How do you do a practice-based Phd in Filmmaking?

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the issues raised by the process of engaging in a practice-based PhD in Filmmaking. As a sole practitioner the screenwriting doctoral student is able to explore her practice through the development of a screenplay, but what of the potential doctoral students who may wish to explore their specialist and professional filmmaking practices but who are unable to operate as sole practitioners, because of the collaborative requirements of the professional filmmaking model. Using the experience of the screenwriting doctoral investigation, and particularly the exploration of the relationship between methodology, exegesis and the creative artefact, we explore a potential model that would enable all filmmaking specialists to engage in doctoral research. Art students engaging in practice-based doctoral research do so in an environment formed by Government requirements that demand cultural, environmental and economic impacts as well as a methodology that to a large extent is formed by social science measures of value. Using this framework as a starting point we attempted to identify a suitable model that would enable filmmakers to undertake practice-based doctoral research.

Keywords: Practice, Methodology, PhD, Filmmaking, Exegesis, Doctoral

Introduction

The Northern Film School at Leeds Metropolitan University, in common with all Film Schools in England and Wales, delivers its courses on filmmaking within the context of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's Benchmark Statements for Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies at BA Honours Level, and for Masters Degrees Characteristics (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008). These statements provide the main framework for filmmaking courses at graduate and post-graduate level. Our approach to research on filmmaking is also informed by the Research Excellence Framework, which identifies the Assessment Criteria for research within the area of Music, Dance and Performing Arts.

These instruments, which govern the approach towards the pedagogy of filmmaking at graduate and post-graduate level, take a similar approach towards the role and position of arts activity within the Academy.

It is essentially a landscape in which elements such as entrepreneurial activity, economic prosperity, developing tourism, professional development, and staff development are the key signifiers; a landscape in which creativity, invention, experiment and the actual composition of artworks are barely visible.

The focus on learning outcomes identified by Universities who run film courses exemplifies this approach. Students are expected to have an understanding of the economic structures of the film and television industry including funding and distribution for different markets, and understanding of the economic and industrial context of screenwriting and the role of the screenwriter within that industry context, an understanding of what constitutes a commercial idea, an understanding of industry expectations and a knowledge of industry requirements with regard to the generation and development of screenwriting projects. These learning outcomes were identified in 2005 by Skillset - the Government funded and UK film and creative industries training body - and was part of the process through which Skillset "approved" and accredited various Filmmaking courses as Screen Academies throughout the UK.[1] Where there is a focus on the development of the film itself students are expected to operate within a standardised paradigm which covers elements such as the High Concept, the Hook, Conventions of Genre, The Rules of Genre, Meeting Audience Expectations, the Conventions of Form – and so on and so forth.[2]

These aims and outcomes are reflected in the Northern Film School assessment strategies at both Undergraduate and Masters Level.

Employability is the new watchword of the UK Government, and the "public funding of higher education is becoming more tightly bound to the fortunes of the economy higher education as serving wealth creation." (Winter, R, Griffiths, M & Green, K.n.d; 2000)

The binding of education to the economy and to wealth creation has been part of a relatively long journey for the arts in Higher Education and this story has been well rehearsed elsewhere. However for the purposes of this paper it is perhaps useful to highlight one or two other points. The 1997 United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) report on Practice Based Doctorates is probably the most influential report in terms of placing arts practice into the Higher Education system. Fiona Candlin argues that in making a firm distinction between art practice and theory the report assumes "that artwork cannot be as intellectually clear and accessible as writing. Indeed in order to become precise, clear and accessible artwork has to be accompanied by written analysis." (Candlin: 2000 Practice-based Doctorates and Questions of Academic Legitimacy: 97)

As Candlin points out the UKCGE report further suggests that "although the creative work may demonstrate originality and so on, it is actually only the written research that can adequately clarify those factors and provide a basis for judgment", in essence "privileg[ing) theory over artwork since it is the theoretical component of the doctorate that gives the work PhD standing." (Candlin: 98)

But whilst the UK HE framework – generally – does impose an element of written research as providing a basis for judgement, there is no real agreement about how much written research should be provided or what form that written work should take. The University of London suggested that "the test and the production should be integrated and neither should be an add-on" and "practice should not be a separate category", whilst the University of Surrey suggested that the "portfolio of original work" was "in lieu of a thesis" and that "the works shall be accompanied by notes on each item in the portfolio and either an extended analysis of one item or a dissertation on a related theme". (McLaughlin, 2002)

Despite this Governmental framework there is of course considerable opposition to the idea of written research providing the basis for judging the value of the practice, perhaps the most succinct of which is Patricia Bicker's reported comment "that in order to fulfil the criteria for a research-based degree in any meaningful way the fine art researcher will almost inevitably be drawn away from any meaningful practice." Peter Suchin, reflecting upon the academicisation of art education, is concerned that ultimately it may mean that we are, as teachers, as students engaging in arts practice in the academy, ultimately being bought off, persuaded into making art that is in fact "a saleable object, something reeking of apparent independence and individuality when in fact it is tightly prescribed by market-complicit models." (Suchin, 2011)

The Practice

There is no doubt that as the practitioner I emotionally identify with both Suchin and Bicker. Nonetheless I find myself engaged in a practice based PhD in Filmmaking – or to be more specific in the specialist area of screenwriting, and it is through my direct engagement with this process, together with my engagement with my Supervisor, Larra Anderson and my Director of Studies, Ruth Robbins that I began to question what the PhD process actually meant.

When I began to think about doing my project, which is based around the development of an original feature length screenplay, I had discussions with other potential supervisors and a Director of Studies. Those discussions weren't so much about the practice itself – i.e. the screenplay that I intended to write, or indeed about what the practice of screenwriting might entail. Rather it was about framing a research question that fitted the PHD Application template. In essence I had to propose a thesis that I would then test. It had to be based upon a methodology that was replicable by other writers and screenwriter theorists and who would thus be able to test out the thesis for themselves. The methodology had to be identified and a draft statement was arrived at:

"The research focuses on examining the way in which a screenwriter develops and writes a screenplay. Throughout the process a development journal will be maintained, recording notes on everything involved in the process of developing the screenplay.

The development journal is both a record of process, but also a reflective tool that through constant reference becomes a reflexive process, having a continuing impact upon the development of the screenplay.

The screenplay itself at various stages is made available to peers for their comments and feedback. As the project develops the screenplay will be submitted to a wider readership for further feedback, comment and reflection.

Their comments and responses will also be noted upon and used as further input, either into the screenplay itself or as part of furthering the second intention of the research programme – to explore new ways and methods of engaging with the act of writing a screenplay, and that in turn this will lead to the development of a new approach towards how we teach and train screenwriters.

In this way the research programme, a practice based programme, will hopefully be replicable. It will provide strategies, examples, an understanding of process, that future writers and screenwriting teachers can draw upon, use as a replicable method, and further develop."

The Screenplay

The screenplay is based upon a particular event in my life, an event I wanted to make sense of through writing about it. As a screenwriter I wanted that form of writing to be a screenplay. In wanting to make sense of this event I wanted to engage in a creative process in which I would be able to explore who I was, what this event meant to me as self and as writer. The development journal was a record of process – a record of the "mechanics" of developing a screenplay. But it was also a record of discovering myself as a writer. The driving force in other words was the writing, the exploration, the creation – the practice.

The screenplay, the principal outcome of my research, is an act of the imagination. It is the imagination that drives the practice, the exploration of myself, my imagination of myself. It is not an act of providing strategies, examples, replicable methods. It is through the act of imagination that these strategies may emerge, but the act itself is not a strategy.

The story is autobiographical – and most of the heart of the story, the Act 2 if you like, is pretty much as it really happened. Names have been changed. Several characters have come together to become one single character. If there is one major difference between what really happened it is the fact that although my grandmother features largely in the story, my mother – who emotionally and factually is just as significant in the real story – takes a minor role. Perhaps there is another autobiographical story in me waiting to get out.

But it has become – to my surprise – an act of imagination as much as an act of recording the events. Gaylene Perry, writer and lecturer in writing, writes about her own doctoral practice "Even when I am treating autobiographical traces in my creative writing, the empowerment that I gain appears to reside in the *imaginative work* that I do as a writer." (Perry, 2010:35)

It is that discovery of the imagination that is most exciting. Interestingly, I have found that the process of developing the doctoral thesis has freed my imagination elsewhere and lots of ideas that I have had in my mind and in my writer's jottings for years have suddenly started popping out, mostly as short screenplays and mostly as screenplays in which I try to experiment with various forms of storytelling.

Because I was in a Film School it was possible for some of these short scripts to be taken up by the School's filmmakers and used as either the basis for their creative projects or as exercises. One short film ended up as third year BA creative project, another was taken up by graduating MA's as an independent post-graduate project, and a scene from the feature film was used as an exercise by first year MA directing students.

For me as a screenwriting student the exercise was invaluable, not because it provided an opportunity to see the work on screen, but because it provided the opportunity to engage in conversations with directing students, producing students and cinematography students about the realisation of the film. The directing exercise has not yet been completed, but I know from conversations with the directing students and with the supervising academic that four students have directed four very different interpretations of the scene. When it came to one of the short films it was quite clear that the Director and Cinematographer had very different interpretations of the short film. Interestingly it seemed to me that the cinematographers had a more clear understanding of what I was trying to achieve whilst – and perhaps in true Director fashion – the directing students tended to see the script as a more or less the equivalent of a shopping list in which the basic ingredients for tomato soup were laid out but the director decided to make asparagus soup instead.

These collaborations raised questions about the nature of the screenwriting research. If the result of my imagination – the screenplay – is subject to widely varying interpretations by fellow collaborative practitioners, what does this mean in terms of my proposed methodology which suggests that it will provide "an understanding of process that future writers and screenwriting teachers can draw upon, use as a replicable method, and further develop."?

Is the discovery of my imagination, or the resulting artefact replicable, either by other writers, or by screenwriting tutors if the artefact itself is subject to such a wide variety of interpretation?

And what does replicable mean in this context? Can I, in my exegesis of my practice, create a genuine meme? As Estelle Barrett says, "the cultural artefact – [in this instance my screenplay] – is not the meme itself". (Barrett: 2010:159) So neither the screenplay, nor the discovery of my imagination is the meme, despite the fact that it is that screenplay and that discovery of imagination, which is the embodiment of my practice and the research of my practice.

Instead, she argues, it is the exegesis that will provide the opportunity for "the replication and re-versioning of the completed artistic work". (Barrett: 160)

My development journal is part of the practice of writing the screenplay. Indeed, in many ways it is the practice. It is the process through which I arrived at the written form of the screenplay. The journal is the visible, readable manifestation of the process. The artefact is the result of the journal. The journal is part and parcel of the final artefact.

But the journal itself cannot stand as the exegesis of practice. I have to contextualise the practice by explaining the journal.

A new question now arises – what form should that analysis take, and indeed how long should the analysis be? Should it be 30,000 words, including extracts from the journal? Or should the Journal be included as a whole, with a 10,000 word analysis based upon the Journal. The latter would provide a rather unwieldy document and so in practical terms alone it is unlikely. But if the journal is in fact the practice, shouldn't the journal be presented in all its unwieldy glory? It is the journal that lays bare my practice of my screenwriting. In analysing it, do I then step away from the practice and begin to provide another layer between practice itself and the understanding of practice?

I haven't yet answered these questions – this is a work in progress. Between us, student and supervisor, we will – I hope – ultimately find a way.

At this point, however, the process of engaging in the research based practice of screenwriting and the number of questions it raised compelled us to start asking how we as Film School academics could provide a framework for PhD's within the Film School itself.

There are two questions here, firstly a practical problem of establishing an "institutional" habitat for the PhD students, and this will be explored later in the paper. The other question relates more to the exploration of practice by other filmmakers. Because I am a screenwriter and within the filmmaking context able to operate as a sole practitioner in my doctoral research I have not had to consider either how my practice might be affected by and in turn affect other collaborators. Nor, because I am a writer have I had to consider the actual mechanics of the presentation of my practice to the examiners.

The Film School Environment

Recently I had to engage in an exercise for our Faculty in which we identified the research projects that were being undertaken in the Film School that might qualify the Faculty for additional funding through the Research Excellence Framework (REF). As such it was necessary to provide a record of the "key research insights or findings that underpinned the impact, and provide details of what research was undertaken." As is common with most Film Schools all our lecturers are practitioners in film, and the majority are practitioners whose experience and expertise is professional. Most of the research activity is based around the development, production and exhibition of short or feature films. Most of the films are made with the two-fold intention of firstly providing a continuing development

of the skills of the filmmakers, and secondly to achieve recognised industry based exhibition and ultimately national and international impact. Almost without exception the practitioners have described the underpinning research in a way that distances their research from their actual practice. Martin Harris, for example, the Film School Lecturer in Documentary and Editing was responsible for Executive Producing "We Are Poets" a feature length documentary about young poets based in Leeds. "We Are Poets" has achieved considerable industry success and far reaching impact: it has been exhibited at the Sheffield International Documentary Festival where it won the Youth Jury Award, and will commence theatrical distribution in June 2012.

Let us be honest here. This frame working is based upon the need to identify impacts under the REF in which "The assessment of impact will be based on expert review of case studies submitted by higher education institutions. Case studies may include any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia that has taken place during the assessment period, and was underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting institution within a given timeframe. Submissions will also include information about how the unit has supported and enabled impact during the assessment period." (Research Excellence Framework: Decisions on Assessing Impact, March 2011). This approach dominates the case study report and Martin rather than identifying the development of either his documentary practice or the development of his teaching practice as the impacts of his research instead identifies the relationships established between the University and Leeds Young Authors, the benefits to the poets who have been able to perform their work more widely at events associated with the screenings, the benefits to the wider community to which the young poets belonged, and the benefits to the two young alumni of the Film School who were supported in the development of the documentary project.

This is not to say that these benefits are unworthy, indeed the reverse is true. The Film School itself has a long tradition of working with the community and of placing the work of our film students within a wider social framework in which the social and civic responsibility of filmmakers is identified and explored in their developing practice.

It is also the case that research projects based around the relationship with community, or upon explorations of relationships between different disciplines, or upon any aspect of "social, economic or cultural impact beyond academia" could and should be identified by the Film School as worthwhile doctoral research projects.

But in the end the Film School is educating and training filmmakers as potential professionals working in the professional industry. And although some of our students do become individual film artists it is not our primary aim. Nor is it the primary aim of the students who enroll at the Film School. Their ambition is to leave the Film School as graduates who will be able to obtain employment and build a long-term career in the media industries as collaborators with other film professionals.

That is the impact that matters: my exegesis, my screenplay, my development journal, are only of value if they succeed in assisting in the development of a knowledge and experience of practice that will assist filmmakers in their development as film professionals. There are implicatory benefits that will result from this, but the primary benefit is around the development of the craft, art and profession of filmmakers.

The Supervisor's Perspective

Arriving at an understanding of what the research work would encompass using the PhD by Practice methodology for a screenplay has not been a straight-forward one. Conversations with other academics have often muddied the waters, from my point of view, as few have understood the concept of this methodology and instead utilize the social sciences viewpoint, which does not accept the artistic artefact as the research in and of itself. I have found that the most common approach is to view the exegesis as the research, and not the artefact achieved by the creative process. Fortunately there is a body of work on the PhD by practice that makes this an established – even if seemingly relatively unknown – methodology – and one which is appropriate to a PhD in filmmaking which still allows the creative artefact/research to rule.

However, one can also see by the student's own account that the methodology brings up questions of creativity in all its forms. This in itself is not uncommon in the creation of any PhD by any methodology. Regardless of choice of final structure, the student is engaged in the creation of a piece of creative work, that though it would need a massive team of people to recreate it into an actual film, is a "complete" creative work in and of itself and of the student's own concept, design and matching their desire. If successful, the PhD will represent in part that the screenplay is a new creation, a contribution to knowledge in the field and a representation of mastery of the field of screenwriting. If the methodology is expressed through the exegesis then this should be a view into the process of screenwriting that would be a channel into screenwriting that could be replicable for others in their own creative journeys to the creation of masterworks and new knowledge of their own. As a beginning, the work on this PhD so far was strong proof of concept that a PhD by Practice in the filmmaking creative skill specialist area of screenwriting is possible.

The Question

The question of how to do a PhD in the other creative skill specialist areas of filmmaking however is not answered by this one example. MA Students were attracted to the idea of continuing on a PhD, but were unsure of what would be involved for their individual creative skill specialist areas.

In order to consider the issue for the creative skill specialist areas outside of screenwriting, I first asked the question what does it mean for students in the specialisms that are directly reliant on the work and immediate collaboration of differing specialists in filmmaking to make work in an academic environment? What model could we work with? As course leader on our MA Filmmaking, the most logical starting point was to take my experience as supervisor on

this PhD and compare and contrast with the collaborative working methods we employ at MA level in the creative skill specialist areas.
On most filmmaking MAs, students create a feature film script or short film. They create a portfolio or journal or write-up referencing artistic and theoretical influences as well as contextualizing their practice and process, including the contributing practice in the individual student's creative skill area.
In some ways, this does sound suspiciously like the exegesis my PhD student in screenwriting may be struggling to find. Is it possible that a PhD thesis that reflects the methodology of the research artefact is merely a mirroring the journal process of the MA, and that it is merely length that distinguishes between MA and the PhD? Or is there more that needs to be distinguished? Of course there are substantial and substantive differences and I hoped that the exploration of the differences would bring me closer to the answer to our question of how to structure a PhD in filmmaking for all specialist areas.
The first difference is that the MA is a degree about learning, and in most degrees this will "normally be supported by integrated teaching, learning and assessment strategies that are related to the learning outcomes that have been established by those teaching the level" (Munn et al., p5). For filmmaking and other degrees in the "practice" category, "the predominant mode of learning is through work-based or practice-based learning" and "often combine structured and independent learning methods alongside time spent in practice." (Munn et al., 2010:3) Masters degrees "are predominantly composed of structured learning opportunities (are 'taught') although frequently at least a third of the programme is devoted to a research project, leading to a dissertation or the production of other output such as an artefact, performance or musical composition". (Munn et al., p12) This means that an MA student in screenwriting is actually being taught how to write a feature screenplay during the course. The screenplay may end up being their graduate MA thesis, but it is something they will have reached through an integrated teaching and learning strategy. The MA in fact is a "license to practice" [Philips & Pugh, 2010:23] – proof that a student has gone through such a strategy and therefore is now been created to be a qualified practitioner in the field.
Upon entering the programme, my current PhD student should be – and is - already a seasoned practitioner. She is keenly aware of how to write a feature script, but engages in this particular research process (the screenplay) with an eye to making a worthwhile contribution to the field itself (screenwriting). Her degree will recognize "a worthwhile contribution to the development" of this field of professional practice. (Phillips & Pugh, 2010: p24). At the end of an MA a student is meant to have an understanding of how to write a screenplay. At the end of her PhD my student should have created not only a screenplay that is a contribution to the art of screenwriting, but have contributed to the understanding of what the practice of screenwriting actually is. This is something that can only be approached by someone who is already a screenwriter. Equally it is something that can be accomplished in other creative specialist skill areas by other PhD students who have completed sufficient training or professional experience in their own area in filmmaking. Direct training in the field to be a practitioner is not what the PhD is about, but practice and creating new knowledge is – as well as a contribution to the understanding of what the practice actually is or is becoming.
The second difference is that in order to accomplish the PhD the research (screenplay) has to be reflected in an exegesis which is reflexive and contextualizing – but which also takes on the original texts to which it refers in its literature survey from a point of view of authority and critique, not just of reference. A PhD student in filmmaking is drilling down to primary reference texts and partaking in analysis and informed critique, not simply contextual referencing. It is this work that creates the difference between simply professional creative work in filmmaking and PhD work in the field.
For some creative skill specialist areas this may mean that the final physical structure of the PhD thesis is altered. Those who utilize moving image and sound design as part of their practice may need to include moving image and sound as primary reference texts (i.e. not simply textual references to DVD's or frame captured stills). This may create non-traditional forms of PhD text, but this potential deviation in form is appropriate and required if students are to examine and analyse primary texts and therefore partake in PhD level work. It is a PhD about the art of *moving* image after all, and not one about other written texts – it makes sense that some of its primary references would involve movement. (We already involve this concept into the MA journal process in a reflective, contextualizing mode, there is no reason why this cannot be replicated in at a PhD level.)
The model of the filmmaking MA also allows us to view the separate/together view of the workings of a filmmaking crew. The screenplay is a complete creative artefact, but in terms of filmmaking it is only one piece of a larger creative work made by a collaboration of creative skill specialists. In the same way, each creative skill specialist area is in an ultimately collaborative position on the larger work, but the individual specialist's work and the creative process upon which each exegesis is based will reflect a different research – based on the contribution of each creative skill specialist area. As a result each research will individually contribute to the field of knowledge in that different area. In the same way we distinguish and identify creative skill specialist contribution, we can then apply the model of the screenwriting PhD to the other creative specialist skills areas of filmmaking.
In theory, then, there is no obstacle to taking on a practice-based PhD in filmmaking in any of the creative specialist skill areas. However, the challenge of accomplishing a PhD in the collaborative skill specialist areas of filmmaking is ultimately not about the "PhD-ness" of the submission, but rather entirely a matter of practicality.
How, for instance does a cinematography student, whose work is dependent on the creation of a screenplay by the screenwriter, the funding and setting up of the film by the producer, the guidance of the director and most likely the collaboration of a production designer, costumer, cast and the other regular characters who make up filmmaking, do it? How are they all going to be able to create a piece of practice-based research in filmmaking? Individual projects

can be created in what I will call “one-man-band” projects. These are most commonly completed in art schools for museum based exhibition projects, or often in visual anthropology or documentary models. However, how does a cinematography student who wants to do a PhD accomplish one in the way in which they were trained or have practiced as filmmakers in the professional world, i.e. in a professional model of collaboration with a team of other filmmakers in differing creative skill specialist areas?

If it was a producing student, it might be possible for them to enlist the creative specialists they need, put the funding in place and go and make a film, as that is the actual job of the producer. However even here, given the expenses involved in making a film, the instability of finding film finance and the time it takes to establish that finance, a three year full-time, or even a seven year part-time PhD may never come to fruition due to the expense of the materials and the intense uncertainty of ever obtaining them at all. Therefore is it fair, even to the PhD candidate whose specialism is producing, to approve a PhD proposal with these stated goals? My experience with graduating MA producing students is that they do not need this to be pointed out to them. None have yet submitted PhD proposals, as they are waiting until we are able to address this issue ourselves.

A cinematography student would have a much larger hurdle to overcome. A Director of Photography’s job is not to find the idea, write the screenplay, establish the project, find funding for the project, direct the story and the actors, create the sets or do any of the other functions that are necessary to be in place for the Director of Photography to perform their art. Tell a cinematography MA graduate that they will have to initiate an entire film in order to even have the opportunity to do the cinematography needed, and most will decide that a PhD is an impossible task outside their realm of interest, of ability and most importantly, training. If one of the remits of the PhD process in the UK is expanding professional employment opportunities (Roberts, 2002) then the lack of a professional filmmaking model is currently an insurmountable obstacle for the recently graduated student who wishes to do a PhD in their specalism.

At BA and MA level there are sufficient students paying sufficient fees to justify funding the short projects that all students collaborate on in their skill areas. Given the lesser fees for a PhD programmes and the self-driven social sciences model commonly used for achieving practice-based PhDs, it would not be cost-effective for a university to fund individual projects for each PhD student seeking a degree. Potential filmmaking PhD students would need to both fund their PhD’s and their films/research. It is hard to imagine the process through which a PhD student could develop this kind of model, access the funds to deliver the fees and the production costs, and find a collaborative group of filmmakers – whether fellow research students or professionals – willing to provide the resources and space for the PhD student to develop the research practice.

The Proposal

So this is the operative problem. How does one accomplish a PhD in filmmaking *in the model in which one has been trained* if there is little opportunity for actual filmmaking? In order to answer this question one must look to another model for a PhD – one that goes beyond the standard practice based PhD – and one that can be utilized, adopted or paralleled such that a practice based PhD in filmmaking can be accomplished.

The research centre model of scientific research programmes seemed to present a potentially useful model for exploration as these offer some key advantages for PhD students engaged in the collaborative process. These were identified by Philips and Pugh as:

> The three major advantages over the position of the individual research student are that: the environment continually demonstrates that research is taken seriously – a great benefit as compared with the situation of students who have supervisors for whom research cannot be the top priority; the laboratory is well funded; and the training in professional practice and the academic issues tackled will be state of the art.” (Phillips & Pugh, 2002:13)

In utilizing a research centre approach where research is undertaken by both professional researchers and supported by research students, one begins to have a potentially workable model. This could entail a supervisor applying for individual support for a film (or rather research project). Or it could be through a university faculty supporting a film school as a meaningful centre of research. In this model, multiple PhD students could be provided with the opportunity to complete their research programme by focusing upon their work in a single collaborative research project as so complete their PhD’s within a justifiable window that is determined by the size of the project that has been funded. In film terms, the school would be acting essentially as the executive producer.

In terms of the advantage of the environment being one in which the work is being taken seriously, engaging supervisor/researchers as leads in the work itself allows not only for a tremendous amount of engagement and commitment from supervisors, but potentially opens up a new world of funding to which the individual research student cannot even apply. Academic research grants brought in by supervisor/researchers would also ensure the university support that comes with seeing their academics participating in meaningful mid-career research. These grants, for example the Research Grants Scheme of the AHRC (AHRC, 2012) also usually stipulate additional funding for actual PhD project studentships as well.

Furthermore the film itself now has much greater possibility of being well funded beyond even research monies. In terms of the hard and soft resources that they can supply there are considerable benefits to students being part of a university research centre. But there are even greater benefits to the University of having an established research center in a field, not the least of which are the external professional partnerships available to such a center.

Additionally grants (such as the AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Awards in the UK)(AHRC, 2012) give studentships with bursaries that are designed to capitalize on collaboration and partnerships between Higher Education departments and non-academic organisations, businesses and private co-finance. The utilization of established professionals in the field opens up the world of further national, international film finance opportunities, from which most such opportunities which students are expressly excluded. For example, in the application guidelines for the UK regional film funding agency, Creative England, it is stated that applications for film finance from registered students will not be considered. (Creative England, 2012:3).

Finally working with established mid-career professionals in the field only raises the learning and research opportunities for every PhD student involved in the project. Due to the nature of the project, the professional practice will be very high. This scenario obviously is of benefit to all, student, academic and university alike as it both creates academic, employment and financial incentives across the board, not to mention creates increasingly higher reputations for the center and university and the academic researchers with each successful research project.

In their paper, Six Essential Roles of Health Promotion Research Centres: The Atlantic Canada Experience (Langille et al, 2009), a medical sciences model is identified that could form the basis for developing a PhD filmmaking model.

The six essential roles are outlined in the following diagram, and include:
(Langille et al., 2009)

1. *Sustaining an operational base*. Using the Canadian centre as a case-study, it is clear that the university-based research centre could create "physical space, research leadership and capable staff who were skilled at developing grant proposals and managing research projects, budgets and human resources. (Hanney et al., 2000; Segrott et al., 2006; Langille et al., 2006:80) Within this physical space people could come together and develop a research culture where 'learning communities' emerged and groups of stakeholders engaged as colleagues across formal and social boundaries. (Edwards, 2005; Segrott et al., 2006; Langille et.al. 2006:81)

This model provides strong parallels to the model of a film production company engaged in the funding and support of films at the heart of its mission. Students would only benefit from being within real-world model of the outside world of filmmaking.

2. *Transdisciplinary and intersectorial collaboration*. Their researchers were determined to be transdisciplinary in the sense that they were working across the conceptual and methodological traditions of a number of disciplines (Gibbons et al., 1994; Langille et al., 2006:81). As a result it was found that a broad range of disciplines and sectors on a project team increased the ability to identify key stakeholders and access a range of resources – human, financial or informational. (Walter et al., 2003; Langille et al., 2006:81)

This approach can be directly applied to the crewing and head of department roles that are key to the filmmaking process and lead to a strong argument for support of this type of structure, which is already inherent within the art itself.

3. *Acquiring research funds*. The model recognizes the stiff competition for research grants and how this was mitigated by the ability of the larger research center and larger number of researchers involved to create a wide variety funding mechanisms to develop research teams and a variety of proposals, to conduct collaborative research projects, and to support conferences, workshops and other knowledge resources around the research itself. (Langille et al., 2006:82) Again there are clear parallels to the proposed film production model we are proposing.

4. *Project management and consultation.*

> "Research centres provide a venue for group research and play an essential role in developing and managing the physical, financial and human resources associated with large-scale research projects." (Hanney et al., 2000; Tash and Sacks, 2004). "Research management and consultation services provided by research centres allow groups to envision goals that exceed the expertise and resources available to individual researchers or small teams." (Rapkin et al., 2006). "Consultation roles played by leaders and staff in research centres include conceptual development, tool development, staff training, literature searches, identification of referral resources and grant writing." (Lunt and Davidson, 2002; Hall et al., 2006)(Langille et al., 2006:82)

This is practice which is not only crucial the success of a film production company in terms of its viability as an actual company, but crucial to the viability of a research centre. The group dynamic of envisioning larger goals than exceed the expertise and resources of the individual is at the heart of filmmaking itself and the support for research staff and PhD students that falls out of the consultational roles is key to the professional practice education that the institution is engaged in.

5. *Training and Mentoring*

> "Training and mentoring of junior researchers and students helps to build individual skills and knowledge, as well as contributes to the development of intellectual and social capital." (Cooke, 2005). "Actively engaging students in research collaborations provides them with real world experience to apply and augment their classroom learning." (Chopyak and Levesque, 2002) (Langille et al., 2006:83)

The core of the question and how this exploration came to this point – how do students do a PhD in filmmaking. Here there is learning involved that is part-and-parcel of the research process and creates real world skills that engage aspects of not only hard skills, knowledge and experience within the field – much more so than they could accomplish on their own - but additionally soft and social skills that increase employability as well.

6. *Communication and Knowledge Translation*

> "Communication is critical to increased understanding and respect across the research, policy and community 'worlds'."(Ross et al., 2003; Cooke, 2005). "However, communicating across sectors and disciplines can be challenging and creative approaches are needed to address communication gaps" (Choi et al., 2005; Edwards, 2005)(Langille et al., 2006:83).

Here filmmaking excels and fills in the gaps. Successful outputs in the field are exactly the creative approaches that create areas of impact in what is one of the most easily "read" forms of communication we have. The opportunities for impact and knowledge translation are exceedingly great at the practice based research level in the art form and with proper researchers in place to examine distribution and marketing outlets a joint-research project of multiple designs could have an unimagined effect.

It is therefore this collaborative, research centre approach and scientific "laboratory" based model that we believe can be applied to filmmaking to create practice based PhDs in all creative skills specialist areas. It has tremendous benefits to offer, not just in terms of the practical applications listed above in these six points, but evidently extensive creative benefits as well:

> "Research within the field of social psychology has reviewed the role of collaboration in creativity and productivity Studies in this area have examined the dynamics of groups, and there is a general consensus that diversity rather than conformity are more likely to produce novelty and quality in the form of outcomes." (Rigby et al., 2005:787)(Langille et al., 2006:83)

Certainly this is a statement of exactly what we would want for and from our films and filmmakers at any level. This is the ultimate reason why the model appears to be one that we want to pursue. We are filmmakers and know from years of experience that collaboration is at the heart of great filmmaking.

Conclusion:

There are a number of reasons for developing a model that enables the student who wishes to investigate his or her professional practice to do so at doctoral level. Some are pragmatic. As discussed earlier, within the UK University system there is a clear Governmental imperative to ensure that research is both carried out and that such research carries within it discernible impacts that go beyond the idea of "pure" research. There is a need to ensure that filmmaking is seen as part of a profession, and that we train our students to take their place within the profession. And as pointed out earlier, if one of the remits of the PhD process is to expand professional employment opportunities then clearly a film school needs to provide the opportunity for their students to both develop their professional practice and their understanding of their practice at doctoral level.

The screenwriting PhD student has been largely working as a "sole' practitioner, developing her screenplay and investigating her practice on this basis. Although the screenplay itself is subject to comment, both from colleagues and from the supervisory team, the screenplay itself is untested as a "film". However the other artefacts that were developed as part of the exploration of practice were produced by Film School students and the screenwriter student

was therefore able to engage in discussions about the script, how it is intended to be read, how it is read, what the end results are. She has been able to examine the transition from script to screen in reality. In a small way this has been a trial run for a research centre.

The directors and cinematographer were able to provide a vehicle through which to conduct this research but were not themselves engaging in a similar reflective or reflexive exploration of practice. We would argue that the benefits to filmmaking PhD students of working within a research centre that provided a collaborative research environment in which fellow professionals were also engaged in practice based research are likely to be considerable. Although the screenwriting student was able to gain insight into her practice, it was a one way process – the exploration of practice was the sole province of the PhD student. PhD students who were investigating their practice in a collaborative environment would gain additional insight into the practice of their individual specialism through working with and understanding the insights of their fellow PhD students.

Whilst the focus of the research centre would be upon the research led projects, it is also clear that a strong PhD programme in filmmaking would contribute significantly to the work of not only the film school itself and to the individual University, but also to the Academy in general and to the profession itself.

There are clear lessons to be gained from undertaking this first PhD in screenwriting practice though it became clear that this individual experience could not be simply translated into a model that would work for other filmmaking specialists. However, the screenwriting research project is enhanced and enriched by the fact that the research is being undertaken within the Film School context. It is enriched by the fact that the researcher can and does engage with fellow practitioners and this alone suggests that the research centre has the potential to be a rich and productive research model.

The model that we propose does appear to solve many of the practical difficulties encountered by the specialist students who wish to explore their creative practice as filmmakers within a professional environment: doctoral students would be able to share and develop their ideas with fellow students and supervisory academics in a collaborative research environment; the research centre would provide "real-world" situation in which students were able to explore their practice.

The research centre would, in other words, provide the environment in which students could "do a practice based PhD in filmmaking".

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End notes

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