

When Is a Boundary Not a Boundary? Exploring the Tensions and Potentialities of Creative Practice in Doctoral Research in Art and Design Education

Sian Vaughan 

Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

Abstract

Alongside their continuing growth in the popularity, both practice research in creative disciplines and arts-based methods in research in the social sciences have histories now spanning several decades. In doctoral education, art and design education research sits within and across two distinct fields – the art and design doctorate and the education doctorate – each field with their own disciplinary traditions and conventions and expectations of doctorateness. For postgraduate researchers and supervisors alike, this brings challenges and barriers that are often perceived as hierarchical and othering. Reflecting on my attempts to locate in an existing global dataset those art and design education doctorates in which practice research and/or creative methods feature, I expose the complexities of the terrain. This paper reveals tensions and acknowledges where boundaries between disciplinary approaches may be artificial, porous or invisible to those interloping. It is imperative that postgraduate researchers and their supervisors acknowledge the complexity, slipperiness, and fluidity of distinctions between practice research in art and design, and creative methods in education research. I argue for the need for confidence in holding space for this uncertainty whilst seeing lineages of precedence that open up possibilities for future research.

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Keywords

a/r/tography, arts-based methods, creative methods, doctorate, practice research, thesis

Introduction

Art and design education research at doctoral level sits within and across two distinct fields and we might expect it to be a fertile ground for crosspollination and methodological innovation, as both practice research in creative disciplines and arts-based research methods in the social sciences now have histories now spanning several decades. However, the fields of art and design and of education have separate disciplinary traditions and conventions (Parry 1998; Trowler *et al.* 2014) and expectations of doctorateness (Denicolo *et al.* 2020) resulting in challenges and perceived barriers. Nowhere are these more apparent than in the decisions and discussions around the format of a doctoral submission and its examination, where expectations around methods and articulation manifest and are assessed. Such disciplinary challenges around creative practice are often perceived as hierarchical and othering by postgraduate researchers and their supervisors, and at the same time can frustrate examiners.

Many of the celebrated alternative thesis submission formats in recent years have arisen from doctoral work that blurs disciplinary boundaries and demonstrates methodological innovation. For example, Sousanis used a comic book format for his Doctorate in Education thesis *Unflattening: A Visual-Verbal Inquiry into Learning in Many Dimensions* at Columbia University in 2014, subsequently published to critical acclaim (2015). Yet, misrecognition and tensions around difference are remain commonly experienced by postgraduate researchers. Slippery distinctions hover between contemporary art practice which may include participatory, socially engaged, or curatorial approaches and the use of creative methods by researchers who may or may not have art backgrounds. Further complications exist in the nuances between design and craft practice, which may also be participatory, speculative and collaborative, and the use of creative methods to engage participants and the take-up of design-thinking as participatory co-design and ideation. I posit that art and design educational research at doctoral level is particularly complex in this context, as postgraduate researchers (PGRs) may be supported through education departments, by art and design schools, or have supervision from both disciplinary contexts.

My experience as an academic based in art and design in the United Kingdom and as a researcher into doctoral education provides much of the impetus for this article. As an experienced supervisor of art and design doctorates, I have also examined art and design PhDs, education PhDs and EdD professional doctorates. My academic career has included leading a large PhD programme in art and design, a management role in an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded Doctoral Training Partnership and establishing a university-wide doctoral supervisor development programme. In previous research, I explored regulatory responses to creative practice as evident in doctoral regulations in the UK, revealing the persistence of normative assumptions around academic texts and mismatches between procedural requirements and the diversity of contemporary forms of knowledge articulation (Vaughan 2021). As a researcher, I participate in the disciplinary communities both of art and design and of education through collaborative

projects, conferences and publishing. To add further complexity to my own positionality, whilst I have worked in an art school for nearly 25 years, my own academic training was in history and then art history. I may work amongst professional artists and creative practitioners, but I am myself not a practitioner or artist-researcher.

This means that I have witnessed and participated in numerous conversations around creative and artistic practice in research where the nuances of disciplinary understanding have been revealed, contested, problematic and/or fruitfully productive. The following are fictionalised versions of common issues encountered and shared across these conversations:

- The PGR (and their supervisors) uncertain of how to 'package' the doctoral research for examination and unaware of precedents and what is permissible under regulations;
- The examiner frustrated when confronted with creative work presented as a knowledge contribution without the PGR acknowledging precedents in art and design practice research;
- The examiner disappointed in encountering qualitative insights gained through arts-based methods whereby the creative practice itself is relegated to an appendix or as illustrative rather than generative and articulating knowledge in its own right;

This article sets out not to resolve resulting tensions, but to shed light on them and in doing so acknowledge where boundaries may be artificial, porous or invisible to those interloping. Research into doctoral viva examination is limited (Houston & Lunt 2024, 5) as it remains a private and confidential space, meaning that discussing and revealing what happens is fraught with ethical concerns and at the level of individual examples full anonymisation may not be possible. Instead, I focus here on how doctoral thesis abstracts reveal or otherwise the nature of creative practice in research into art and design education, as the abstract is often how an examiner is solicited and primed, as well as how PGRs try to identify precedents for packaging their own doctoral study. Reflecting on my attempts to locate examples of art and design education doctorates in which practice research and/or creative methods feature reveals the complexities of the terrain.

Problems of naming and context

Whilst not always specific to art and design educational research, across the literature on doctoral education and arts-based methods and practice research two groups of issues are evident that chime with the list of tensions above I have identified through experience. Firstly, questions around precedence and acceptance, secondly, and closely allied are the issues of disciplinary expectations.

Both art-based research and practice research have longer histories than current postgraduate researchers often realise, which if known could provide them with reassurance. In North America, Elliot Eisner is credited as one, if not the, first to advocate for arts-based research in educational research back in the 1970s. Since then, arts-based research and arts-based methods as qualitative approaches have broadened across disciplines in the social sciences and beyond, spawning handbooks to guide the researcher (Kara 2015; Leavy 2018) and embracing new terminologies such as creative methods, research poetry and photovoice. In the UK, since at least the 1980s a second strand of practice research can be identified in which artistic or design practice becomes methodology and articulation of the

research and no longer just the object of research. For example, in my own institution a PhD was awarded in 1993 to Tom Gilhespy for a doctoral project entitled *A theoretical appraisal and artistic response to Soviet monumental sculpture* which included Gilhespy's own sculptural practice, documented now only through an appendix of 35 mm slides in the bound volume (1993 University of Central England).

Speaking some 30 years after his initial efforts to encourage arts-based research in education, Eisner had noted that:

It is not uncommon for some university faculty to feel a sense of estrangement, or at least loneliness, with respect to arts-based research. Very often their colleagues know nothing of its features, but, nevertheless, may be suspicious of its scholarly merits. (2006, 17)

This demonstrates that a lack of acceptance and understanding of arts-based research was perceived decades later, even by one of its pioneers. Similarly, Bredies' comment that she 'had a constant feeling of risk and uncertainty due to the lack of role models' (2013, 47) when doing a design research PhD in 2007 resonates with the contemporary concerns of PGRs. In 2017, Hawkins and Wilson could confidently proclaim that 'practice-led research in art and design has now come of age and can take its place alongside other forms of research at the academic high table' (2017, 82) as they drew out commonalities between paradigms in different disciplines at doctoral level. Yet even they acknowledged that 'nevertheless, the journey has at times felt like one undertaken through a series of 'special pleadings' – by arguing that practice-led research in the arts was in some way different, and therefore deserved special alternative modes of evaluation and assessment' (2017, 82). There seems to a lingering sense of this terrain as different and newly navigated.

Whilst it is not the place here to narrate the variety and history of the different terms in use surrounding creative practice and arts-based methods in research, it is important to note that the terminology is numerous and that this can be problematic. This terrain also uses words that have multiple meanings. Whilst art and design is generally considered as one of the creative disciplines alongside the performing and literary arts, we must acknowledge that these disciplines cannot uniquely or exclusively claim creativity, other disciplines also encompass creativity in terms of innovation, originality and imagination. Similarly, the word practice has multiple meanings. In art and design, we use practice to indicate artistic or creative practice, the making and doing of art and design. Yet, the word practice is also used to indicate professional activity more broadly, and thus practitioner researcher and practice-based research can indicate research focused on professional activity in many disciplines, including healthcare and education (Fox *et al.* 2007).

The terminology around what I have been describing as practice research in art and design is complicated. Multiple terms are in use including practice-based research (Candy & Edmonds 2018), practice-led research (Smith & Dean 2009), practice as research (Barrett & Bolt 2007; Nelson 2013), design research (Vaughan 2017) and research-through-design (Godin & Zahedi 2014). On the European continent the preferred term is artistic research (Wilson & van Ruiten 2014), whereas from Canada research creation (Loveless 2020) has gained

traction. Each neologism has its own nuances of meaning. Batty and Zalipour's recent article provides a useful framing and summary of the landscape of terminology from the perspective of media/screen practice, whilst arguing for a new creative knowledges enabling framework (2024) that differentiates practice-enabled knowledge from research-enabled practice. Perhaps, that there is continuing multiplicity rather than consensus speaks to the inherent difficulties of articulating the specificities of creative practice as an alternative paradigm for research within higher education when there are so many different forms of creative practice itself. Extending Hope's metaphor of the colour-wheel (2016) is helpful here, reflecting the potentially myriad spectrum of complementary, contrasting, and inter-connected ways in which different conceptions of practice and research can exist in research in art and design undertaken by creative practitioners.

Similarly in qualitative educational and social science research several terms are in use to capture and describe how creative practice sits within the research approach including art-based research (Eisner 2006), arts-based research (Leavy 2018), visual methods (Banks 2001), visual research (Moss & Pini 2016) and creative methods (Kara 2015). Here too, a well-established and burgeoning methods literature aims to support researchers in deploying and analysing creative practice within their research.

In relation to art and design educational research, one term in particular requires further consideration which is a/r/tography. As its progenitors explained:

The name itself exemplifies these features by setting art and graphy, and the identities of artist, researcher and teacher (a/r/t), in contiguous relations ... By emphasizing practice, a shift occurs from questioning *who* an artist, researcher, or educator might be or *what* art, research or education is, to *when* is a person an artist, researcher or educator and *when* is an experience art, research or education. (Irwin et al. 2006, 70)

The naming of a/r/tography recognises the entangled identities and practices of those who maybe researching whilst also being educators and artists. Even here though, as my conversations have anecdotally evidenced, there are those for whom the term sits uncomfortably, with design professionals who feel excluded, and with some artists who prefer to identify as artist-researchers having inseparable identities rather than the when/or they interpret a/r/tographer as indicating. In my own work I have tended to use the umbrella term practice research when differentiating from arts-based methods in qualitative research. Although that is not without its own compromises and potential for misunderstanding as boundaries between the two are neither static nor always easily delineated. So, whilst such research is not without history or precedent, the multiplicity of contested terms for research involving creative practice speaks to continuing concerns around legitimacy as well as definition.

The second set of concerns that the literature reveals relate to this complexity and are around disciplinary tensions between arts-based methods as qualitative methods in education and practice research in art and design. Art and design education research sits at the crux of these two disciplinary positions. In many ways, this results in a particularly nuanced set of the concerns that are acknowledged in the wider literature on doctoral education. In their examination of supervisor development and cross-disciplinary supervision experiences, Wisker and Claesson

argue that tensions ‘emerge in the design, actioning, and completion of the research project and in the shape and expression of the thesis’ and that these are ‘inflected by the different disciplinary cultures in which supervisors and students locate research’ (Wisker & Claesson 2013, 21). Kiley’s work indicates how such disciplinary expectations can complicate the doctoral examination process where it is commonly acknowledged that there should be ‘a fit between the topic and methodology of the dissertation and the expertise and methodological proclivities of the examiner’ (2009, 894). Her interviews with supervisors demonstrated that:

The issue of ‘fit’ becomes more problematic with cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary dissertations ... as their experience suggested that each of the examiners will address the dissertation from their own disciplinary perspective and expect it to address all the issues of that disciplinary approach. (2009, 894)

In an editorial to an earlier special issue of this journal on Visual Art-Based Educational Research, Adams noted that it ‘opens up the idea of research in ways that do not readily conform to conventional notions’ (2019, 558). Although Adams also acknowledged that ‘most arts-based researchers in education find themselves engaging with more orthodox social science methodologies’ (2019, 558). This engagement across disciplinary boundaries is fraught with challenges.

In recently speculating on the potentialities of a practice-led approach to open educational practice research in Australian higher education, Hamilton and Hansen warn against becoming trapped in a theory-practice divide with the result that the artist as ‘practice-led researcher may become too reactive and define their research only by its direct opposition to other, more traditional, research methods’ (2024, 11). Such oppositional positioning, or rather hierarchical views across disciplinary positions are frequent refrains in the literature. Mason expressed concerns:

... about the confusion surrounding definitions and methods of artist-led research ... [and] concern about the dominance of a single language in art education – belonging to the fine art world – and the manner in which some artist-led studies misinterpret traditional social science methodologies. (2008, 288)

Conversely, in Piirto’s provocatively named article *Writing inferior poems as qualitative research* (2002) she reports:

At an Arts-Based Educational Research conference, the question of quality was asked over and over again ... To observe heartfelt efforts by researchers with little or no background in the art being demonstrated was sometimes painful, especially to those who worked in, were trained in, knew, and loved the art being demonstrated. (2002, 443)

It seems that the concerns run both ways across the disciplinary boundaries. Such complexities inflect art and design education research at doctoral level and can be read into the three scenarios I outlined drawn from conversations with colleagues. The impetus for this article arose from questioning if the issues I recognise from

my experience and conversations with colleagues are mirrored in the literature, why do such experiences and concerns persist. Aiming to understand the position and prevalence of practice research and arts-based methods in doctoral research into art and design education, I looked for existing datasets that might evidence trends and provide examples.

Attempting to map the extent of practice in the field

I had originally intended to turn to the British Libraries' EThOS online repository of all doctoral theses in the UK to investigate the extent and nature of art and design education research engaging with arts-based methods or practice research in the national context in which I work. However, the EThOS service has been offline since a severe cyber-attack on the British Library in 2023. So instead, I turned to ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (PQDT Global, 2024) as an available dataset. PQDT is an online searchable database of over 5.5 million masters' dissertations and doctoral theses from over 4100 institutions and more than 60 countries. PQDT Global is however a commercial service provider, and whilst global in remit still retains something of a bias through weight of numbers to North American institutions. Not all UK institutions, nor doctoral graduates, upload their doctoral theses.

My search strategy focused on text searches of doctoral thesis abstracts as these are the mechanism by which researchers and PGRs decide on relevance to their own work and are often the information sent when soliciting examiners. I restricted my focus to the last 10 years (2015–2024) to try to establish a manageable dataset and view of more recent research approaches. I ran several searches using keywords for the sub-fields of art and design education including architecture, product design, textiles, fashion and craft as well as art and design (1). I then combined these searches into a single saved search which returned 533 results. I ran a separate search of abstracts for the terms 'photography' and 'education', which returned 137 results so that I could conduct a separate initial analysis of relevance (2). Exporting the data to spreadsheet format, I ordered it by author to eliminate duplicate records before analysis.

First, I read each abstract to determine if the research was actually about art and design education. As Mason found in conducting systematic reviews of literature, the terminology of art and design education can prove problematic: 'search terms are notoriously difficult to define. We used the term "art" as a proper noun to denote a subject but ... it most often appeared as part of an adjectival clause' (2008, 284). Indeed, many of my results were not relevant instead being about: the use of arts-based methods in other disciplines; 'learning design' in educational rather than art and design terms; a more poetic 'art of' phrasing regardless of discipline; or with a rather generic 'this will be of interest to education' type statement of significance. The separate search I conducted around photography and education returned numerous mentions of photo-elicitation methods, photographs as ethnographic field record, or archival photographs as source material, resulting in the exclusion of 110 of the 137 dissertations as not relevant to art and design education. Some other abstracts were excluded due to the original language not being an available option for PQDT Global's in-built translation (e.g. Serbian, Hungarian, Ukrainian), or where the translation provided was not sufficiently comprehensible.

From an initial 671 results across the two search strings,^{1,2} my final sample was 444 doctoral thesis abstracts of research into art and design education. This final sample of was predominantly of English-language theses (87%), but also included almost 10% in Turkish and a small number in Portuguese, Spanish, German, Arabic, Chinese or Hebrew. It included doctoral theses from over 20 countries.³ The relatively small number of examples from European countries was noticeable, as was the fact that there was a sole entry from Australia. Even noting the unevenness of geographic coverage, it was clear that art and design education research is something of a niche area at doctoral level.

Troubling categories and finding examples

I undertook a close reading and content analysis of the 444 abstracts for doctoral theses in art and design education research to attempt to identify the extent of the use of arts-based methods and practice research. As might be expected, there was a preponderance of qualitative and more historical work, with some quantitative and mixed methods, however, as Table 1 indicates, I did identify 96 (or 22%) of the doctoral theses that *might* have deployed arts-based or practice research approaches.

It was evident that not all PGRs name their methodology as such in the abstract, some giving more descriptive accounts rather than using specific terminology. Where needed and possible, I examined the full text of the thesis to further understand the nature of the research. However, as not all were available as full text on PQDT Global nor could be tracked down on institutional repositories, I was unable to determine precisely how many fell either side of divides between more standard pedagogic experiment and/or ethnographic qualitative research, and arts-based methods in qualitative research. This analysis therefore involved a degree of interpretation on my part as to whether arts-based methods or practice research were used in the research. I could only be confident that this was the case for 57, roughly 13 percent or an eighth of the art and design educational doctoral theses in my sample.

TABLE 1 Initial key findings from search of ProQuest database for doctoral dissertations dating between 2015 and 2024

Key findings	Doctorates (n)
Art and design education doctorates identified	444
Identified as potentially arts-based or practice research	96
Confirmed as arts-based or practice research	57
Abstract included the term 'arts-based'	22
Abstract included the term 'a/r/tography'	5
Abstract included the term 'practice-based'	3
Abstract included the term 'participatory design methods'	2
Abstract included the term 'practice-led'	1
Abstract included the term 'research-creation'	1

TABLE 2 Educational settings where arts-based or practice research was situated

Educational settings for arts-based or practice research	Doctorates (n)
Early years/primary/elementary education	7
Secondary education/high school	6
Higher education	21
Professional development of teachers	10
Outside formal spaces of education	5
Multiple educational settings	1
Educational setting not identified	7

As Table 2 shows, I did find examples of arts-based research across all educational settings as well as in research on teacher professional development and learning outside formal spaces of education.

Interestingly, the majority of those engaging arts-based methods or practice research were researching either higher education (21 of 57) or teacher's professional development (10 of the 57).

A key difficulty in identifying arts-based methods was in trying to distinguish between qualitative research using ethnographic approaches to existing creative activity in education and arts activity designed or instigated specifically as part of the research. For example, Harvey described their PhD "A Human-Centered Design Approach to Fashion Design Education" (2018, University of Johannesburg, South Africa) as design-based research, which from the title might be presumed to be fashion design. However, as described design-based research meant 'a systematic study that aims at the design, development and evaluation of an educational intervention intended to improve educational practice' (2018, iv). The data collection and analysis matrix also revealed just traditional qualitative methods of interviews, participant questionnaires and field observations. In contrast Thomas' doctorate *Towards "After-Modern" Design: A Practice-Based Inquiry* (2018, Lancaster University, UK) did include her own design practice in that she created a portfolio of designed objects called 'inquiring objects' as experimental prototypes. She also ran workshops sharing her objects and process which:

brings a 'second voice' to this research by eliciting feedback from design students in higher education design about the concept of 'after-modern' design and engaging undergraduate students in the process of creating 'inquiring objects'. (2018, 130)

So, her doctoral research involves integrating both practice research as a designer and arts-based methods.

Attempting to identify boundaries between categories is problematic. Hayianis' PhD *How can painting operate as a hermeneutic practice in secondary level art and design education?* (2017, University College London, UK) demonstrates movement across categories during his study. He reflects on how he took a more

practice-based approach in his first year which 'required me to examine my assumptions and working habits as a painter' (Hayiannis 2017, 217) through studio practice and led to an exhibition for his upgrade assessment. He then states:

I have not subsequently followed such a practice-based path in the realisation of the present project, I acknowledge here the degree to which my thinking with regard to painting and teaching painting has been informed by the work that I made over my first year of research. (2017, 218, 219)

Rather than continuing researching via his personal artistic practice, he carried out two painting projects with groups of year 9 and 10 pupils (ages 13–15) at the Saatchi Gallery in London. However, in describing the research methods used in these participatory projects, he states that they 'correspond with those often adopted in action research and case study research practice (interview; collecting and analyzing students' work; note-taking)' (2017, 25) rather than naming the use of arts-based methods. Thus, whilst he as the PGR is aligning his doctoral research with more traditional qualitative methods, it can be seen as encompassing separate phases of practice research (in the art school individual practice sense) and arts-based research methods. It could also be interpreted as an example of a/r/togographical research although he does not use that term to self-describe his project.

Other examples further illustrate of the complexities of categorisation around art and design education and arts-based or practice research. Lightfoot's PhD *On the edge of their seats: a human-centred approach to primary school chair design* (2016, University of Brighton, UK) definitely uses a practice research methodology, as she creates a design concept for school chairs informed by a 'multi-stakeholder and participatory approach ... to explore furniture design issues within the real world setting of a working classroom' (Lightfoot 2016, ii). Arguably however, whilst she includes examination of how primary pupils (ages 4–11) sit for arts activities such as drawing and painting, this forms part of a broader study in which art and design practice research is applied to education, rather than being research focused specifically on art and design education. Davis-Soylu's PhD *Touching an enigma: A memoir of making meaning through art*, (2016, Indiana University, USA) takes a decidedly a/r/togographical approach to investigate 'how Amazon sculptures in public parks are received and experienced by learners' (2016, vii). Here it is her concept of learners that is complex, she describes the public participants she interviews and observes as free-choice learners in an experience outside of formal education, in the sculpture parks that she describes as classrooms (2016, 9). A trained teacher, Davis-Soylu is working in a museum education department whilst undertaking her doctoral study. Her research could be seen as about public art in an art historical or museological frame, rather than as art and design education research. However, she takes an explicit a/r/togographical approach in which she positions her thesis purposefully to trouble such categorisation: 'The Otherness of the work is a conscientious positioning against dominant reductive perspectives that typically provide guidelines for minimizing, categorizing, naming, and organizing data and findings' (2016, 2). This extends to writing and structuring her thesis as creative non-fiction and:

through what I call a/r/tography provocations at the beginning of each chapter. The a/r/tography provocations are sensory invitations that I offer to engage the body, mind, and spirit of the reader. Specifically, at the beginning

of each chapter, I include three provocations: 1) Track, an audio recording of music (using the artist's subjectivity), 2) Tension, a statement of tensions to consider about the presented text (using the researcher's subjectivity), and 3) Object, a description of suggested objects or materials for sensory exploration of the topic (using the teacher's subjectivity). (2016, 5)

The entry on the PQDT Global includes both a full-text PDF of her written thesis and MP3 music files which can be downloaded and played. Somewhat frustratingly, although Davis-Soylu views the tracks as integral to her thesis and engagement with her research, on the database these are listed as 'supplemental files'.

Few of the PGRs in my sample appeared to have embraced alternative formats of submission or to explicitly comment on other modes of research communication in their abstracts such as exhibitions or performances. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions regarding examination processes and if examiners encountered physical artefacts and artworks as well as the written texts. Sutton describes her PhD *An Exploration into Value in Relation to the Subject and Teachers of Art and Design in Secondary Education in England* (2021, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK) as using a/r/tographical approaches. Her methods included an art exhibition held in a public gallery developed through a collaborative photo-voice challenge in which she was also a participant. Images of the exhibition are included as illustrations in her written text, but there is no indication as to whether examiners encountered it or the physical works. Kulinski describes her PhD *The Matter of Artmaking and Teaching: Exploring Preservice Art Teachers' Perceptions and Uses of Matter in Artmaking, Reflection, and Curriculum-Making* (2023, Syracuse University, USA) from the outset as 'arts-based inquiry (which ultimately takes the form of a visual journal in and of itself)' (2023, i). Her thesis includes illustrations of her annotated sketches visually representing and analysing the works of other international contemporary artists to provide context for her research. There are also photographic illustrations of artworks and journal pages by her and by her participants, as well as her thesis text including found poetry she created as part of her findings. Yet, still her thesis follows a traditional five-chapter structure of introduction, literature review, methods, findings then discussion and recommendations.

Smith-Wyatt's PhD *Landscape Orientation* (2020, Florida State University, USA) was the most experimental thesis format in my sample. She states:

This artistic practice based inquiry, modelled after Chinese cases, is grounded in Taoist philosophy, personal story, and commentary. It is about the practice of contemplative art making as research as/in resilience told through the experiences of students in a doctoral/graduate art education program.

(Smith-Wyatt 2020, vi)

Informed by discussions with other doctoral students, her thesis is written as a very personal reflective narrative interwoven with, and through, poetry and photographic images. The photographs depict nature, show an advanced photographic practice, and document the breadth of her personal artistic practice: 'the story is told through poetry, contemplative photography, ink, watercolor, and egg tempera painting, as well as quilting, rug hooking, and needlepoint' (2020, vi). The document itself is presented in landscape format, rather than the traditional portrait

alignment to highlight its difference to standard thesis forms and normative expectations challenged throughout her research as privileging hegemonic white western perspectives. It is perhaps not surprising that it in was research into the experiences of art and design education doctoral study that I found the most innovative and experimental form of arts-based and practice research.

Learning from the search for practice – some conclusions

A thesis being included in the PQDT Global database indicates a successful outcome to doctoral study and consensus by examiners. As such, this end product of the doctoral journey is unlikely to reveal explicitly any of the issues for arts-based and practice research in art and design education that I identified at the start of this article – concerns around thesis format and packaging, around what might be termed misrepresentation, misrecognition and misunderstanding across disciplines in examination. Ethical considerations and expectations of confidentiality make it hard to do more than generalise around my own viva experiences. A study of thesis abstracts does, however, approach these issues obliquely, as the thesis abstract is how often examiners are introduced to the research during negotiations around the make-up of an examination team. Within repositories and libraries, the thesis abstract also functions to introduce other PGRs to models of practice and presentation potentially pertinent to their own developing work.

As O'Donoghue states, it is vital to consider 'who is in a position to access the outcomes of research inquiries conducted in and through art in ways that are meaningful and generative?' (O'Donoghue 2009, 365). My examples show how PGRs might position their research in ways that could be misrecognised by others, and that practice is particularly slippery in how it might sit across or between arts-based method, individual creative activity, and more traditional qualitative inquiry. Issues of naming are pertinent, as the terms used help or hinder PGRs and their supervisors in identifying precedents and the breadth of approaches to practice in art and design education research, as well as indicating to potential examiners the terrain they might expect the research to be situated in.

As the investigation of theses abstracts included in a global dataset has shown, the boundaries between art-based methods, practice research, action research and ethnographic research in art and design education at doctoral level are complex, and this is reflected in the multiple descriptions and terms used. It is also apparent that despite now having decades of history of practice research and arts-based methods, these more creative research methodologies have not perhaps penetrated art and design education research at doctoral level as much as we might expect. Whilst the chosen dataset does have limitations, specifically around the gaps in geographic coverage, it is still significant that my sample included a relatively small proportion of doctoral research using arts-based methods, and fewer still challenging the conventions of text-based thesis presentation.

As art and design education research sits across two disciplines, it is imperative that disciplinary expectations are understood so that they may be negotiated and challenged creatively. In a territory that I thought I knew well, engagement with these abstracts has revealed surprising details of the terrain. Identifying the methods of art and design in art and design educational research at doctoral level has proven to be particularly complex and challenging. The variety in terminology

deployed and in how PGRs position their research has emphasised where boundaries between methods and approaches may be artificial, porous, or slippery. Whilst standardisation in categorisation as such is perhaps not needed, this does speak to how research is discoverable by others and the framing and expectations that they will bring to bear on their encounter with it.

There are examples of a seam of rich and innovative approaches to researching art and design education that can be uncovered with some effort. The question becomes how to reduce the effort that locating these examples entails, so that more confidence can be generated amongst art and design education PGRs and their supervisors through seeing lineages of precedence. To do so, I argue that it is imperative that postgraduate researchers, their supervisors, and all involved in art and design education research acknowledge the complexity, slipperiness and fluidity of distinctions around creative practice in art and design education research. This is not merely a pragmatic response to decades of contested terminologies; arguably it is part of the rigour required in research and situating our work within its field(s). Recognising the complexities of the terrain of art and design education research should not be envisaged as constraining, but instead as productive in its potentialities. Creatively navigating the tensions and fluidity of disciplinary and methodological expectations in art and design education research can be productive and rigorous. We need the confidence to hold space for this uncertainty and messiness, rather than trying to tidy it up. Revealing the complexity through multiple examples of difference can enable doctoral research to challenge, adapt and respond in ways that enrich understanding of art and design education at all levels and in all contexts.

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Sian Vaughan is Associate Professor in Research Practice at Birmingham City University (UK) where she leads RAAD, the centre for Research in Art, Architecture and Design. Her research interests sit within the fields of art and design and doctoral education, unified through a focus on creative research practices. She explores artistic practices with archives, history and institutions with a particular focus on creative research methods as knowledge generation. Her educational research is focused on the practices and pedagogies of doctoral education and particularly in how these are responding to creative practice in research.

Endnotes

1. The main PDTG search string was – (abstract(“art and design”) AND abstract(“education”)) OR abstract(“architectural education”) OR abstract(“design technology education”) OR abstract(“product design education”) OR abstract(“architecture education”) OR abstract(“textiles education”) OR abstract(“fashion education”) OR abstract(“craft education”) OR abstract(“design education”) OR abstract(“art and design education”) OR abstract(“art education”).
2. The second PDTG search string was – abstract(photography) AND abstract(education).
3. List of countries – UK, USA, Canada, Sweden, Serbia, Israel, Ireland, Hungary,

Hong Kong, Germany, Turkey, Portugal,
South Africa, Malaysia, Australia,

Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic,
India, Netherlands, Taiwan, Ukraine.

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