

Speaking of Supervision: A dialogic approach to building higher degree research supervision capacity in the creative arts

Jillian Hamilton  and Sue Carson

Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology

ABSTRACT

In the emergent field of creative practice higher degrees by research, first generation supervisors have developed new models of supervision for an unprecedented form of research, which combines creative practice and a written thesis. In a national research project, entitled 'Effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees', we set out to capture and share early supervisors' insights, strategies and approaches to supporting their creative practice PhD students. From the insights we gained during the early interview process, we expanded our research methods in line with a distributed leadership model and developed a dialogic framework. This led us to unanticipated conclusions and unexpected recommendations. In this study, we primarily draw on philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogics to explain how giving precedence to the voices of supervisors not only facilitated the articulation of dispersed tacit knowledge, but also led to other discoveries. These include the nature of supervisors' resistance to prescribed models, policies and central academic development programmes; the importance of polyvocality and responsive dialogue in enabling continued innovation in the field; the benefits to supervisors of reflecting, discussing and sharing practices with colleagues; and the value of distributed leadership and dialogue to academic development and supervision capacity building in research education.

KEYWORDS

Supervision, creative practice research, practice-led, academic development, distributed leadership, HDR, PhD, postgraduate

ARTICLE HISTORY

First published in
Educational Philosophy and Theory, 2015, Vol. 47, No. 12,
1348–1366

Introduction

In a recent (2013–2014) research project entitled *Effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees*, which was funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), we set out to investigate the practices of supervisors of Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) candidates in the creative arts (including visual and performing arts, design, creative writing and media). Unlike 'traditional' fields (Science and the Humanities for instance), creative practice PhDs involve research in and through the production of creative 'artefacts' (art, products or events) in conjunction with a written thesis (often referred to as an 'exegesis'). Besides difference in form, the research questions, aims, methodologies and new knowledge claims of creative practice PhDs also differ from those of a traditional PhD (Hamilton & Jaaniste, 2009; Scrivener, 2000). In turn, this means that the models and practices of PhD supervision in creative fields are quite unlike those of established research domains. However, when we conducted our research, little research had so far been carried out into what effective supervision in this distinctive field entails.

A large-scale Australian research project, entitled *Creative Arts PhD: Future-proofing the creative arts in higher education* (Baker & Buckley, 2009), had recently established the diverse practices of institutions and various approaches of creative arts disciplines in relation to what constitutes the creative practice PhD, how it is examined and how it is supervised. Its final report included a number of recommendations relating to standards and consistency, including the recommendation that,

Further examination of patterns of supervision could assist in establishing some best practice models to assist in creative-arts-specific research supervision training programs. (97)

This recommendation provided a key impetus for our project. Whilst the field of creative practice HDRs is relatively new (largely gaining traction since the Strand report in 1998), we proceeded from the premise that, since many first generation supervisors have now begun to consolidate their approaches, it might be possible to capture insights into what constitutes effective supervision practices in creative fields and to establish how they might be fostered.

Our project, which was conducted as a partnership between Queensland University of Technology, University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, Auckland University of Technology and University of Western Sydney, unfolded during 2013 and 2014. The findings were presented in a comprehensive, 75 page report entitled *Building distributed leadership for effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees* (Hamilton, Carson, & Ellison, 2014), with resources disseminated through the project website *Effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees* and a book-let for supervisors entitled *12 Principles for Effective Supervision of Creative Practice Higher Research Degrees* (Hamilton, Carson, & Ellison, 2013).

We do not intend to duplicate our research findings and outcomes here, for they can be accessed directly through those publications. Instead, the focus of this article is on our *approach* to the research, including the way in which it evolved, and how it influenced our findings, recommendations and presentation of the outcomes of the research.

In 'A Complex Terrain: Putting Theory and Practice to Work as a Generative Praxis', Elizabeth Grierson writes:

The *making new* is a foreign terrain of discovery ... There is always the potential for entering new discourses and opening knowledge to the 'more'. (Grierson in Allpress, Barnacle, Duxbury, & Grierson, 2012, p. 68)

This is broadly true of the journey of research. The nature of research into a new field is, self evidently, an exploration of the unknown, and its outcomes cannot be fully anticipated in advance. When engaging with new discourses, the research process can take divergent paths and reach unexpected conclusions. In our project, it was not simply the emergent discourses of adjoining fields of supervision that would cause us to change course and to discover 'more', but the tensions we encountered between the dominant discourses of supervision and the experiences of supervisors.

Opening up our research to the voices of supervisors, we would discover more than we anticipated. In turn, as our project progressed, our methods evolved to become multimodal, distributed, participatory and dialogic. This led to insights, outcomes and recommendations that might otherwise have eluded us, including new ways to approach research supervision training. It also led us to rethink the presentation of our research. Instead of synthesising our findings into authoritative statements, standards and best practice models, it would come to take the form of polyvocal dialogues.

A Distributed Approach to Capturing Diverse Perspectives and Situated Knowledges

When first embarking on our research into the effective supervision of creative practice HDRs, our aims were aligned with the recent recommendations of Baker & Buckley's *Creative Arts PhD* project (2009) for sector-wide standards and the establishment of an exemplary 'model' of supervision. By

capturing the early experiences of administrators and course leaders and eliciting the strategies of 'early adopter' supervisors, we planned to develop this 'in-common' understanding of effective supervisory practices. This, we assumed, would unfold as a conventional research process: situating ourselves—as the researchers—at the centre of a data collection process, we would draw together primary and secondary data through the methods of document audits, surveys and interviews. We would then filter this primary data through an interpretive analysis into a definitive overview of the field, produce a coherent 'model' and set of 'standards' and disseminate our conclusions to a receptive audience through summative publications.

However, our preliminary research quickly confirmed our own experiences as supervisors and administrators of creative practice HDRs. It highlighted the unevenness of supervisory practices and processes across the sector, the contestation of the field of creative practice research and tensions between local and central administration. We recognised the need to take a more open approach to capturing diverse perspectives. Involving five partner institutions (including 'Sandstone', 'Technology', 'Regional' and 'Trans-Tasman' Universities) in a research partnership, we set out to draw together insights from their varied contexts, and from a range of institutional levels— from top-level policy documents to research student centre administrators and course leaders, to experienced, as well as new, supervisors.

Our initial approach to the research was therefore not strictly centrifugal. Indeed, the project proposal we submitted for funding the research cited the principle of distributed leadership. Adapted from other contexts, distributed leadership has been applied to research in higher education in a number of ways in recent years (Jones, 2011). It recognises that leadership and expertise are not simply invested in formally designated leadership roles but that, as an attribute and capacity, leadership is possessed by individuals at all levels of an institution who act as local innovators, exemplary role models and sources of information and good practice to others (MacBeath, 2005).

At this point, our implementation of distributed leadership principles was narrowly defined. That is, we were mindful of capturing and representing the diverse perspectives of 'leaders' at different institutional levels, across a range of university contexts. We took a consultative and collaborative approach to data collection through the network of project team members. Each belongs to the first generation of creative practice HDR supervisors, and each is recognised nationally, as well as locally within their institutions, as leaders in the field. Together, we proceeded to cast a wide net to draw together a diverse range of 'informants' for our study.

Our document audit and surveys of HDR administrators revealed that the participating universities have varied clusters of creative disciplines, diverse HDR cultures and practices (admission processes, naming and timing of milestones, proportion of theory to practice, guidelines for submission and presentation of (written and practical) outcomes and examination requirements). It also confirmed Baker and Buckley's (2009) findings of inconsistent nomenclature for creative practice/practice-led/practice-based/artistic research and the written component/thesis/exegesis. And it revealed diverse complexions of HDR cohorts across each institutional context—from primarily high performing honours graduates to mature practitioners and industry professionals. We approached administrators and course leaders across the partner universities through surveys and interviewed 25 experienced and new supervisors. In this way, our data collection not only had breadth, but also depth, as it drilled down through several strata of HDR culture. Moreover, our interview sample brought together supervisors from diverse creative disciplines visual art, music, performing art, new media, creative writing, fashion, graphic design, interaction design and interior design. In terms of experience, the longevity of supervision ranged from 6 months to 20 years. The sample included seven 'first generation' supervisors (advocates for the field, who helped to define it through scholarly publications and were amongst the first to supervise creative practice PhDs); seven 'experienced' supervisors (with three or more completions of creative practice HDRs and an average of 10 years experience); and eleven 'new' or 'second

generation' supervisors (who have recently completed their own creative practice PhDs). The expertise, qualifications and backgrounds of the interviewees also varied. Whilst the majority (21/25) have a PhD (two were undertaking a PhD and two are accredited through 'equivalent standing'), the type of PhD varied, with the majority (twelve) holding a 'conventional' PhD and nine with a creative practice PhD. (It should be noted that, of those with a conventional PhD, three quarters considered themselves hybrid theorist-practitioners but undertook a PhD before creative practice HDRs were possible.¹) Through the 'insider' knowledge of the project team members embedded within each of the partner universities, we were able to tap into established networks and recruit this diverse cross section of 'informants' very early in the project timeline. We disseminated the survey and commenced the interviews with supervisors in November 2012.

The data collection process was therefore inclusive of diverse perspectives from the outset, with participants from multiple institutions and multiple levels of university strata, from across a range of disciplines and backgrounds and with varied levels of expertise. That is, we were mindful of collecting diverse insights and were aware that the professional situation and perspective of each informant would be inflected by their institutional location, disciplinary base, qualifications, experience and professional responsibilities, along with the attendant discourses and conversations that surround them. We recognised that each respondent to our surveys and interviews would possess a multifaceted subject position; have a particular 'point of view'; be pursuing their own, partial objectives; be responsive to a range of preceding and concurrent discourses; and inhabit particular speech genres.

Donna Haraway (1998) has written about the importance of recognising a subject's 'situated knowledges'. From a feminist perspective, she argues that 'texts' are inevitably inflected by an author's subjectivity, which is predicated upon their lived experiences and their habitation of gender and sexuality. Situated knowledges, she writes, leads to 'wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organising worlds'. From a different perspective, Bakhtin (1981) argues that a 'text' or 'speech' is necessarily inflected by the author's point of view or 'accented social orientation', which is contingent upon class and political position. In the case of our research, we expected respondents' 'oriented subject positions', and hence their spoken and written responses to our questions, to be influenced by a range of factors including their position within their university (administrator, academic leader, HDR supervisor); the agendas through which their position functions (strategic, operational, pedagogic); and the types of discourses they most frequently encounter (policy documents, theoretical papers, practitioner statements, academic conversations, student voices).

This was not something that we saw as problematic. As Bakhtin argues, the recognition of authorial partiality enables us to accept—even to embrace—the speaker's individual and unique orientation to their subject. However, in this diversity, we might say that the sample provided a representative snapshot of the sector. It was therefore our hope that a synthesis (through the process of content analysis, Holsti, 1969) would lead to standards and a model that was broadly representative and would therefore be relevant to diverse contexts.

Dialogue, Responsiveness, Centrifugal and Centripetal Discourses

Our surveys and interviews with supervisors were semi-structured, with open-ended questions to enable multi-dimensional perspectives to arise.² In the interviews, questions ranged across the topics of the supervisor's background and experience; views on creative practice as a field; supervisor training; acquisition of expertise and support for the role; and practices, strategies and innovation. Because our questions were wide-ranging, open-ended and expansive, we left ourselves open to insights that were new, unexpected and surprising.

Early on in the interview process, a number of observations would change our approach to the research. Firstly, it became clear that supervisors in creative fields have not only assumed a level of risk implicit in a new, undefined area of pedagogical practice, they have also been, and continue to

be, highly agile in changing contexts. Of our interviewees, not only have the majority supervised a form of PhD that is very different to the one they completed themselves, a high proportion (72% or 18/25 (11/ 14 experienced supervisors and 7/11 new supervisors)) have extended their supervision capacity beyond their immediate area of expertise and discipline area (primarily to ‘fill supervision gaps’ at their institution and so enable the uptake of creative practice research in adjoining fields). In addition, irrespective of their qualifications, the form of their own PhD or their identification as a theorist (five), practitioner (five) or hybrid theorist–practitioner (fifteen), all supervise across both creative and written aspects, with the exception of one.³ This flexibility in specialist expertise is unusual in postgraduate supervision and sets the field apart from more established areas, where supervisors tend to attract candidates and take on projects that are very closely aligned with their own specialisations and form of PhD.

This flexibility has, of course, been a pragmatic necessity in forging a new field. As one supervisor noted, ‘I was only one of a few people in the [discipline] who had actually supervised to completion [when I arrived]. And so ... if anyone wanted to do a PhD, I was supervising’. However, instead of being daunted by the challenges that a new form of research pedagogy presents, the supervisors we interviewed have embraced the challenges of risk and diversity. Whether practitioners or theorists, they recognise an opportunity to enhance their own knowledge and understanding as well as to strengthen and invigorate their discipline’s postgraduate (as well as undergraduate) course offerings. Importantly, they also see this agility as integral to the potential for innovation in creative research. As one supervisor noted, ‘It is exciting to be part of such a rich area and it is gratifying to be part of a process of change’. Indeed, some respondents argued that creative PhDs are all about challenging orthodoxies. As one respondent commented:

I like to think that at PhD level the practitioner is innovating or renovating the question of what the field is. They’re bringing something that’s fundamentally questioning to the field.

Similarly, supervisors of creative practice research candidates have been presented with the opportunity to challenge orthodoxies as they bring together teaching, research and creative practice into a new field that challenges the conventions of HDR more broadly. They consider the opportunity for continued experimentation and diversity to be absolutely fundamental to the momentum of innovation in creative arts research as well as in institutional approaches to research degrees.

In our interviews there was a recurring theme of supervisors adopting ‘guerrilla tactics’. Petersen (2007) argues that academics are continually involved in maintaining, negotiating and challenging the boundaries around academic categories because of the dynamic nature of academic work. A discourse of resistance was similarly reported by Krauth’s, 2011 examination of doctoral studies in the field of creative writing, in which he refers to the exegesis as a ‘runaway text’:

After paralleling and plaiting, came a sense of the exegesis as outlaw. I think important room should be made for the outlaw exegesis because new knowledge won’t be made by those who obey, or stretch just a little, the laws or status quo. (np)

The supervisors we interviewed cannot be characterised as mavericks however. They overwhelmingly welcome the opportunity to engage with a diverse, cross-disciplinary higher degree research community and the perspectives of traditional, as well as new fields—within their institution and beyond it. As they navigate uncharted territories, they are curious, experimental and expansive in their approach, but they value the emerging research into the field and the clarity it brings, with almost all of the supervisors we spoke with (80%) being familiar with the developing literature on creative practice research. Indeed, eleven of the twenty-five respondents have actively contributed to the literature. That is, we found a measured, scholarly approach, attentive to the discourses of others, and a sense of active co-production of the field. Indeed, in the face of diverse supervisions and the individual needs of candidates, a number of supervisors we spoke to have come to focus on the core attributes of research design as an anchor to their supervisions. As one, reported, ‘It’s about how to go through, and what’s required [in terms of scholarship]—not always

about being an expert in the precise field'. Another (new) supervisor noted that 'I have a sense of how to do a PhD, and I see the work of the creative and match it in standard'. That is, they did not see innovation in creative practice HDR as challenging the core attributes of research as the production of new knowledge through rigorous methodologies and scholarly articulation of the resulting extension of a field. Contestation is around what form this might take.

This framing is important for contextualising the strong resistance we encountered to the potential imposition of prescribed models and 'standards' relating to methodologies, forms of creative practice research, and what constitutes new knowledge. An overwhelming proportion of supervisors in our sample insisted that these aspects of creative practice must remain open to experimentation. As one experienced supervisor argued:

They must remain flexible because the learning mode is discovery based. I think it is a flaw when people try to systematise models for creative practice PhDs. They don't understand the fundamental premise that it is discovery based.

We would hear this sentiment expressed over and over again in relations to the imposition of policy and supervision oversight. In particular, supervisors were anxious about the imposition of standards and models by central research student centres, (which they saw as a subtext of central supervisor training and resources).

All of the institutions in our study offer central academic development for supervisors (being compulsory for supervisor registration or accreditation in some), and the majority of supervisors we interviewed (19/25 or 80%) have undertaken it.⁴ Whilst this central training is well developed, and most supervisors we spoke to recognise its value for understanding 'process' and broad principles, they are largely resistant, or at best, are ambivalent to it, describing it as functional, institutionally imposed, generic and ill-aligned to creative HDRs. Moreover, belying a broad perception that the goal of such training is to impose central generic standards, there was much discussion about the unique aspects of creative practice research and the need for programmes that are specifically targeted to issues that supervisors encounter in this (unique) context. As one respondent proposed:

It would be great if there were opportunities available to supervisors that focus on creative practice in particular. The university does not have the expertise in many ways to offer this [support]. However, we do have a few very good higher-level academics in our faculties.

That is, supervisors were not expressing an aversion to continued professional learning *per se*, but to central, generic and didactic models.

On the other hand, working within a 'small' community to undertake academic development in the form of workshops, case studies and mentoring, which includes opportunities to hear and voice local practices and discuss in-common issues, is welcomed by the majority of supervisors we interviewed. Whilst none of the partner institutions in our study currently offers systematic and regular discipline or faculty-specific supervision training, many new supervisors in particular commented that they would appreciate such opportunities to learn from experienced peers.

This resistance we encountered to central supervisor training is not unique to creative fields. As we commenced our literature review, we found that recent qualitative research in IT disciplines (Bruce & Stoodley, 2009) and other disciplinary fields (Hammond et al., 2010) reported similar findings. Hammond et al. for instance suggest that tying academic development to quality assurance and compliance is problematic. They write that 'there is considerable resistance from supervisors to compulsory, centralised and formal training programmes. There is also considerable cynicism about the value of such programmes' (2010, p. 15). This reflects scepticism to recent changes in the Australian higher education sector in the form of national policy and standards, which have been reflected, at local levels, as supervision has shifted from a somewhat 'private' affair to the subject of considerable oversight in the form of policy and regulations, milestones of candidature, supervisor accreditation and reporting.⁵

We can draw upon philosophical perspectives on dialogue to help explain the tensions we encountered. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin not only describes the inflected nature of dialogue, and the accented social orientation of the speaker, he also explains the responsive nature of their 'utterances', writing:

Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere. Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account ... Therefore, each kind of utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication. (1986, p. 91)

In this way, Bakhtin argues that responsive speakers present purposeful, responsive utterances to existing discourses. He goes on to describe the inherent tension between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' discourses, as the site of contestation. Centripetal discourses are official and formal, and their purpose is centralising, homogenising and hierarchizing. 'Centrifugal' discourses, on the other hand, are decentralising and destabilising of conformity and formality. These counter forces, he argues, are constantly at play in communicative interactions (1981, p. 425).

Responsive utterances are not simply a dialogic clash of accented social orientations and voices then, but a contest between the centre and the margins, between authority and innovation and between 'ideals' and lived experience. Moreover, it is the dialogic clash of accented social orientations that exert a constant push and pull upon meaning. As a site of contestation, discourses are in a state of flux. It is this push and pull on the meaning (of creative practice, of research and of HDR supervision) that respondents in our study wish to retain, in order to ensure the field might remain open to experimentation. We must recognise the tensions between university centres, which are interpreting and implementing national policy regulations (such as the Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013), and the responses of supervisors on the ground. It is a tension between quality assurance and compliance to 'standards' and 'models' of supervision, and the need to recognise complexity, differentiation and emergence. It is not merely a dialogic clash of accented social orientations, perspectives and voices, but a fundamental tension between the urge to reign in, to standardise and to govern through oversight and regulation and the contesting voices of advocates for diverse practices, and an expansive space for risk, experimentation and innovation.

A Chance to Talk: The Best Academic Development is Talking Things Through

The second, and most striking, aspect of the interviews we conducted was a frequently stated desire by supervisors to engage in conversations with others about their experiences, new discoveries, insights and practices. Opinions that were frequently voiced, such as 'we don't get the chance to talk' and 'a supervisor's role is such a cloaked affair compared to other contexts', suggest that this opportunity is rarely afforded.⁶ That is, whilst supervisors are very conscious of the powerful centralising voices that are amplified through university corridors and formal communications, they felt that they have few institutionally sanctioned avenues to give voice to their own, often hard won knowledge.

Our interviews clearly afforded this opportunity. As interviewers and project leaders, we are also experienced supervisors of creative practice HDRs, and we made this situated perspective clear at the beginning of each interview. Our approach to the interviews might, therefore, be described as a qualitative and relativist research method, in which we assumed the dual identity of practitioner-researcher.⁷ This meant that the interviews, whilst rigorously developed and implemented through formal Ethical Clearance processes, with consistent question forms, independent initial analysis and so on, took the form of colleague-to-colleague dialogues, which proceeded from a common ground. The interviews afforded a pretext in which supervisors could voice their invested, tacit knowledge on a range of topics.

In many cases, their tacit knowledge had never been voiced before. The interview process therefore often created powerful reactions in the interviewees. A palpable shift in posture, in gesture and voice, was discernable, and in response to the open-ended final question, 'Would you like to add any further comment', the interviewees frequently took the opportunity to comment on the positive impact the interview had on them. This was more than an appreciation of the opportunity to simply talk about their practices, or the ego boost that is afforded by conferring the status of 'expert' on an interview subject. Speaking aloud about their insights for the first time, many interviewees realised the extent of the knowledge they had gained, and this helped to secure their identity as a supervisor and self-perception of their value (to their students and to the institution). Further, it afforded an opportunity for deep reflection. The concrete articulation of the interviewees' tacit knowledge brought it to the surface and into the open, and this led to deepening their own insights. As one participant relayed at the end of his interview, it was a most powerful form of academic development for him. Then, reflecting on his own statement, he concluded that, 'The best academic development is talking things through'.

For supervisors who have gained a reputation as local innovators and leaders, there are opportunities to share their knowledge as their advice and insights are often sought out by their peers. Indeed, for new supervisors in particular, the term 'leadership' tends to be associated with 'experienced supervisors' or 'disciplinary experts', rather than with managers or administrators of HDR programmes. Instead of engaging directly with a chain of 'command' and institutional process when issues arise, a local network of 'advising' is first sought out. Indeed, many interviewees spoke readily of the informal networks that operate in relation to discussions around supervision, which suggests that a form of distributed leadership has arisen, in which innovators and experienced practitioners advise and support their colleagues within informal local networks. Whilst this local leadership is often informal and unstructured, supervisors—particularly new supervisors—frequently referred to its value. Indeed, whilst most supervisors maintained that there was no 'consensus' on creative practice supervision, many report adopting the effective approaches of experienced supervisors.

Some of the universities in our study have actively developed a mentoring system that pairs experienced supervisors with emerging ones, whilst some supervisors at other universities have formed informal mentoring relationships.⁸ The mentees overwhelmingly recommend it as an opportunity to learn. Co-supervision also affords a type of 'apprenticeship' for an associate supervisor, before taking on their own principal supervision. As Sinclair (2004) notes, experience in supervision is a key indicator of likely success in student progression and completion (and this is borne out by data collected from schools in our study). This suggests that experience is of benefit to supervisors/supervisions/candidates and it therefore follows that the insights gained by experienced supervisors may be of particular value to new supervisors in the form of providing exemplars of good practice. Indeed, in our study, we found that mentoring appears to be highly valued by new supervisors. As one comments:

[Mentoring] is the strongest aspect of [our university's] program, I have had really good mentorship as a supervisor ... It is a strength of the school.

We found that the mentors in our study tend to use personal exemplars of (successful) creative practice PhDs to assist this process. As one explained,

I use examples of exegeses, as they are tangible evidence when used in conjunction with the story. Back-story is important; [it might be] an example of risk taking, but it needs to be based on deep working knowledge and lived experience with the context [of the student].

A conversational approach, which employs authentic, contextually specific examples to make supervision practices, insights and strategies explicit, was often cited as the preferred model of learning by new supervisors who are, in Petersen's terms in the process of 'identity formation' and developing 'self-governance' (2007). Such dialogues enable new supervisors to adopt the 'unremarkable' academic practices of experienced peers.

As an extension of this concept of modelling, an overwhelming majority of experienced, as well as new, supervisors in our study expressed interest in the idea of using ‘real’ exemplars as case studies. This includes those drawn from ‘outside’ their own institution. Such exemplars of good practices, they pointed out, should not be cast as a model or standardised template, but should be presented as a collection—a field of possibilities—that might be adapted to suit the supervisor’s own context and situation.

In short, because supervising in a new field is a relatively isolated and unparalleled experience, there was an often-stated desire to engage in conversations with others and to gain insights into the exemplary practices and strategies of others working in a similar context (however that might be defined). As one supervisor noted, ‘there’s a sense of peer sharing that works for me—a multiplicity of voices, keeping things open rather than closed.’

Here, we might again return to the philosophy of Bakhtin, who expands in *The Dialogic Imagination*,

It is through dialogic interactions that language is used and developed; and it is through dialogic interactions that the world is created and experienced with each person engaging in the ever flowing current of life imbued with and propelled by other voices, other texts, other ways of being and doing. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346)

Through dialogue, we can gain insights into other ways of ‘doing supervision’, and of ‘being a supervisor’. Moreover, as supervisors within an emergent field, through dialogue and the negotiation of meaning that it entails, we can begin to develop a common language and shared understanding of what the field is, its practices, its language and definitions, and its impact.

From our initial interviews with supervisors, we therefore began to form an understanding of the benefits of dialogic exchange. It is of benefit to experienced supervisors, as it affords them an opportunity to reflect upon, articulate and thereby consolidate the understanding they have gained. It is also of considerable benefit to new supervisors, as it provides a way to gain insight into the wealth of institutional, operational and tacit knowledge of their more experienced peers. For both, it facilitates the process of identity formation as a supervisor, and it enables the development and sharing of good practices of supervision. Moreover, a dialogic framework works more deeply in relation to an emergent field. It affords the initiation of a deepened understanding, a shared language and the dissemination of exemplary practices, yet it enables the field to remain fluid and emergent—open to the addition of new experiences, to contestation and to unending responsiveness.

In our research report, we therefore went on to highlight the importance of local relationships and networks and argued that actively fostering distributed leadership is pivotal to building research education leadership and postgraduate supervision capacity. We would make recommendations to universities for local, discipline-based academic development for supervisors in the form of supervisor dialogues and collegial mentoring to complement generic, central training. We would also recommend that disciplines and faculties recognise the ‘informal’ leadership that has emerged, and harness it to stage local, discipline-level workshops on supervisory practices and processes, to facilitate peer-to-peer dialogues, and to capture authentic, contextually relevant exemplars of good practice. Further, in our booklet for supervisors published from the research project (Hamilton et al., 2014), we would recommend to supervisors that they reflect, discuss and share practices with colleagues through sustained local dialogues.

In emphasising the importance of decentralised, local and contextually specific academic development for HDR supervisors, as a complement to central programmes, we are not alone. In research on supervision in IT disciplines, Bruce (2009) notes the powerful impact of the conversations she had with supervisors (in the form of focus groups). And Hammond et al. (2010) recommended that universities review resources and professional development programmes to ensure they respond to local needs of new and experienced supervisors, foster local conversations

about research education and develop leadership in research education at local levels. It may be then that this is not simply a concern for creative practice fields, but for HDR programmes more generally. Indeed it may have implications for other forms of academic development at universities. Whilst central, generic academic development and policies can provide guidance on policy, process and broad principles, we may need to add value through complementary, multifaceted, locally invested, dialogic strategies.

Enabling Distributed Leadership through a Dialogic Framework

Whilst we would go on to recommend a dialogic framework for supervisor development and leadership capacity building in research education as an outcome of our research, we also realised that our recommendations must be mirrored *within* our research. Whilst our core aim—to capture and share the isolated and scattered insights of supervisors in the emergent field of creative practice HDRs—did not change, our objectives did. We broadened our research methods into a dialogic framework and set about facilitating greater opportunities for supervisors and administrators to articulate and make concrete their tacit knowledge. Moreover, we realised that it was important to not simply draw together supervisor dialogues as a ‘data capture’ process, but to engender dialogue between supervisors by enabling them to meet and present, share and see what has been learnt, to debate issues from their diverse perspectives and to bring their ways of ‘doing supervision’ into an open conversation. In this way, supervisors would not only be afforded a voice, we could also progress the discursive push and pull upon the meaning of supervising creative practice research and so advance the maturation of the field.⁹

Six months into the project, we initiated a national symposium, *Effective Supervision of Creative Arts Research Degrees*. The goal was not to present our research findings to an audience, as is the usual motivation for a conference conducted within a research project. Indeed, the research was in its initial phases, and as yet, we had no findings to report. Instead we set out to open up an opportunity for reflective dialogue and exchange. We invited project team members and the interviewees, sent invitations to all Australasian and New Zealand Universities and issued an open call for good practice case studies and position papers. In this way, the project design expanded to include 62 delegates from 20 universities.

At the symposium we engendered multimodal dialogues in the form of formal papers, case study presentation and open forums on specific topics (such as supervising the writing and supervising the practice). In relation to our research project, the symposium multiplied the outcomes. Alongside the audit, survey and interview materials we originally set out to collect, it enabled us to capture exemplars and case studies presented at the symposium and disseminate them on the project’s web site: www.supervisioncreativeartsphd.net. It also provided an opportunity for feedback and early evaluation of the project as it was unfolding. But more than this, the symposium enabled responsive dialogue and information and resource sharing amongst delegates.

We would see writ large the benefits of actively fostering distributed leadership. The symposium enabled participants to establish cross-institutional supervisor relationships and networks and both to voice their ideas and to gain feedback. As one wrote,

How wonderful it is to talk to people about supervision, to test ideas, get a feel for the lie of the land, ask for advice—knowing there’s a potential community out there.

And, as another respondent to our symposium feedback questionnaire noted, it facilitated reflection and supervisor dialogues, sharing of practices and capturing authentic, contextually relevant exemplars of good practice,

This symposium has revealed that there are many people concerned about similar issues and there is plenty to learn from one another.

The symposium provided an opportunity for a dialogic form of academic development, which was of benefit to both new and experienced supervisors, but it also initiated a ripple effect as participants became conduits of dissemination, taking back what they had discovered and establishing local networks within their own universities. As one wrote,

[The symposium] furthered my knowledge about the different approaches taken by PhD supervisors and the challenges faced when supervising these kinds of research projects. This has assisted me as a PG supervisor and I will share the information with my creative arts colleagues at [my] university.

In this, we enabled the extension of the process of distributed leadership and prompted the initiation of new networks, both between delegates and in new local communities of practice.

Such dialogue was also of benefit to the field more broadly, for it enabled delegates to collectively seek common ground. As another delegate commented,

[There was] a sense that we are all in the same boat as supervisors; that we care about our practice and the shaping of the practice-led space within academia.

And many of the attendees would go on to produce scholarly outcomes (including in response to our call for submissions to this special issue). For these supervisors, a reflective and dialogic process that began with the tentative voicing of tacit knowledge in interviews saw their insights teased out, made confident and then amplified through a dialogic framework in the symposium, where their insights had been set side by side, tested and contested, before being realised in published form. All of this had been made possible through the evolving and multimodal processes of dialogue.

Changed Outcomes

Besides changing the project's research methods, our shifting understanding of the needs of the field also saw us change the way in which we would present the outcomes of the research. Instead of distilling the primary data obtained from the document audit, surveys and interviews into a definitive overview of the field and producing a coherent 'model' and set of 'standards' for supervision, we instead took a dialogic approach. Through a content analysis, we first identified the primary concerns, attitudes and practices of early adopter supervisors and synthesised them into recurrent themes, good practices and strategies of supervision. From this we produced a set of working principles, which were presented in a booklet entitled *12 Principles for Effective Supervision of Creative Practice Higher Research Degrees* (2013). Importantly, these principles are not presented as rules, guidelines, or models but as a form of supervisor-to-supervisor advice—a form of mentoring. Each principle is voiced in the words of supervisors, and whilst we summarise each thematic principle in terms of overview, it is illustrated (in both title and narrative description) by quotes and exemplars of good practices in supervisors' voices, which sit adjacent to each other, highlighting comparative and diverse experiences and voices. In some instances, they are coupled in dialogic contestation, highlighting the contextual differentiation and situated knowledges of the speakers (as new and experienced supervisors for example). Instead of standards, they are framed as possibilities and exemplars of good practice that might be adapted to suit a supervisor's own context and situation. Indeed, in the introduction, we provide the caveat that,

We present them as advice rather than rules, as one thing that the supervisors were unanimous about is the need to avoid proscriptive models and frameworks, and to foster creativity and innovation in what is still an emergent field of postgraduate supervision.

The outcome of our research (besides a formal report in line with funding guidelines) might be described as a polyvocal text, or heteroglossia. In an interpretation of Dostoyevsky's novels [1981 Trans.], Bakhtin describes a heteroglossia as a hybrid construction of the utterances of the narrator and cast of characters. The term is translated from Bakhtin's native Russian, as 'raznorechie', which literally means 'different-speech-ness'. More than a textual device for arranging multiple voices into

an advancing narrative, a heteroglossia involves integration of subject positions, accented social orientations and voices—with all the tensions that this juxtaposition implies. Bakhtin contends that purposefully combining harmonised and discordant discourses produces dialogic counterpoints, which shapes discursive meaning. Meaning is never fully realised, closed once and for all, but remains open through ‘responsive utterances’ that negotiate and advance it as a continual ‘clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents’ (1986, p. 41). This push and pull upon meaning challenges coherent, centralised, ‘official’ or normative discourses as it maintains a dynamic interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces.

Conclusion

Our interviews revealed the tensions between a normative drive towards coherent ‘standards’ and a resistance and contestation by supervisors in the form of other voices, other texts, and other ways of being and doing. We realised that supervisors hold innovation and experimentation at higher value than systems, standards or prescriptive models; that they hold relationships with candidates, peers and local networks in higher regard than institutional ‘management’ and ‘compliance’; and that they value dialogic approaches such as mentoring, sharing authentic exemplars and supervisor-to-supervisor dialogues in higher regard than generic, didactic academic development and resources. However, what became most clear was that experienced, as well as new, supervisors benefit from the process of voicing their insights, and there is great value to them in engaging in reflective practice and articulating their processes and practices of supervision, expressing concerns and sharing experiences and strategies for success. These early findings caused us to change tack part-way through our research process and, far from producing a model or standard for the effective supervision of creative practice PhDs, we facilitated an open, dialogic framework in which supervisors could share their insights and work towards co-producing a deeper understanding of the field. And we produced a dialogic, polyvocal text that was open rather than closed.

Most importantly, we realised that it is the *process* of dialogic engagement, as much as the concrete *outcomes* of the process, that provides a means through which supervisors can be supported and equipped, and research education leadership capacity can be built. In this, our understanding of distributed leadership expanded beyond simply the recognition of the expertise of leaders at all strata of the institution. We realised that distributed leadership provides an opportunity to enable a broad-based and networked system, in which innovators and early adopters can share a wealth of tacit knowledge and provide models, advice and support to others within communities of practice.

Local leadership by ‘early innovator’ supervisors has been imperative to establishing this new field of creative practice research supervision and integral to building supervision capacity. Dialogues between ‘local’ supervisors must now be recognised as a crucial component of professional development and building research education leadership. If not necessarily evident to other ‘tiers’ of leadership, the advice, mentoring and sharing of good practices that experienced supervisors offer to their less experienced peers are critical aspects of supervisor development and held in higher regard by new supervisors than normative institutional ‘management’ and ‘training’. What is more, it is mutually beneficial, with experienced supervisors gaining benefits in terms of reflection upon, consolidation of, and influence upon the field. Whilst central training is of some value, if the creative arts disciplines are to build supervision capacity and help to ensure quality in postgraduate supervision, institutions have a responsibility to recognise this inherent ‘expertise’ and nurture dialogic relationships and networks. This can be facilitated through activities such as peer mentoring, peer-to-peer dialogues, discipline-level workshops for sharing advice and contextualised, discipline-specific exemplars of good practice.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching under Grant LE12:2264. The views expressed in this study do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The authors also extend thanks to the project team, who facilitated the interviews, Professor Welby Ings, Associate Professor Barbara Bolt, Professor Ross Harley and Dr Claire Aitchison. We thank Research Assistant Elizabeth Ellison for her management of the mass of material we gathered and the content analysis of the interviews. And we thank the supervisors who generously offered us their insights and so contributed to (and are acknowledged in) the booklet *12 Principles for the Effective Supervision of Creative Practice Higher Research Degrees*.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching [grant number LE12-2264]

Notes

1. During a 'transitional' phase, many PhD candidates in the creative arts employed tactics to incorporate practice within their 'full thesis', so helping to pave the way for this new field. This discussion is outside the scope of this study.
2. Participation was voluntary, with signed consent. The interview questions were approved by the QUT Human Research Ethics Approval Number 1200000625.
3. In 2009, Baker and Buckley argued that differing backgrounds of supervisors had led to supervisors supervising different 'parts' of the PhD (i.e. the exegetical component or the creative component). However, they foresaw a gradual shift to supervisors overseeing the entire thesis, as more supervisors became able to do so. This is borne out in our, more current, research. Irrespective of their qualifications, the form of their own PhD, almost all our interview subjects supervise across both creative and written aspects of a candidate's project—in recognition that theory and practice are integral and interdependent.
4. This represents a substantial shift from earlier discipline-wide studies that found that none of the much larger sample of supervisors surveyed had undertaken central training (Dinham & Scott, 1999; Hammond, Ryland, Tennant, & Boud, 2010; Sinclair, 2004). This shift reflects changing quality assurance requirements.
5. See the Introduction to this Special Issue for more detailed discussion.
6. Except, that is, for passive resistance to imperatives of institutional compliance, which might be manifest as a failure to comply or return forms.
7. An exception was some of the interviews at QUT, which were conducted by the project's research assistant. The relative merits and disadvantages of an 'insider' research position have been discussed in anthropology and sociology literature, particularly in relation to the allied health professions (Finlay, 2006; Marshall, Fraser, & Baker, 2010).
8. One university in the study has recently introduced a tiered accreditation system that recognises levels of experience through titles and recommends that workload be allocated for mentoring supervisors in a formal arrangement.
9. Our approach to the project was also shaped by the OLT's expectation that funded research should not simply produce research outputs, but must engender systemic, sector-wide change. To this end, the OLT encourages wide participation and early dissemination. (This is a substantial difference to

other funded research programmes in Australia such the ARC and NHMRC with their emphasis on summative findings.)

Notes on contributors

Prof Jillian Hamilton teaches, researches and supervises postgraduates in digital media, art, design and film within the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. As a member of QUT's College of Mentoring HDR Supervisors, she has published extensively on creative practice research including its methodologies, the exegesis, disciplinary distinctions and HDR supervision. In 2013, she led an OLT Leadership for Excellence project, 'Building distributed leadership for effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees' and chaired a national symposium on the topic. She is the project leader of an OLT Strategic Priority Project on postgraduate research and coursework and has contributed to several OLT grants. In 2013, she received an Australian Award for University Teaching Excellence and an AAUT Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning. She is currently on secondment with QUT's Learning and Teaching Unit where she leads Academic Development programmes. Email: jg.hamilton@qut.edu.au

Associate Prof Susan Carson is principal supervisor of practice-led PhD students in the fields of creative writing, film and television, and Indigenous narrative within the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, where she is a member of QUT's College of Mentoring HDR Supervisors. She was co-leader of the 'Building distributed leadership for effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees' OLT project and co-chair of the Effective Supervision of Creative Arts Research Degrees symposium in 2013. Sue has considerable experience in academic management and close knowledge of supervisor training from her role as Head of Postgraduate Studies in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT for five years during a time of expansion in the creative practice doctoral programme. In 2013, she won an AAUT Citation for University Teaching for her work in postgraduate studies. Email: sj.carson@qut.edu.au

ORCID

Jillian Hamilton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8636-534X>

References

- Allpress, B., Barnacle, R. B., Duxbury, L., & Grierson, E. (2012). *Supervising practices for postgraduate research in art, architecture and design*. Rotterdam, DEU: Sense.
- Australian Qualification Framework Council. (2013). *Australian Qualification Framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.aqf.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/AQF-2nd-Edition-January-2013.pdf>
- Baker, S., & Buckley, B. (2009). *Creative arts PhD, future-proofing the creative arts in higher education: Scoping for quality in creative arts doctoral programs*. Sydney: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. Retrieved from www.olt.gov.au/project-futureproofing-creative-arts-melbourne-2007
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *Discourse in the novel, The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. (M. Holquist, Ed., C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press. pp 259–422.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. (V. W. McGee, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press
- Bruce, C. (2009). *Towards a pedagogy of supervision in the technology disciplines*. Sydney: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. Retrieved from www.olt.gov.au/resource-towards-pedagogy-supervision-qut-2009
- Bruce, C., & Stoodley, I. (2009). *A pedagogical framework for the technology disciplines*. Retrieved from eprints.qut.edu.au/28536/
- Dinham, S., & Scott, C. (1999). *The doctorate: Talking about the degree*. Nepean: University of Western Sydney.
- Effective Supervision of Creative Practice Higher Research Degrees*. (2013). Retrieved from www.supervisioncreativeartsphd.net
- Finlay, L. (2006). 'Rigour', 'ethical integrity' or 'artistry'? Reflexively reviewing criteria for evaluating qualitative research. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69, 319–326.
- Grierson, E. (2012). A complex terrain: Putting theory and practice to work as a generative praxis. In B. Allpress, R. Barnacle, L. Duxbury, & E. Grierson (Eds.), *Supervising practices for postgraduate research in art, architecture and design* (pp. 65–79). Rotterdam, DEU: Sense.

- Hamilton, J., Carson, S., & Ellison E. (2014). *Building distributed leadership for effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees*. Retrieved from <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-building-distributed-leadership-effective-supervision-creative-practice-higher-research-degr>
- Hamilton, J., Carson, S., & Ellison, E. (2013). *12 Principles for the effective supervision of creative practice Higher Research Degrees*, Retrieved from www.supervisioncreativeartsphd.net
- Hamilton, J., & Jaaniste, L. (2009, October). *The effective and the evocative: Reflecting on practice-led research approaches in art and design*. Interventions in the public domain, 2009 ACUADS National Conference, Brisbane.
- Hamilton, J., Thomas, M., Carson, S. J., & Ellison, E. (2014). *Good practice report: Postgraduate research and coursework degrees*. Sydney: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.
- Hammond, J., Ryland, K., Tennant, M., & Boud, D. (2010). *Building research supervision and training across Australian universities*. Sydney: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching Project Final Report. Retrieved from www.olt.gov.au/resource-building-research-supervision-and-training-across-australian-universities-uts-2010
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14, 575–599.
- Holsti, O. R. (1969). *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Jones, S. (2011). *Distributed leadership*, Retrieved July, 12, 2013, from <http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/distributedleadership/>
- Krauth, N. (2011). Evolution of the exegesis: The radical trajectory of the creative writing doctorate in Australia. *Text*, 15, 1. Retrieved from <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april11/krauth.htm>
- MacBeath, J. (2005). Leadership as distributed: A matter of practice. *School Leadership & Management*, 25, 349–366.
- Marshall, J. E., Fraser, D. M., & Baker, P. N. (2010). Reflexivity: The experience of undertaking an ethnographic study to explore issues of consent to intrapartum procedures. *Evidence Based Midwifery*, 8, 21–25.
- Petersen, E. B. (2007). Negotiating academicity: Postgraduate research supervision as category boundary work. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32, 475–487.
- Scrivener, S. (2000). *Reflection in and on action and practice in creative-production doctoral projects in art and design*. (Working Papers in Art and Design). Vol 1. Retrieved from http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/vol1/scrivener2.html
- Sinclair, M. (2004). *The pedagogy of 'good' PhD supervision: A national cross-disciplinary investigation of PhD supervision*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Strand, D. (1998). *Research in the creative arts*. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.