilst community can be initiated and supported by academic staff, where the doctoral researchers become involved in running community events and initiatives communities can become more sustainable and be perceived as more successful. In my own context, within a Faculty of Arts Design and Media at Birmingham City University in the UK, I have been involved in community-building initiatives that are the co-creation of staff and doctoral researchers.

In 2014, I was involved in setting up a peer-mentoring scheme for doctoral researchers in Art and Design. Traditionally, doctoral students have looked to supervisors for guidance in their academic career, and more recently, this has been supplemented in most institutions by a separate career development programme focusing on the development of transferable and employability skills. However, we recognised that this provision was not explicitly supporting the complexity of multiple, potentially conflicting identities of doctoral researchers in Art and Design in which academic, industry and practitioner roles are often entwined. This complexity is one that can be troublesome to navigate, and comes in addition to the isolation and trepidations that are axiomatic of the doctoral experience regardless of discipline. Our peer-mentoring scheme was therefore designed to provide both psychosocial support in addition to the supervisory team, and also to the enhance the skills of mentees and mentors[[22]](#endnote-22).

From its outset the mentoring scheme included group social gatherings as well as individual partnerships. This emphasised doctoral research as a collective experience as well as individual endeavour, enabling informal spaces to discuss experience and identity. Feedback from our participants in the pilot year was overwhelmingly positive about the benefits they perceived from such community events. Each individual mentoring partnership was also initiated with the gift of a voucher for a local independent coffee shop:

We felt this would be an important part of the scheme: it could provide a neutral venue for the meetings and a means of easing the initial conversations. On a practical level, it would facilitate meetings between partners based at different campuses, as the coffee shop chosen was fairly equidistant from all sites.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Somewhat unsurprisingly, feedback from participants was also positive about the vouchers. Beyond the obvious gratitude for free coffee and cake, the participating doctoral researchers stated that it both made them feel valued by the institution and that it encouraged them to value the mentoring process itself. The impact of the psychosocial support encountered through peer-mentoring seemed to emerge on two interrelated levels: through an enhanced sense of wellbeing and also increased confidence for both mentors and mentees. The mentoring scheme was explicitly designed and led as a staff-student partnership between myself, another academic and a doctoral researcher in the final stages of submission and viva. That the peer-mentoring scheme was jointly led by a staff-student partnership in a visibly non-hierarchical manner was crucial in enabling discussion and facilitating engagement around issues of professional and creative identity, and in creating the sense of a broader research community in which doctoral researchers were legitimate participants. The success of the scheme in its pilot year, as evidenced in participant engagement and feedback, also signified for us the obvious benefits of facilitating sociality and community through the provision of catering.

An institutional restructure in 2014 brought art and design doctoral researchers into closer contact with those in music and performing arts, media and cultural studies, and english. It gave us the opportunity to expand and embed our doctoral community across more disciplines. The resulting *PGR Studio* was the co-creation by academic staff and doctoral researchers of a post-graduate research community as ‘a creative, collaborative and practice-based space of doctoral training’[[24]](#endnote-24). With all its activities designed and run in collaboration with doctoral researchers, *PGR Studio* aims to support all forms of research activity not just practice-based research. We were fortunate in establishing *PGR Studio* to be able to employ our former student partner, now with a newly-minted doctorate from her own Fine Art practice-based research, and we have employed some of our current doctoral researchers to help devise and facilitate the running of *PGR Studio’s* programme of events each year.

Whilst the studio can be an artists’ studio, a design studio, a recording studio, or a rehearsal studio, it can also be a writing studio for those undertaking more traditional forms of research in the arts and humanities. This is important for a Faculty in which there are doctoral researchers working in English Literature, Art and Design History, Cultural Studies and Musicology as well as practice-based researchers in Fine Art, Jewellery, Composition, Performance, Fashion Design, Architecture and Creative Writing. As Coordinator Dr Jacqueline Taylor explains:

The PhD as incorporating creative or artistic practice is not set up as separate to the “traditional” Ph.D. Rather, all research is approached as part of a spectrum in which there are different nuances of practice to avoid setting up a binary between research involving creative practice and that which does not and risk “othering” practice against more traditional research.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The emphasis is on enabling a supportive, social and creative community for all doctoral researchers, in which research is research regardless of its methodological or conceptual approach and where creative encompasses intellectual and conceptual leaps as much as it does professional artistic practice. This ambition has proved tricky to enact, and requires a fluid and flexible approach to doctoral provision.

*PGR Studio* still runs the peer-mentoring scheme with the associated social group gatherings, mentees have become mentors to newer doctoral researchers demonstrating both their perception of benefit and their willingness to perpetuate the community. Other regulars in the *PGR Studio* calendar are an annual spring research festival and doctoral researcher run summer conference. The annual conference explicitly encourages performances, participatory workshops and exhibitions rather than more traditional papers: ‘The conference rethinks the conventional conference format and provides a vital platform for students to experimentintellectually as well as in the dissemination and form of the research itself’[[26]](#endnote-26). In fact, this focus on the experimental and playful presentations has led to grumblings from other doctoral researchers who feel that practice-based research is being over privileged and who resent not being able to contribute more traditional conference papers in this annual doctoral research showcase. Arguably there are opportunities for doctoral researchers to present more traditional papers in the more discipline-specific seminar events run by research clusters elsewhere in the faculty, however the resentment suggests that concerns about legitimacy and hierarchies in research can affect those doing more traditional forms of research as much as practice-based doctoral researchers*.*

*PGR Studio* does facilitate more traditional training and professional developments events including for example workshops on the use of specific referencing software, *Viva Survival* workshops, writing retreats and *Demystifying Progression Assessment* workshops. The practice-based ethos is never far away, for example an *Introduction to Academic Conferences* workshop was run as a mini-conference, complete with awkward coffee breaks, a fly-in-fly-out keynote speaker and staff role-playing the “this is more of a comment than a question” audience contribution, all of which are then collectively discussed and critiqued. Provisioning the environment to be supportive and collegial is an important aspect of these workshops and events, and catering often is a critical element. A careers event on routes-out of doctoral study is run as a panel discussion and networking event as *Careers and Cocktails* with a tailored menu of cocktails and mocktails whose names prompt discussion of potential career routes.

Significant features of the community-building activities include a lively blog on the website and a small *Researcher Development Funding Awards Scheme*. The funding scheme supports doctoral researchers to organise and facilitate development initiatives that benefit the doctoral environment and community. In 2017, practice-based art doctoral researchers successfully bid to hold a midweek meditation and mindfulness workshopwhich included a group outing to the Kadampa Meditation Centre in central Birmingham, and then a group trip to a vegan café. As the organisers commented in a blog post:

Aside from the obvious benefits of improving well-being, stress management and problem-solving skills, sessions such as these give a focused reason for students to come together and share the experience of the activity, allowing for new academic and social connections to be formed, reaching across faculties and year groups.[[27]](#endnote-27)

This is reminiscent of both Prof Sade’s reflections on the challenges of establishing community within *Creative Lab* at QUT, and Prof Phillips’ analogy with knitting groups. Community cannot be forced and imposed. You need to give people a reason to come together and then as connections are made, networks form and community can grow. *PGR Studio* shows that there can be clear benefits in giving doctoral researchers the agency to develop their own community, and to find their own reasons to come together.

Similarly, Midlands4Cites (M4C) actively promotes community amongst all doctoral researchers in the arts and humanities, and an inclusive approach to practice-based research in a structure which enables the agency of doctoral researchers to identify and build the communities that they want to be part of. M4C is a consortium of eight universities across four cities in the midlands of England which form an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP).[[28]](#endnote-28) As the expanded successor to an earlier, Midlands3Cities (M3C) DTP, the combined cohort that M4C supports is several hundred students at any one time and the M4C has purposively encouraged the sense of an M4C cohort identity that bridges the institutions.

As well as the centrally-supported events such as an annual *Research Festival*, M4C’s Cohort Development Fund (CDF) was initiated to support training, development and research activities designed by award holders. The CDF explicitly promotes doctoral community as each CDF application has to come from award holders in at least two of the consortium universities, and applicants are encouraged to include doctoral researchers outside the DTP wherever possible. In the first year of the CDF’s availability, one of the funded-events that was proposed was about practice-based research. In June 2016 Nottingham Trent University hosted *Critical Creativity*, a one-day symposium which brought together writers, scholars and post-graduate students to explore the relationship between critical writing and creativity. As the relation between creative-practice and academic writing or exegesis has been a frequent concern in the discourses of practice-based research, it is perhaps not surprising that the practice-based students proposed this topic for one of the early community events. The symposium included papers by academics from within and beyond the M3C consortium, as well as a practical workshop on understanding and developing creative-critical writing techniques. A wine-reception and a showcase of readings in the evening encouraged networking and the sense of a practice-based research social community.

*Cracking the Established Order* (*CtEO*) was a two-day interdisciplinary conference held in June 2019 at De Montford University and is another CDF-funded event that demonstrates M4C’s support for practice-based research. However, as the title of the event reveals, it also demonstrates the on-going concern of practice-based doctoral researchers with the positioning and legitimacy of their research in the academy, seeing themselves and their research as other. The symposium aimed to draw out the provocative potential of practice-based research and focused on the different approaches to the methodology of practice-based research. Purposefully avoiding the conventional academic conference format, *CtEO* consisted of a variety of workshops, performances, discussion groups, screenings and installations. *CtEO* was successful as an event in terms of attendance and engagement and leading to a special issue of the *International Journal of Creative Media Research*. It has also generated longer term benefits for the practice-based research community within M4C, as an organising committee of doctoral researchers has been established to take *CtEO* forward as an annual event. This suggests that the practice-based researchers within M4C see the benefits for themselves as a community in coming together. It is something that they want to keep doing.

An important element of community for practice-based doctoral researchers is the psycho-social support that can be mobilised. The challenge for universities and those tasked with coordinating doctoral education is to find mechanisms that encourage supportive and collegial environments whilst allowing for agency. Both PGR Studio and the M4C consortium have mobilised relatively small funding opportunities to enable doctoral researchers to define and create their own community events.

**Community as a professional skill for practitioners**

Not all PhD programmes have the same structure. Whilst in the UK the emphasis is on individual study and research supported through supervision, in the USA and Canada PhD study involves assessed coursework, followed by comprehensive examinations and then a research project, with full-time doctorates taking on average four to six years. The coursework element of structured training means that the North American doctoral experience has a stronger cohort element, at least in the initial stages. In practice-based doctorates, this sense of cohort and community can serve multiple functions - pedagogic, social and professional. North American academic Prof Sarah Bay-Cheng explicitly links it to the skills and aptitudes needed for a career, whether in the arts, in academia, or combining the two: ‘I think the sense of cohort is really critical […] how do you work collaboratively? How do you understand professional networks?’[[29]](#endnote-29).

Motivated to close the gap between professional practice and scholarship, and working with a group of colleagues in the University at Buffalo, in 2010 Bay-Cheng founded an innovative PhD in Theatre and Performance for doctoral researchers in dance, performance studies and theatre practice. Keen to embed a community ethos as a professional skill, the coursework element coalesced around three credit-bearing seminars and a non-credit bearing weekly studio to encourage and support practice, all of which reinforce the sense of a doctoral researcher being part of a community. In the *Performance Research* seminar the emphasis was on the mechanics of research as an introduction to postgraduate and doctoral study and to the field. So, as well as methods training in archival research ‘it was also a place to from the very beginning talk through ideas about how theatre practice and historical research might get it together and what a practice-based research model is’. The *Performance Scholarship* seminars were focused on dissemination, on the publishing process and on understanding the different audiences for scholarship. The *Pro-Seminar* had an explicit employability agenda and aimed to prepare doctoral researchers for the job market with sessions on applications and CVs, job talks and workshops on organising a research agenda. For Bay-Cheng it was crucial the doctoral researchers had a collaborative space in which to explore and prepare for future careers:

My goal was to create a programme that was rigorous, sustainable, and equitable. You know, it should be about you and the quality of your work, but your success should not depend on whether or not you get a supervisor who is super involved, and, because there are lots of great supervisors who are super knowledgeable, right, but they haven’t been on the job market in 20, 30 years. Things are changing all the time. And so, the goal in that was that you wanted a space to be really attentive to what was happening in that particular moment.

Practice-based research was embedded throughout both the coursework and research stages of the PhD through the studio component, and this balance between professional skills and space for creative experimentation and failure is key to Bay-Cheng’s approach to doctoral education. It is a tricky balance to achieve however, particularly when the doctoral community brings together people from different specialisms and backgrounds, including experienced creative practitioners for whom failure may be conceptually and reputationally difficult:

I think one of my tendencies was to go as quickly as possible to the fun stuff that I really liked, and I think one of the things that I frequently underestimated, was a) how people understood where they were coming from, and b) how they understood where everybody else was coming from, and so one of the things that we had to kind of retool was language, and making expectations really explicit, particularly around studio […] In a group dynamic, I think it’s really important to - in the same way that you would working in a theatre company - there has to be some early investment in building the community and in building the group.

It is significant that Bay-Cheng draws on her professional arts background and identifies the commonalities between building community in academia and collaborating in theatre practice. As well as supporting doctoral researchers to make contributions to knowledge, doctoral education in practice-based research has to prepare researchers for collaboration and cooperation in their future careers, whether inside or outside universities, or the more common portfolio model of combining being an academic with a continuing professional creative practice.

Prof Sade from QUT in Australia echoed this view of community as a professional network and being part of a community as a professional skill for academics. He gave the example of the urban informatices research group in the QUT Design Lab who have established “a community of alumni around the world that know each other, when they’re anywhere they visit”. His view is that PhD students “need to have a network, and build a network, if they are going to be successful afterwards.[[30]](#endnote-30) For practice-based doctoral researchers, these professional networks are likely to be both within and beyond academia, in communities that are disciplinary, cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary.

There are inevitably professional research skills as researchers that practice-based doctoral researchers need to acquire and develop, whether about particular methods, ethical practices or the various forms that academic writing and dissemination can take. Supporting skills development through structured training can be a collaborative activity and engender community. Being a productive member of any community is a skilled activity, involving communication, interpersonal and professional skills. Skills which need to be developed and supported as part of research activity. These are also skills that are valued outside of the higher education and research careers. It is important however to recognise the current debates around doctoral graduates’ employability and preparation for routes out of study may not have such resonance in creative subjects where the boundaries between academic and professional employment are not so absolute. Practice-based researchers need to be part of multiple communities as a professional activity.

**Concluding thoughts: Building community as rebuilding the academy?**

My intention here in reflecting on different experiences and initiatives in doctoral education was to offer another lens to understanding practice-based research more broadly and the conditions under which it thrives. There are clearly significant benefits to building and supporting community amongst practice-based doctoral researchers. Community can provide the sense of belonging supportive of doctoral becoming, enabling productive conversations that aid the navigation of methodological, epistemological and ontological threshold crossing. It is important to create community-building events and spaces for conversations to explore issues, rather than training to provide answers and solutions. Community can enable safe spaces to vent as well as to share experiences. Feeling part of a community can provide reassurance as well as opportunities to test out ideas and learn from others.

It is also evident that building and supporting community for and amongst practice-based doctoral researchers is not without its challenges. The interviewees have honestly reflected upon occasions and initiatives which have floundered. Mixing disciplines and integrating practice-based researchers with other researchers can be challenging as cultures, languages and understanding may not be shared and may need to be negotiated. Community and individual anxieties around the legitimacy of practice-based research surfaced in all the interviews that I conducted, and in my own lived experience at my own institution. Community activities and conversations within communities can be a significant way to raise the visibility of practice-based research within institutions and to build confidence in its legitimacy. In my view however we need to leave such epistemological and methodological questions open, rather than presenting restrictive solutions. Echoing Søren Kjørup[[31]](#endnote-31) we need to plead for plurality in how our practice-based doctoral communities recognise and value research, focusing on questions of quality, significance and appropriateness that build confidence rather than increasing anxieties or suggesting hierarchies.

Encouraging community membership as a cooperative endeavour in practice-based doctoral education benefits the individual doctoral researchers, but also has potential to benefit supervisors and other academic staff and to challenge institutions. Many of the benefits described and observed in the interviews would be as valuable for academic researchers as they are for doctoral researchers. All academics benefit if they can be part of truly collegial, creative and intellectually challenging research communities alongside doctoral researchers. Academia may increasingly be structured as competitive and hierarchical; however, those tendencies do not have to be reinforced and instilling a cooperative and collaborative mentality in the doctoral researchers as our peers can benefit creative interdisciplinarity and the future of the academy itself.

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1. Whilst this chapter focuses on critical interrogation of different lived experiences of supporting practice-based doctoral communities, in the PhD section of this volume I provide some more pragmatic ideas for initiatives and considerations that can be applied in your context, please see *Community-building for Practice-based Doctoral Researchers: Mapping Key Dimensions for Creating Flexible Frameworks*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ( Mantai 2019, 368). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. (Frick 2011, 127) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. (Collinson 2005; Hockey 2008; Wisker and Robinson 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. (Collinson 2005, 718) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. (Wisker & Robinson 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. (Newbury 2010, 377) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This and other quotations are taken from the author’s email correspondence with Emeritus Prof Janis Jeffries, December 2019 – January 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This and other quotations are taken from the author’s email correspondence with Dr William Goodin January – February 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a fuller discussion and reflection on *This Is Not A Seminar*, its pedagogic and philosophical underpinning and their positions as facilitators, practice-led researchers and ethnographer-participants see:

    Lyndall Adams, Christopher Kueh, Renee Newman-Storen & John Ryan (2015) ‘This is Not an Article: a reflection on Creative Research Dialogues’ (This is Not a Seminar), *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47:12, 1330-1347. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. (Adams et al 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (Adams et al 2015, 1336) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. (Adams et al 2015,1334) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. (Adams et al 2015, 1341) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. (Adams et al 2015, 1344) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The South West Creative Technology Network is a £6.5 million project to expand the use of creative technologies across the south west of England, led by the University of the West of England and funded through Research England’s Connecting Capabilities Fund. The University of Plymouth are partners alongside Bath Spa University, Falmouth University, and industry partners Watershed in Bristol, and Kaleider in Exeter. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This and other quotations are taken from the author’s interview with Prof Mike Phillips, 20 December 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. (Design Research website 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. (QUT Design Lab, 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This and other quotations are taken from the author’s interview with Prof Gavin Sade, 16 January 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. (QUT Creative Lab 2017, 12) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. (Boultwood et al. 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. (Boultwood et al 2015, 16) [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. (PGR Studio, 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. (Taylor 2019, 205) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. (Taylor 2019, 213) [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. (Bailey & Walden 2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. The Midlands4Cities Arts and Humanities Research Council funded Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) comprises: the University of Birmingham and Birmingham City University; Coventry University and the University of Warwick (both in Coventry); De Montford University and the University of Leicester (both in Leicester); and Nottingham Trent University and the University of Nottingham. Midlands4Cities is an expansion of the earlier Midlands3Cities (M3C) Doctoral Training Partnership (2014-2019) which had not included the two universities in Coventry. M3C funded 439 doctoral awards between 2014 and 2018, and M4C intends to make approximately 460 awards for PhD study between 2019 and 2024 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. This and other quotations are taken from the author’s interview with Prof Sarah Bay-Cheng, 27 January 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. As with the earlier quotations from Prof Sade, this quotation is taken from the author’s interview with Prof Sade on 16 January 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. (Kjørup 2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-31)