

Artists as tricksters: Exploring boundary crossing between theory and practice in a new doctor of creative arts program

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Abstract

This article explores how artist-researchers navigate the “uncertain” space between theory and practice in a new Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) program in an Australian regional university. The trickster is deployed as a metaphorical device to provide insights into how the first DCA’s candidates, their supervisors, and the university’s leadership make sense of their own experiences *within* and *about* the practice-led research program under a neoliberal climate. Tricksters’ cross boundaries between critical and imaginary spaces; yet they also *create* boundaries, by extending collective knowledge into the unknown. This process is entirely consistent with the critical and creative work required by doctoral candidates to produce innovative research. Narrative inquiry is applied in accordance with the artist-trickster’s subjective agency within practice-led doctoral study. The article charts the DCA’s emerging identity as a doctoral qualification equal to the traditional PhD but different from it, during its implementation in 2016 to the first successful completion in 2019. The findings reveal the benefits of the program’s innovative design, grounded in the creation of its distinctive community of practice that supports practice-led research, local and international connections, and regional resilience.

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Introduction

Practice-led research is globally recognised in higher education as the primary engagement of creative work in driving new research insights (Barret and Bolt, 2007; Haseman 2006; Hawkins and Wilson 2016; Leavy, 2009; Sullivan 2009). Nevertheless, research into emergent doctoral programs designed for practitioners engaged in creative arts research have consistently identified it as a contested field (Berridge, 2006; Candy, 2011; Wilson, 2019). The development of research programs such as the Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) at the University Southern Queensland (UniSQ) in regional Australia are hardly unique in the broader national context (Candy and Edmonds, 2018). However, their focus on the creative work as an integral part of the overall study challenges the current neoliberal higher education climate and its focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) curriculum and programs (Carter, 2017: 247). The emphasis on STEM subjects is based on the neoliberalist educational model's focus on "investments made in the development of students' human capital" (Hastings, 2021: 315). As student learning and study areas is linked to their future earnings, the neoliberal model assumes a corporate power structure (Hathaway, 2020).

Within this neoliberalist context, Ronald Barnett (2016) investigates the role of the university as a corporate agent. He asserts that the university is not only representative of its own structures, but also the spaces and responsibilities it occupies in developing its "potential in and for the world" (Barnett 2016: 7). Barnett (2016) identifies three 'planes' that conceptually and practically facilitate an understanding the contemporary university landscape. The first plane recognises the university as an institution as well as the *idea* of an institution. The second plane is the contextual understanding of the university in the present moment - in its time and space - as well its future possibilities. The third plane positions the university as encompassing both a "set of particulars" such as specific events or projects as well as being a "site of universals" (Barnett, 2016: 6). According to Barnett (2016), the university shifts across and between these three planes while simultaneously occupying all of its levels. This very process of shifting across the planes is a critical and creative form of boundary crossing between the educational institution and its possibilities. For example, if the process of discerning spaces in which the educational institution occupies is a "creative act", then the university is not necessarily to be found within its neoliberalist structures "but in its imaginings" (Barnett, 2016: 8). These "imaginings" not only make the implementation of creative doctorates such as the DCA within a neoliberal climate possible, but expose the gap between the university and its possibilities (Barnett, 2016: 8). The consideration of what the educational institution already is and its possibilities requires both critical and practical forms of boundary crossing (Barnett 2016; Martinez-Aleman et al., 2015) and thereby challenges the neoliberal climate.

The neoliberalist focus on STEM subjects in higher education is positioned among broader societal, political and economic factors such as “changes in workforce patterns and downward trends in economic indicators [that] justify STEM action” (Siekman and Korbel, 2016: 6), have perpetuated an achievement-based emphasis grounded in a narrow understanding of “measurable” outputs and learning outcomes. This, in turn, has devalued the Arts and Humanities, which are globally recognised leaders in qualitative research and creative innovation (Kerby et al., 2018). The value of creativity as a skill-set is negotiated and politicised in educational and governmental practices (Barrett and Bolt, 2007; Harris and De Bruin, 2018). This preoccupation has been played out against the background of a range of processes in the education sector, some specific to Australia and others far more broadly. From the 1970s onward, there has been a tension between the “nation building aspirations” of the federal Commonwealth government, with schools and universities operating in an “increasingly politicised space” (Baguley et al., 2021), resulting in increased accountability and economic rationalisation (Ponnuwamy and Manohar, 2016; Redi, 2019). The States and Territories receive funding from the federal government for schooling and universities despite their determined defence of their constitutional responsibility for schooling. This tension has become the “defining characteristic of Australian education”, which is further problematised by “a complex mix of such factors as globalisation, educational ideologies, educational practices and curriculum gate-keepers” (Redi, 2019: 199).

More broadly, education as a field has traditionally been founded on a “platform of scientifically grounded knowledge” (Eisner, 2004: 1). As the sciences are considered measurable and dependable, they are therefore *teachable*. In contrast, the artistic process is perceived as talent-based (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2014). The growing support for the re-valuing of creativity via the introduction of the Arts in the traditional STEM offerings resulting in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) has allowed the school curriculum to encourage lateral and hands-on creative thinking and innovative problem solving (Harris and De Bruin 2018: 153). Vally et al. (2019) emphasise that training in creative thinking leads to enhanced creative production in educational and employment contexts and is therefore sought out globally.

Creative researchers have been compelled to develop and expand their own research contexts in academia due to practice-led research not always being well understood nor contextualised as a pedagogical framework (Buffington, 2007; Duxbury and Grierson, 2008; Kerby et al., 2018). For example, in the seminal work *A Manifesto for Performative Research* (2006), Brad Haseman urges practice-led researchers to engage in a performance paradigm that is distinct from qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. Haseman (2006) argues that these performative acts, which are the very embodiment of the creative process, as drive practice-led enquiry:

The ‘practice’ in ‘practice-led research’ is primary – it is not an optional extra; it is the necessary pre-condition of engagement in performative research. [...] in using the term performative to define this field of research I am seeking to go beyond the way the performative is currently being used in the research literature. (6)

Despite these developments, candidates in emergent programs such as a DCA often feel that the current understanding of non-traditional research, demands that they justify their creative work as bona fide research that is constantly measured against the traditional PhD (Arnold, 2012: 9; Kerby et al., 2018). Yet as Barrett and Bolt (2007: 3) assert, practice-led research is underpinned by the very process of creating to uncover new knowledge. The discovery of knowledge lies in the very process of its “becoming” which then leads to creative outcomes as well as new conceptualisations to broader art discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; Haseman, 2006). Hence, practice-led research presents itself as “contradictory” to the outcome driven expectations in traditional research:

Rather than attempting to contort aims, objectives and outcomes to satisfy criteria set for more established models of research, we believe there is a need to generate appropriate discourse to convince assessors and policy-makers that within the context of studio-based research, innovation is derived from methods that cannot always be pre-determined, and ‘outcomes’ of artistic research are necessarily unpredictable. (Barrett and Bolt, 2007: 3)

This unpredictability facilitates the implementation of creative doctorates that offer a platform for research and pedagogical training in creative research. This training seeks to empower students to contextualise both their projects but the larger research framework within which their project(s) operate and through which they contribute to other fields. The reticence to recognise creative works as legitimate research, which is born of an unfamiliarity with it on the part of academics working in other fields, is hardly unique (Berridge, 2006; Kerby et al., 2018). A key general requirement of doctoral programs is to produce new knowledge. The ways to achieve this are, however, often obscure, indifferently articulated, or left to the candidate and supervisors to interpret. Hence, doctoral researchers often find themselves challenged by the need to grapple with the “unknown” (Arnold, 2012: 9; Baguley et al., 2017). This includes the very process of navigating practice and exegetical approaches and outcomes.

Trickster metaphor

This article deploys the trickster as a metaphorical device to explore how DCA students, their supervisors, and university leadership make sense of their own experiences *within* and *about* the new program in a regional Australian university. The trickster metaphor illuminates the challenge confronting doctoral practice-led researchers as they grapple with the “unknown” when navigating between their theoretical and practical works within the DCA. Botha (2009), in emphasising the value of metaphor as a pedagogical approach, states that “...it is exactly the creative and innovative and interactive role of metaphor which creates the similarities between a student’s earlier understanding and the acquisition of new knowledge of an unfamiliar topic” (432). Metaphor is therefore well placed to prepare students to manage the uncertainty associated with practice-led processes. Central to this metaphorical approach is the deployment of the qualities and attributes of the trickster to the DCA program itself as well as contextualising creative doctorates globally. The trickster is also part of many cultural traditions and as such, is a globally

recognised archetype that can transcend national or regional boundaries and support a more accessible understanding of practice-led research.

Being featured in myths, fairy tales, folklore and in traditional cultural knowledge, the trickster takes on many culturally specific representations and identities. For example, [Marshall \(2018\)](#) discusses the anarchic trickster figures such as the West African spider Anansi and the African-American Brer Rabbit who are often featured in folklores transported by slaves to the Americas. They are characterised as amoral, destructive and prepared to do anything to ensure their survival. Anansi is a cunning character that outwits those who are much more powerful and stronger than he is ([Sherlock, 2000](#)). Similarly, Brer Rabbit is a trickster who succeeds by means of relying on his wit rather than physical strength and displays extreme forms of behaviour that provoke authority and bends social mores. Both tricksters play a key role in communal storytelling on plantations in the Americas and provide insights into “cultural and psychological legacies of enslavement” ([Marshall, 2019](#): 3).

There are many other examples of tricksters from various cultural traditions such as Aesop’s fox (Greek), Loki (Norse mythology) and the raven, turtle, racoon (Native American). Within a national context, the Australian dingo trickster is considered a descendant of the wild dogs of Asia and Thailand that the Australian Indigenous people have brought to Australia around 40,000 years ago ([King, 2007](#)). There are some Australian Indigenous peoples who consider the dingo as their sacred totem and honour it in ritual ceremonies and social structure ([King, 2007](#); [McIntosh, 2003](#)). The dingo is a powerful symbol for moderation in behaviour as individuals or groups gain an understanding of cultural and social expectations as well as particular ways of life ([McIntosh, 2003](#): 311). [King \(2007\)](#) notes that the dingo, according to an Australian Indigenous elder, “is a ‘fully fledged lawman’. It institutes Dreaming laws but also breaks them” (43). Acknowledging the many cultural traditions of the trickster archetype is also important in their capacity of transcending the locational boundaries within which the DCA is embedded.

The trickster is often used as a metaphor for transformation ([Azaria, 2015](#)), which allows them to highlight the educational changes brought on by the implementation of the DCA and the culture of the regional Australian university in terms of embracing applied practice. As change-agents within higher educational settings, tricksters enable human agency in a way that can alter existing educational trajectories and influence strategic decisions as well as its pedagogical agendas ([Hensley, 2018](#): 608). As Hensley notes, tricksters can prompt change through “the educational transmission of knowledge into transformative educative experience” ([Hensley, 2018](#): 608). With the trickster enabling a transformative educational experience and having a global appeal, it is a useful metaphorical model in facilitating future strategic decisions about doctoral program recruitment and retention of its candidates. Tricksters are also described as boundary crossers who work from the periphery in order to make best use of their own strengths; they alert us to the creative possibilities for innovation through critical action and creative play ([Bassil-Morozow, 2015](#); [Hawley, 2008](#); [Ryan, 1999](#): 8).

The trickster metaphor provides a framework through which insights into the critical and creative practices of artist-researchers become possible. In particular, their capacity to

cross boundaries between theory and practice as well as to create new boundaries as part of their doctoral study are illuminated through the use of this metaphor. Tricksters and artists both operate through applied action; they engage in the *act* of creating as a practice-driven process in expanding knowledge (Hyde, 2017). Tricksters, like artists, embrace their subjectivity as they slip in and out of their factual and imagined interpretations of everyday experiences. Tricksters therefore, *create* boundaries by extending the boundaries of collective knowledge into the unknown (Hyde, 2010). This is akin to the very critical and creative work required within creative research (Haseman, 2006) where creative play - its action or performativity - underpins enquiry to overturn rigid ideas (Hawley, 2008; Hyde, 2017; Ryan, 1999). Among these broader characteristics and competencies, the trickster is compatible with the doctoral practice-led researcher as it,

...has been enlisted to solve a problem he himself created. In a case like that, boundary creation and boundary crossing are related to one another, and the best way to describe the trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found-sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there ... (Hyde, 2017: 7)

This article's conceptualisation of the trickster metaphor therefore provides artists-researchers with pedagogical tools for understanding and envisioning a process that elucidates what is otherwise an "uncertain" doctoral space (Arnold, 2012: 9; Candy, 2011).

Program context

As a comparatively young university, having evolved from the Darling Downs Institute of technology into a fully-fledged university in 1992, the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) forms part of the Australian Regional University Network. It is recognised for its "community-centred" values in regional heritage as well as flexible online and distance learning (UniSQ Strategic Plan, 2016–2020: 4). These educational attributes complement UniSQ's research objectives in building postgraduate programs that include "the use of non-traditional models in their mode of delivery and in the building of supervisory capacity" (UniSQ Strategic Plan, 2016–2020: 9). The university's emphasis on developing non-traditional research programs is broadly aligned with *The Australia Research Council* (ARC), one of the Australian governments' main agencies for allocating research funding to academics and researchers across Australian universities as well as administering *Excellence in Research for Australia* (ERA), Australia's national research evaluation framework. According to the ARC's ERA specifications, non-traditional research outcomes (NTROs) include original creative works that can be recorded/rendered; live performances; curated or produced public exhibitions or events and externally-based research reports (ARC, 2018). The function of NTROs is defined under the ARC's ERA assessment guidelines as,

the creation of new knowledge and/or the using of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings. (ARC, 2018: 9)

Contextually, the national and university-specific recognition of non-traditional research emphasises the growth of the emergent UniSQ School of Creative Arts research training culture and postgraduate career trajectories alongside the research of current academic staff. This focus was entirely compatible with the School of Creative Arts impetus on developing a practice-led doctorate as a result of the School's practice-focussed undergraduate programs. These undergraduate programs involved community engagement in preparing artist-researchers to work as professional industry freelancers and educators (Hammer et al., 2019), thereby serving as a foundation for UniSQ's objective in developing postgraduate programs that produce research "innovators and entrepreneurs" (UniSQ Strategic Plan, 2016–2020: 8–9). This led to the School of Creative Arts implementation of the DCA in 2016.

The DCA is comprised of coursework (25%) and research (75%) and is equivalent, yet distinct from the PhD. While the UniSQ PhD can include a creative research component of up to 50%, the DCA provides a weighting of 70–80% on the creative work and centralises the creative production of the professional artist-researcher through a practice-led inquiry. The weighting of the exegetical component (20,000 to 30,000 words) is aligned with the weightings of other more established programs such as the Doctor of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong and emerging degrees such as the Doctor of Arts at the University of Sydney. While there are national and international creative doctoral programs engaging in this non-traditional research model, the regionally bespoke DCA has drawn the attention of international students, particularly from the USA, UK and Canada because of the opportunity to specialise in Music, Visual Arts, Theatre, Film, Television and Radio, and Editing and Publishing/Writing and study either on campus or online. This flexible approach has seen increasing student enrolment from interstate and rural/regionally remote areas (UniSQ DCA Program Data, 2016–2018). Overall, enrolments in the program have increased and the DCA has become increasing external facing and competitively viable across its neighbouring institutions. The steady growth of the DCA, particularly in the current COVID-19 context, suggests that there is a need for creative doctorates which enable the artist-trickster to flourish in an increasingly neo-liberal context (Batorowicz and Johnson, 2020; Marshman and Larkins, 2020; Zhou, 2020).

An important feature of the DCA is its *Community of Practice* (CoP) embedded in its courses. The DCA CoP brings together the doctoral cohort across all stages of candidature, as a means of collectively supporting the artist-researchers' experiences as they navigate between theory and practice. The DCA CoP entails: peer practice critiques and NTRO showcases among other forms of research development. This applied approach has recently extended to a wellbeing focus as a response to the university's broader health focus, given the current impacts of COVID-19. Another unique feature of the UniSQ DCA is its HDR training in NTRO reporting to support the University's ERA submission

under *Creative Arts and Writing* (FoR 36). The program's features are a point of distinction from other Australian doctoral programs (Batorowicz and Johnson 2020).

In outlining the specific features of the UniSQ DCA, it is important to acknowledge HDR training provided via CoP as a broader educational concept. Lave and Wenger (1991) defined CoP as a learning community that assists in self-directed and collaborative co-creation of knowledge within higher education and management education. The first applications of CoP have been in “teacher training and in providing isolated administrators with access to colleagues” (Wegner 2006: 5). As learning within the education field is both an outcome and a process, CoP is valued as a peer-to-peer form of professional development (Coffman et al., 2016: 30). Wegner (1998, 2006). *Community of practice* is a participant collective who share an interest for something they do and learn how to better carry out their practice through regular interaction (Wenger, 1998, 2006). Wegner (1998: 72–73) identifies three dimensions within a CoP that involves: a sustained mutual engagement; a joint enterprise that refers to the CoP position and its influence within a broader system including institutional contexts (Wenger, 1998: 73–81) and a shared repertoire that have formed part of its CoP such as tools, stories, and concepts (Wenger, 1998: 83).

Notably, Coffman et al. (2016) studied the impact that a CoP has on doctoral students and the ways in which student identities are developed as emergent scholars. The study is consistent with our use of the trickster metaphor as it characterises CoP as a form of transformational learning within the “liminal space of doctoral studies” (Coffman et al., 2016: 31). Transformational learning in doctoral studies requires students to shift from a course-taker that is, a “consumer of knowledge” to an independent scholar who is a producer of knowledge (Lovitts, 2005: 138). The CoP therefore allowed us to explore the connection between our experiences as scholars and our self-knowledge. We described the scholarly identity as one dimension of multiple identities. *Community of practice* enabled a platform to explore the connection between the scholarly identity and other dimensions of our “multifaceted and fluid identities” that includes the personal, recreational and professional (Coffman et al., 2016: 33). Fostering the trickster as an archetype that takes on multiple representational identities, CoP is positioned as a tool to help navigate the complexities of our multiple identities as well as refining our identities through varying experiences of self-actualization (as a scholar and professional practitioner). *Community of practice* facilitates a space for boundary-crossing that enables students to transform into emergent scholars. This is so, as CoP provides an appropriate environment for self-reflection and collective critique while maintaining clear goals as individual researchers and as a research community (Coffman et al., 2016: 34).

Theoretical framework

While practice-led doctorates have become increasingly prevalent across the last four decades, they are still considered an uneasy fit within the tertiary-education sector (Candy and Edmonds, 2018: 63; Kerby et al., 2018; McNamara, 2012). McNamara (2012) states that the historical merging of art schools into the tertiary-education sector has created a “perennial disadvantage because they find themselves within a

system that was not set up for their needs” (2). It was widely believed that creative works were unable to demonstrate their contribution to new knowledge unless they were accompanied by “a different set of research tools” within the tertiary-education sector (De Freitas 2007: 2; McNamara 2012: 2). This view has been challenged at a national level through the formation of the Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Arts (DDCA) in 2013 (Wilson, 2019). DDCA’s *NiTRO* online publication also provides a platform for practice-led research debate that advocates for creative doctorates in their offering of rigorous and high quality-focussed training in non-traditional research outcomes (NTROs) (Wilson, 2019).

The degree of rigour involved in doctoral practice-led research is developed over time and involves particular considerations regarding the boundary crossing process between theory and practice. For example, Jeffery et al. (2020) address the substantial planning involved within the context of their own practice-led creative writing doctoral studies. They discuss the added challenges of not knowing the extent to which creative practice can be planned for, as well as the critical and creative components within practice-led research not always cohesively connecting as part of the overall doctoral outcomes (Jeffery et al., 2020: 392). It is also important to acknowledge the hybrid nature of creative writing doctorates in their capacity of “boundary crossing” between theoretical and creative research. As Kroll (2013) notes, one of the central areas of exploration has been the hybrid creative writing doctorate and “the challenge of assessing its contributions so it accords with the standard OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) definition, upon which UK and Australasian research assessment systems are based” (7). This is further reiterated through the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) whereby research is the key defining component that constitutes a doctoral qualification. Kroll (2013) further emphasises the hybrid nature of the creative writing doctorates which position examiners as “scholars, reviewers, critics, judges and mentors” (Kroll, 2013: 2).

For most artists, however, a creative doctorate and its aim of creating new knowledge marks an uncertain space of transitioning between practice and practice as research (Hamilton and Jaaniste, 2009). Berridge (2006) argues that there are difficulties in the “setting of boundaries,” particularly in the interplay between art and production, the creative process and the exegesis, which are all integral components of the practice-led doctorate (3). Crucial to this requirement is for the creative work and exegesis to be presented as a cohesive project (Candy, 2011; Duxbury and Grierson, 2008). It is therefore “the uncertainty, paradox and ambiguity inherent in this kind of process that together leads to a place of ‘generative possibilities’ within doctoral study” (Berridge, 2006: 3). What continues to be understated is the skill-base expected from the researcher during the boundary crossing process (Leavy, 2009). It requires on one hand, an astute intuitive and idiosyncratic self-knowledge regarding risk-taking in order to explore the unknown (in a form that may also be not known). On the other hand, the candidate must follow the doctoral guidelines and specific program objectives. As Berridge (2006: 3) states: “this in-between, risky space is one where anything can happen, yet it is bounded by the rules of academe” (Berridge, 2006: 3). It could be argued that doctoral creative research is riskier than a conventional PhD, as its innovation lies in its form as well as its content and

presentation (Mannay, 2016). As Berridge (2006) notes “there can be uncertainty in the student, the supervisors and the academy as to whether the new, unconventional work is acceptable” (3). Like the trickster metaphor, this shifting and creating of new boundaries and the risk-taking it involves leads to a fuller exploration of its capacity for innovative research and the expansion of innovation itself (Duxbury and Grierson, 2008).

Creative and critical thinking in doctoral research

Creative doctoral research involves a nuanced application of critical and creative thinking skills. As Paul and Elder (2007) argue “... critical and creative thought are intimately related. Each without the other is of limited use. Creativity without criticality is mere novelty. Criticality without creativity is bare negativity” (21). Although these skill-sets are required at an advanced level of creative doctorates, they continue to be understated in the context of the PhD. Barrett and Bolt (2007) observe that creative research is affiliated with “subjective, emergent and interdisciplinary approaches,” yet alternative avenues continue to be viewed less favourably by researchers who are not yet “convinced of the innovative and critical potential of artistic research” (3). Further, the engagement and “impact of practice as research is still to be fully understood and realized” within the broader university and community contexts (Barrett and Bolt, 2007: 3). There is also a resistance to the idea that criticality and creativity can go hand in hand and that creative practice can take on a critical form. Artists therefore need to engage in appropriate research models within their doctoral studies to expand knowledge. Arnold (2012) notes that creative doctorates provide:

an opportunity to bring creative activity together with academic debate and intellectual rigour. In this context, the latter does not justify the former nor interpret it in an academic and theoretical way. Rather, acting together, the artefact [creative work] and exegesis bridge the Cartesian binary, offer new models of knowledge to the academy, new dimensions of what knowledge itself consists of and how this contributes to learning. Because this disputes the regular academic templates, it challenges the academy itself. (9)

In creative doctorates there is a high level of criticality involved in the artwork and the exegesis. Criticality encompasses research requirements of originality, innovation and contribution within theoretical, historical and contemporary art discourse (Rogoff, 2008). This critical synergy between practice and theory takes on an elevated form of rigor in both process and content. This is because the practice and exegesis serve different functions yet are required to align in their concurrent forms as a cohesive project (Arnold, 2012). This is a complex process that we characterise as “trickster-boundary crossing” between practice and theory. Doctoral projects involve subjectivity encompassing self-criticality, reflexive practice and re-evaluations of their positioning within broader academic and industry contexts. In practice-led research, creative works are considered critical in themselves. The artist imbues the work with critical agency which then “troubles” our current social and cultural conditioning (Freedman, 2007). It therefore critiques what already exists, yet it is a reconsideration of existing knowledge that exposes

ideological underpinnings (Castro and Batorowicz, 2017). This definition of creative work as research separates it from those practices which are non-critical (Castro and Batorowicz, 2017; Rodriguez-Ferrándiz, 2014).

Metaphor as pedagogical approach

In order to apply experiential, problem-based learning within the creative doctoral space, it is important to emphasise the value of metaphor as a pedagogical approach. Botha (2009) asserts that metaphor enables an epistemological leap between established and radical knowledge, therefore taking on an “indispensable role in mediating the acquisition of new knowledge” (431). Pedagogically, this supports practice-led researchers’ broader aims of “extending our understanding of the role of experiential, problem-based learning [...] the ways in which creative arts research outcomes may be applied to develop more generative research pedagogies and methodologies beyond the discipline itself” (Barrett and Bolt, 2007: 2). Botha (2009) extends the metaphor’s role beyond interpreting one event or experience by developing the premise of the metaphor as an *interaction* between two comparable fields. This assertion of the interactive metaphor echoes Haseman’s (2006) notion of performativity in creative research, whereby, the *act of creating* takes the form of a performativity that constitutes its own research paradigm for artists-researchers. Botha’s (2009) interactive metaphor involves the *creation* of new meaning as it requires both the literal and metaphorical elements of the two comparable fields to be shifted. Botha (2009) notes an: “Interactive metaphor would allow truly new forms of knowledge and understanding to be acquired by the student without presupposing the student already knows, in some sense, that which is being learned” (432). This understanding of metaphor emphasises the appropriateness of this pedagogical approach in developing a metaphorical tool to guide doctoral students through the challenging process of *creating* new knowledge in creative arts.

The metaphor of boundary crossing as deployed by the trickster is a method of assisting doctoral candidates in their very process of navigating practice and theory within their research. The trickster metaphor, as a pedagogical tool, diverts from the possible pitfalls of setting up rigid boundaries that may offer clarity to a task but which are often contrary to the creative processes (Barrett and Bolt, 2007). The trickster as boundary crosser and creator of boundaries in order to solve a problem s/he has created is an effective model for creative researchers. A central challenge within a doctoral candidacy is to create as well as answer one’s own formulated question of enquiry. The creation of such boundaries also defines the methodological framework not only in the exegesis but also in the creative practice (Arnold, 2012). Arnold (2012) explains that practice-led research is distinctive as “it involves a significant focus on creative practice, within its research methods, contexts and outputs” (9). However, Berridge (2006: 3) argues that it could be more “clearly elaborated in arts education and research training and applied more generally in pedagogical approaches in other disciplines at all levels of the university.”

Trickster's performativity and the carnivalesque classroom

In keeping with the performativity of the trickster metaphor, practice-led research occurs or reveals itself in the process of the artist's making; in the very *act* of doing. These actions are conceptualised by Haseman (2007) as “performative utterances.” As these utterances warrant movement and transformation, they emphasise the performativity of the research process. If practice-led research is understood at its base as being performative, then a doctoral cohort creating a series of ‘performative utterances’ could potentially create a dialogical, carnivalesque-like classroom. Bakhtin's (1981) *Dialogic Imaginations: Four Essays* is particularly relevant in addressing the trickster's performativity within the doctoral space as the dialogic educational environment is likened to “a carnival.” Within this context, there are no universal truth statements but rather a dialogue - a living conversational model focused on communication and language learning (Nesari, 2015: 643). Bakhtin asserts that dialogism involves “any utterance, whether spoken or written, that people use in communication with each other (Bakhtin in Marchenkova et al., 2005: 72; Nesari, 2015: 643). Haseman's ‘utterances’ can be considered in light of dialogic education method involving student practice of “exploratory talk” where the teacher acts as a facilitator or guide¹ (Nesari, 2015: 642). With Bakhtin's ideas rooted in medieval carnival, the carnivalesque is about the absence of stability and boundaries. Therefore, it is a model that is constantly shifting with each “performative utterance.” This reflects the “rotated power” in the classroom, where students, like the trickster, take control of their learning, and can neutralise the teacher's authority as well as also learn from each other (Nesari, 2015: 645–6).

It is important to acknowledge “action learning” and “living theory” as educational relatives to practice-led research inquiry. Action learning speaks to the problem-solving aspects within practice-led research as it is a method involving real tasks in which participants learn by doing and then reflect on what they have done. It enables researchers to interrogate the kind of knowledge in order to position the research problem as an equal aspect of the problem itself (Vaartjes and Goff, 2008: 50). Further, action research considers the researcher's own positioning and input as both subjective and valuable (Vaartjes and Goff, 2008: 50). Vaartjes and Goff (2008) argue that the researcher needs to commit “their whole self to the research process – their history, their way of thinking, their capabilities, their emotions, their physicality” (50). Branko Bogнар draws on Whitehead and McNiff's work on living theory in action research, asserting that,

it is not enough to proclaim practice as good simply because by reflecting on what we have done and showing how we have changed it in light of what we have learned [...]. We also need to explain our work as a systematic, informed way of public acting, for which we hold ourselves accountable by producing explanatory accounts. (Bognar in Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 135)

Whitehead (2009) further asserts that “the explanatory principles in living theory are energy-flowing values embodied and expressed in practice” (87).² They address living logic and the contradictions they encompass by being committed to live by certain values

while acknowledging the possible denial of them values within practical terms (Whitehead, 2009: 87).

Methodology

This study undertakes a qualitative approach underpinned by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) critical framework in privileging “practice, politics, action, performance” and pedagogies inclusive of peripheral perspectives (4). The approach informs the study’s trickster metaphor and the researchers’ own philosophies as regional arts-based educators. Informing this approach is the educational foregrounding of creating new knowledge by re-evaluating socio-cultural norms through art (Freedman, 2007). In deploying narrative inquiry, the researchers’ embrace Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) assertion that the methodology is active research because it functions as an engaged agent for transferring knowledge and lived experiences. Narrative inquiry encompasses what Arnold (2012: 9) calls a “subjective academic narrative,” as it aligns with the artist-trickster mode of inquiry and embodiment of subjectivity to provide critical agency in research outcomes. It creates and crosses boundaries as it “practices the theory of academic knowledge as personal and draws together the Cartesian binary of the personal and the intellectual” (Arnold, 2012: 9). Ontological considerations of being and knowing through the experiential are taken into account through the methodological acknowledgement in the (re-) telling of experiences of both the studied subject and the researcher (Arnold, 2012; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry, therefore, enables the development of a collaborative DCA discussion, capturing the subjective practice-led experiences of candidates and staff. Importantly, we have collated responses and reflections of the candidates who were/are part of the first DCA cohort.

The study’s central question is based on the researchers’ observations and participation in the implementation of the DCA and with its first-year cohort. These observations are informed by the broader doctoral contexts, practice-led debates and a global engagement in STEAM (Harris and De Bruin, 2018: 153). The insights gathered from the processes involved in the program’s implementation through student and staff perspectives offer an important contribution to knowledge. This study provides insights into the student transitioning into the practitioner-scholar model, a multi-perspective understanding of practice-led learning via a metaphorical approach and insights into the program’s impact. The recommendations may assist other university academics in considering the implementation of creative doctorates. The study answers the following research question:

To what extent can the trickster metaphor enable practice-led researchers in their boundary crossing between theory and practice as well as assist them, their supervisors and university leadership staff to make sense of their own experiences within and about the new DCA program within a regional Australian university?

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews of 30–60 min were conducted to gather primary data and access personalised stories. Seven participants were selected via purposive sampling, involving three executive leadership staff, two teaching staff and two students that served as key stakeholders within the first year of the DCA. The initial voluntary sampling was small as the first cohort consisted of eight students, in part due to

the program not yet being marketed. A focus on executive leadership staff sampling facilitated the contextualisation of their vision for a new practice-led doctoral program within a neo-liberal higher education climate and the broader theorisation of the boundaries and boundary crossing that the leadership stakeholders face. This is further complemented by a sampling of the student cohort and teaching staff in order to explore their experience and assess the efficacy of the trickster metaphor in assisting practice-led researchers in their boundary crossing between theory and practice. To ensure the accuracy of information, each interview was transcribed verbatim and provided to participants for checking, with an opportunity to provide further feedback or amendment. The interviews were approached as active, co-constructed narrative data, through the shared understandings as part of the methodological acknowledgement of active research in the subject and researcher experience (Whitehead, 2009).

Narratives are “forms of social code” that discuss stories as “dialogically constructed” rather than expressions of internal cognitive or affective states (Andrews et al., 2013: 6; Bakhtin, 1981). Interview transcripts, post inclusion of participant feedback, were constructed into written narratives by the researchers with direct and active voices quoted in the findings. The “multilevel, dialogic” aspects of narrative inquiry (Andrews et al., 2013: 2) is acknowledged as the researchers have considered the functions of the individual stories and their connection to any broader social narratives which can include “the performance and negotiation of social identities in a common space of meaning” (Andrews et al., 2013: 2; Riessman, 1993; 2008). The narrative approach is vital to this study as it advocates authentic and individual agency. Ethical approval for this study was granted through the university’s human research ethics committee under the approval no: H16REA167. The DCA candidate and UniSQ stakeholder insights were used to inform pedagogical approaches to the further development of the DCA.

The interview narratives presented, derive from the final interview transcriptions of each respondent alongside the researchers’ observations supported by the literature concerning practice-led research within the DCA. Active voice is applied with the use of everyday language in order to foreground the subjective, experience-centered approach of narrative inquiry. One of the powerful tenets of narrative inquiry is that researchers are not objective inquirers but are complicit in their study; being part of this world the inquirer needs to evolve themselves as well as “offer up research understanding that could lead to a better world” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 61). As part of the multi-dimensional narrative inquiry approach, the study encompasses interview narratives of seven key UniSQ institutional stakeholders involved in the program’s development including; the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research and Innovation, the former Associate Dean of Research in the Faculty of Business, Education, Law and the Arts, the former Head of the School of Creative Arts, two DCA Program Coordinators leading the implementation of the program and two first year DCA students.

The interview narratives are presented in two parts. The first involves the UniSQ executive team and leading staff perspectives on the implementation of DCA and its distinct features. The second narrative focusses on the candidate experience of the program and student perspectives on the practice-led model through the lens of the trickster metaphor.

Interview narrative 1: UniSQ program implementation and practice-led debate

The DCA's developmental phase, according to the Associate Dean of Research, was enabled by the university wide restructure and was done so in a relatively short timeframe. The UniSQ's former Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, included within the academic division the quaintly titled "portfolio renewal", an overview of programs as an area that could be further developed. As noted by the Associate Dean of Research, there was also a broader acknowledgement that there is a balancing act between enacting practice-led research and ensuring that the program adheres to the Research Training Scheme and other institutional non-negotiables. Though cognisant of these institutional imperatives driving the new doctorate and the bureaucratic requirements that it needed to address, the Associate Dean of Research's understanding was informed by a respect for the Arts and a confirmation of the development of an innovative program that addresses the needs of the profession as well as industry:

my intuitive response is that the creative performing arts and the visual arts help us to see and understand the world in really important ways that are not possible through other forms of knowledge production and presentation [...]. From educating graduates, that then flows on to the communities... (Associate Dean of Research, 2016).

This overview reveals the multi-layered opportunities afforded by a program like the DCA and the way in which, like the trickster, conventional models are challenged in the production of new forms of research. A recent academic staff member brought an outsider's view to an assessment of the extent to which the DCA was accepted as legitimate doctoral research. Its challenge of the status quo, in their view, elicited a response that they characterised as an "anxiety":

I think there is a national kind of anxiety about what research in the arts might look like and there's an ongoing debate. [...] But I think because doctoral research in the arts hadn't been here for very long, there really wasn't a body of knowledge [...]. So, people weren't able to articulate what it means to do a PhD in creative practice I think and certainly not in a way that was coherent or agreed ... (Academic Staff, 2016).

One of the DCA program coordinators emphasises that this is a two-way process: "I think if you understand something it's easier to value it. I think things that you don't understand, it's really difficult to value." The former Head of School notes a growing trend among staff to be interested in either their practice or their theoretical inquiries but not both: "we need to be very clear about this as an absolutely practice driven, but it is not without theoretical anchors that are relevant [...] innovative and owned and practised." These concerns emphasise the complexities and tensions between creative and traditional research outputs particularly under the ERA assessment process.

Alongside program design, there are discussions concerning the competitive market for the arts (Australia Council for the Arts, 2017) and the university business model, for like other universities, it measures its viability by the number of enrolments and

completions with attention to student attraction and retention within its programs (as per [University Rankings, 2020](#)). This business focus emphasises graduate employability as a ‘measurable’ success factor in the program’s viability and outcomes ([Bridgstock, 2011](#)). Currently, 42% of Australian artists have a graduate and a postgraduate degree; “artists are more highly educated than the workforce at large [...] just over three-quarters of them hold a university degree, compared to only 22% in the wider labour force” ([Throsby and Petetskaya, 2017](#): 33–34). In turn, there is a university expectation that the program engage with this market using its own branding, one that is reflective of UniSQ’s educational culture and vision. The former Head of School commented: “I think the big challenge has been to not replicate what other universities do, but to take the best of what they do and apply it for our context.” This is important as the broader university financial focus does not necessarily align with the “creative economy” that considers the dialectic and cyclic interactions between a crisis and creative innovation ([Dubina and Campbell, 2012](#)). Steady employability is not aligned with the career trajectory of *all* artists nor does it necessarily serve as a success measure of an artist’s career or entrepreneurial skill-set (although steady income generated from sales of artwork may attribute to an artist’s profile in their field). However, artists do take on lecturing, curatorial and other forms of industry-related employment to enable financial stability ([Australia Council for the Arts, 2017](#)).

Prior to 2019, there was little program-specific marketing being done, which speaks to the nature of the program’s grass-roots regional community ([Arts Queensland, 2018](#)). The former Head of School asserts: “We survive I think really through word of mouth and because we have a very healthy way of working with our students. I can’t help but think that it’s because of our insistence on a consolidated strategic connection between theory and practice.” In addition to these program quality-signifiers, the DCA is one of few programs to be offered completely online as well as on campus ([UniSQ Benchmarking Data, 2020](#)). The program has also attracted students from rural and remote regions as well as international students. UniSQ International admissions data includes student enrolments from Germany, China and Canada since 2017. Evidence of this international growth in the DCA intake is in alignment with UniSQ’s emphasis on its international standing in research training ([UniSQ Strategic Plan, 2016–2020](#)). Internationally, there appears to be no similar interdisciplinary Doctor of Creative Arts program. Canada, the United States, Asia, the UK and Europe offer field-specific programs, for example the “Doctor of Fine Arts”, “Doctor of Music Arts” and “Doctor of Performing Arts”. This suggests a limited opportunity for hybridity within doctoral research ([Parry, 2007](#)). The UniSQ DCA’s interdisciplinarity enables its candidates to enact the trickster, by slipping between disciplines and exploring the contested spaces between that which is established and in turn, unsettling ideas of locality.

The DCA’s appeal to students also lies in a student-centered mentoring approach by UniSQ staff who are professional artists in their own right. As the former Head of School notes: “creating a degree that’s about generating funds where we churn them in and churn them out is not going to happen [...] because the staff who are working in the DCA are very, very invested and know what it’s like to really have creative projects that change lives [...]” The program specificity operates on a personalised, CoP approach directly

embedded in the DCA which candidates across all year levels attend. This CoP enables professional networking and authentic industry immersions that are connected to external cultural bodies and other universities globally. It is this shifting between the personal and the public sphere that gives the trickster not only its creative energy but its cultural significance as it moves between the many layers of professional engagement. The artist-researcher as a trickster extends beyond being an arts producer but industry participant and cultural ambassador. The trickster's constant shifting between familiar and unknown spaces is what constructs the multifaceted experience of a UniSQ doctoral student as they take on the role of an academic researcher, professional artist and community participant.

Narrative 2: boundary crossing between theory and practice

Underpinning the DCA's CoP is the development of a dialogic, peer-learning experience, where students can connect across all year levels of candidature as well as engage with external guest artist-researchers and scholars. The program supports the 'uncertain' and 'risky' space experienced within practice-led research (Berridge, 2006) through peer learning and collective problem-solving at doctoral level. The former Head of School addresses this practice-led researcher experience as: "The nexus in the ambivalence that's created between testing out your theory in practice because when you do that, you change the very nature of the theory you're looking at and you have to change the very nature of practice." One candidate acknowledges that "I'm finding more and more that [the exegesis writing] process is creative in itself. [...] you're crafting a paper really. You're finding different things in people's research that resonate with your project." These learnings have been realised through class conversations and creating a framework for DCA students that is a "safe space" for the testing of ideas. A DCA candidate commenting on this peer learning approach noted: "It was good to test whether what I was thinking was making sense [...] I get a lot out of listening to other students and listening to the research they're doing and different ideas about how they're structuring their project."

In developing a sense of connectivity through the DCA CoP there is also an appreciation of the program's interdisciplinary focus. A DCA researcher notes: "because the students come from all different fields, I think that's definitely helpful because while our practice is very different the reasons that we're doing it and the way we take risks are very similar [...]. They're also able to see gaps easier than someone that knows your work". The candidate's reflections here not only denote an overcoming of individual project challenges through interdisciplinary dialogue but also a strong artist identity formation within this very interdisciplinary context. The program is increasingly gaining a reputation as being *for professional artists* as one candidate notes: "it's better because it is practice-led. So, I thought that it would give me an opportunity to develop my practice and possibly be a practicing artist." The DCA branding extends beyond industry-readiness as it also develops student's artistic agencies that connects them to global art conversations. This exemplifies how artist-tricksters can work the regional periphery and how collaboration among artists as students and educators can cultivate career research opportunities, creative and cultural agency as well as regional resiliency in doctoral study.

Recommendations

This study provides three recommendations that can offer key insights for other universities developing creative doctoral programs as well as for staff and student researchers who identify with the complexities of doctoral projects. While these recommendations are considered in the context of staff and student narratives from one university, the study is supported by key literature and national and international doctoral program benchmarking as a means contributing to new knowledge. The following recommendations are aligned with the qualities of the trickster archetype to assist with creative doctoral research, particularly in the boundary crossing between theory and practice:

(a) Building the trickster-artist researcher confidence:

Provide program tailored preparation for commencing DCA students highlighting the “unpredictable” nature of practice-led research via NTRO training.

In response to practice-led research being considered an “unpredictable” and “risky” space in its very form of inquiry (Berridge, 2006), it is important that program-tailored NTRO training is introduced to better prepare students to manage the ongoing “uncertainty” that is involved in creative projects. This will equip students with the confidence to transition between practice and practice as research within the academy (Hamilton and Jaaniste, 2009). Specific NTRO training will support students in how creative research is contextualised, recorded and evaluated as new knowledge and as generating broader impact. This will enhance the positioning of creative doctorates and their role in developing high profile artist-researchers.

(b) Embracing the artist-trickster’s non-authoritarian lessons:

Enhancing practice-led collaborative peer learning via class critiques and online forums.

It is important to develop flexible and blended mode class forums that provide a relatable, dialogic and “carnavalesque-like” conversational environment as a way of encouraging peer learning in the doctoral space. Collaborative peer learning is a non-authoritarian pedagogical approach that provides the opportunity for students to share knowledge and learn from each other across interdisciplinary contexts (Miles and Rainbird, 2015). This approach is uninhibited by the traditional power dynamic between supervisor-student in doctoral research. Peer learning involving collaborations and class critiques can also alleviate student experiences of isolation, individual project team insularity, or any broader sense of not belonging within the university. Central to this, is ensuring that these forums are widely accessible via blended mode class/forum offerings to optimise local to global learning engagement.

(c) Enacting the trickster’s boundary crossing and peripheral resiliency:

Strengthen research connectivity and collaboration across university and industry networks via program-based COP as a career building and program resiliency strategy.

For “less established” research models such as creative research, where students may feel that their programs are engaging on the “academic periphery”, it is vital to develop a program-based COP as a platform that connects researchers and facilitates collaborations across industry and other universities. This cultivates professional artist-researcher development through transformational learning and creates a sense of belonging while encouraging creative innovation and researcher and program resiliency. This platform can function as a support collective where ideas can be tested and specific project problem-solving can take place in both theoretical and practical contexts. Collaborative research showcases and other outputs could also be generated in order to optimise outputs and enhance research culture. In pragmatic terms, expanding program-based COP across external networks supported by specific program marketing, will assist in the promotion of the program and its future growth beyond its developed networks. This includes strategic decisions about local and global recruitment that is enriched by the culturally diverse affiliations of the trickster metaphor, in support of a common understanding of practice-led research across creative arts higher education.

Conclusion

This article has provided key insights into the UniSQ’s DCA’s design and the evolution of its distinct identity during its 1st year in 2016. The first student cohort was drawn almost exclusively from within the UniSQ community because of limited and non-program specific marketing in accordance with the University’s specifications during this period. Publicised predominately by word-of-mouth, the program demonstrates a sustainable and resilient regional model under a neo-liberal climate and a complex and competitive creative economy (Australia Council for the Arts, 2017). Drawing on the trickster metaphor, this article provided insights into how the first DCA candidates, their supervisors and leadership staff make sense of their own experiences *within* and *about* the program. The trickster metaphor, the interview narratives, and the relevant national and international literature on practice-led research provided insights into the program’s viability and innovation. This included a doctoral COP that supports practice-led researcher capabilities across local and international candidacy; tailored practice-led research content with specific NTRO training, and blended mode peer learning forums for local and international students. It was these program features that have not only assisted students in better understanding practice-led processes within doctoral study, but also has equipped students with professional creative and critical researcher skill-sets, further expanding the trickster metaphor as one of program leadership and regional resiliency.

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Notes

1. This contrasts the monologic teaching methods where the teacher's voice and views "are the first and last ones uttered in the classrooms [...] so that students learn to speak and write 'correctly'" (Nesari, 2015: 642).
2. Whitehead contrasts this from propositional theories that are *derived from conceptual abstractions* of relations between propositions (2009: 87).

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