

Ways of Knowing: PhDs with creative practice

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Question: I've heard that you can do a PhD with creative practice, where performance or maybe an art show might be a big part of the research. This excites me as it may open up avenues for Māori dance and art. Are there guidelines for how you would frame your performance expertise, which I see as essentially non-academic, within a research context? What are the potential pitfalls?

Keywords: PhD, doctorate, creative practice.

Answer:

You are right to be excited about the horizons opened up by academia's expansion through PhDs in creative practice. In some ways, you are also absolutely right that there is potential here for indigenous expression to find a medium by which it can represent itself in a university research context. Arguably, allowing the diversity of aural, embodied and visual knowledge to be carried into academia is right in line with kaupapa Māori where the inclusion of all the community and its diverse ways of sharing knowledge must be a prime guide to research objectives (Smith, 1999). This might also be seen as an urgent need from a wider academia long stifled by Cartesian dualism. As Stoller (1997) suggests, "Stiffened from long sleep in the background of scholarly life, the scholar's body yearns to exercise its muscles. Sleepy from long inactivity, it aches to restore its sensibilities" (p. 21). Subjectivity and the phenomenological celebration of how our physical senses can reveal knowledge has stimulated much qualitative research in recent decades. The major shift here is that diverse phenomena are not just being used to reveal new knowledge to researchers, but also to convey that knowledge to others. So a dance, a piece of music, an architectural design, a sculpture, are all being recognised as not just something one experiences and then expresses in writing, but as something that can in and of itself actually carry knowledge and convey meaning. This recognises that "...science is in, not above, historical or linguistic processes" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 2). Research that actually recognises the body, the voice and images as a valid mode of expressing knowledge shifts our core understandings of how knowledge is constructed, and challenges the implicit power that textual languages can exert (Bourdieu, 1991; Lackoff & Johnson, 1995; Lepecki, 2004). Such research benefits the university and the wider community by generating new understandings of practical knowledge through the practice itself (Barret & Bolt, 2007). So the scope here is significant, and can be seen to be benefitting Māori by endorsing, legitimatising and theorising cultural practices that might have otherwise only appeared as illustrations of theories and ideas that were defined and investigated through text.

PhDs with creative practice are relatively new in the history of the doctorate. They have been possible within the Sorbonne University in Paris since the 1970s, but have only become more widely available within international academia in the last two decades. This has resulted in a diversity of approaches and expectations of examination. Within some institutions, the rebellion against 'logocentricism', or the superiority of the word, has resulted in text being vilified; there is no requirement for a written component within the degree and only the creative art work is examined. Other institutions have sought a more integrated approach between creative work and written discourse, so that the knowledge revealed by the practice is more accessible to others outside the discipline. The philosophies underpinning these different approaches, and the tensions between them, continue to be explored. This involves a

questioning of how bodily experienced phenomena may even be rendered in text, particularly in the context of creative practices (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Nelson 2006; Zarilli, 2002) Debates continue as to the most effective way of evaluating such knowledge within institutions (ACCUADS, 2008; Philips et al, 2008; Rowe & Buck, 2009). Further discussions ultimately question the point of bringing such research into the academic world (Elkins, 2009; Macleod & Holdridge, 2006).

Within New Zealand, creative practice in doctoral degrees initially took the form of ‘named doctorates’, such as the Doctor of Fine Arts and the Doctor of Music degrees. These named doctorates have tended to celebrate excellence in creative practice, rather than integrate practice with theory through discussions on research methods and contemporary scholarship in the area. The introduction of creative practice as an option within a PhD at The University of Auckland has brought a new possibility for how such creative practice research might be positioned within academic knowledge in New Zealand. The University of Auckland’s PhD with Creative Practice requires a rigorous scholarly investigation presented through both a written thesis of approximately 60,000 words and a corpus of creative work (The University of Auckland, 2011a). The creative work can be presented for examination through live performance or exhibition, or recorded on digital media (The University of Auckland, 2011b). It is expected that examiners will consider the creative work and the analytical discourse as an integrated whole. The final output is a PhD that is internationally recognised as a leading contribution to knowledge.

It is always wise when going in to a long project like a doctorate to look for possible challenges. With any doctorate, the length of time and depth of the project needs consideration, but PhDs with creative practice demand an advanced ability in both creative practice and academic research. Anyone contemplating this route to a doctorate might want to self-audit and consider:

How strong am I at writing, and demonstrating critical thinking? If you need more skills here, think about doing a paper or two in advance so you go in well prepared. You will also need to be really motivated.

How would a PhD with creative practice enhance your life and the lives of those in your community’s lives? Would a practical component to a thesis make the knowledge more accessible to others in your community?

Would the practical component also allow for the greater participation of your community in the research process?

You might want to read about kaupapa Māori and consider the way you will contextualise your creative practice within an academic framework that also respects your cultural values. It is usually also possible to get examples of completed theses to get a realistic look at what is expected, and what you would have to produce. You can access some of these electronically, for example Noema Williams at <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/6774> and Margaret Merimeri Tauhere at <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/6351> Although these do not engage creative practice specifically, they show the way that kaupapa Māori can be used as a foundation that bridges academia’s need for theoretical positioning and the need for culturally based work to satisfy communities’ values and protocol.

Ultimately, the best way includes talking to people who know. Organise the time when you could have a chat with a doctoral advisor in a relevant university department. They can perhaps most accurately outline for you the opportunities and challenges that your doctoral research project would present if you were to incorporate a creative practice aspect.

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