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**Opportunity, fixed points and the space in-between: the creative writing PhD at the International Institute of Modern Letters**

Abstract:

This small-scale qualitative study examines relationships between the critical and creative components in The International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML) PhD as understood by six participants (graduates, supervisors and examiners) in the IIML community of practice. Consideration of the options available for the critical component leads to consideration of flexible space and fixed points within the degree structure and examination criteria. This paper focuses on practical strategies to help students navigate this space. Participants outline strategies they find useful for creative writing PhD students including 'performing what you do', the use of an annotated bibliography and giving primacy in the critical component to the craft issues identified as significant for the creative component. Participants describe ways to frame the thesis effectively for examiners. 'Writerly critical work' is discussed as an alternative to expository academic prose, along with the academic risks of including non-traditional critical writing in a PhD. The author links practices that support students to learn conscious orchestration of the flexibility and rigidity factors to the concept of learner agency.

Biographical note:

Lynn Jenner graduated with a PhD in creative writing from the International Institute of Modern Letters, Victoria University of Wellington in 2013. Her hybrid thesis, published as 'Lost and Gone Away' in 2015, was a finalist in the 2016 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards in the Non-Fiction category. Lynn's background is in Educational Psychology and Evaluation. Her author website is Pinklight.nz

Key words:

critical/creative nexus – learner agency – craft-focused research – 'writerly' critical work – conscious orchestration

**Setting the context**

The IIML PhD began in 2008. The IIML thesis 'typically has a creative and critical component, although it can also be a hybrid combining both'. The creative component is 'about 60% of the research for the degree' and the critical component 'about 40% of the research for the degree'.

The critical component of the PhD is described as 'an academic/scholarly study contextualising the creative component' that 'will normally be about 30,000 words'.

 (Introduction to the PhD 2015)

According to the criteria for all PhDs at Victoria University of Wellington the thesis must:

- form an integrated and coherent whole;

- make a significant and original contribution to knowledge or understanding;

- be based on research conducted under supervision while registered as a PhD candidate at Victoria ( Essential Ingredients of a PhD thesis 2016).


**Rationale for the study**

Conversations during my time as a PhD student suggested that students and supervisors working in the IIML PhD had an uncomfortable awareness of the degree's uncertainties, especially around the critical/creative nexus and the assessment of the critical component.

The nature and purpose of the critical component, often called the exegesis in Australia and the United Kingdom, has been identified over and over again as a site of conflicting views.

By April 2004 the critical component of creative practice doctoral degrees in Australian universities was both important enough and challenging enough for TEXT to devote Special Issue 3 to 'Illuminating the Exegesis'. Although subsequent Australian research has gathered large data sets, identified common problems, suggested future directions and offered resources, this body of information cannot be assumed to apply to the New Zealand situation or, more specifically, to the IIML degree.

My aims for this initial research were:

- To give members of the IIML community of practice access to thinking others have done before them about the critical/creative nexus;

- To provide an opportunity for graduates, supervisors and examiners to share practical ideas from their experience on how to work through or with the tensions surrounding the critical/creative nexus;

- To give prospective or current students at IIML some access to the ways examiners have approached the creative writing PhD and the IIML degree in particular.


**Definitions**

I defined 'the critical/creative nexus' as every way in which the critical component and the creative component of the thesis could be thought of as related. This includes whether the

critical or creative component is written first, how the content of one influences the content of the other, which would be presented first in the thesis and why, and how a 'bridging chapter' works.

I defined 'learner agency', as a student feeling she has power to act in relation to her learning, as opposed to feeling the power resides somewhere else.  Learner agency is developed in relationship to the learning context and to other people, their ideas and feedback.

**Grad1's** description of supervision is an example of increasing learner agency.

> My experience was that in the first year they [supervisors] were the experts and I was the student … then in the second year we were on a par and then in the third year I should be the expert and they are the readers … (GRAD1).

**Method**

I interviewed all participants in December 2014. All interviews were in Wellington except for EX2, whom I interviewed at another New Zealand university. **GRAD1** and **GRAD2** were IIML PhD graduates. **SUP** was a current supervisor. **SUPEX** had co-supervised and examined IIML PhD students. **EX1** and **EX2** had examined an IIML thesis and also supervised and examined Creative Writing PhD projects at other universities. **SUP, SUPEX ,
EX1** and **EX2** are established creative writers. Code names were used for participants because the academic creative writing scene in New Zealand is very small and I wanted participants to speak as freely as possible.

Because this was the first piece of New Zealand research about the creative writing PhD, I asked about the critical/creative nexus from a wide range of entry points. I asked direct questions about the critical/creative nexus, such as *How do you understand the purpose/s of the critical project?*  and questions that approached the critical/creative nexus indirectly such as:

*What makes a good critical project?*

*Is there a bad version of a critical project?*

*What is the role of a research question?*

Other questions focused on essential student skills for the PhD, bridging chapters, what helps students reach an understanding of the critical/creative nexus in their own projects, advice to students about the critical/creative nexus, the order of tasks and the standard expected. Participants were given a list of possible questions and invited to address them in any order or add other topics.

**Results and analysis**

**GRAD2** identified two 'tensions' in the PhD. The first was '*The PhD is about craft' vs 'It is a higher degree'*.  The second tension was '*flexibility' vs 'anxiety*' (GRAD2).

Considering the interview data in the light of these tensions led me to three new questions:

- How much flexible space is there in practice between the elastic-sounding language of the degree components and the generic assessment criteria?

- How do supervisors and examiners describe this space?

- How can supervisors help students navigate this space safely?

This article focuses on the participants' views of the critical/creative nexus, however the three later questions also influenced the selection of responses reported in this article. [1]

In response to the core question: *How do you understand the relationship between critical and creative components?* **GRAD2** thought **'**the critical would feed the creative and the creative would feed the critical'.

**EX1** described the creative component as the prime mover. Both **EX1** and **EX2** emphasised student choice.

> The questions for the critical come out of the creative, they come out of the interests of the student and where they want to push their creative practice. There are different models for different students (EX1).

> I suppose one of the dangers in trying to set out and stipulate what the relationship between the components should be is. It's liable to be the case in a creative writing PhD that that relationship has to develop differently for every project … (EX2).

In response to the question: *What makes a good critical project?* **EX1** highlights 'manageability' and a strong connection between components.

> I find wider questions interesting – around what writing is doing, in a wider cultural context rather than just focusing on the formal question. Some people are very very interested in formal questions and that that is obviously also a good approach. Maybe the ideal is to have questions of content that you're exploring but then have a very specific formal approach you're trying to work in relation to that content …

> When I say the ideal I just mean something that then becomes manageable for everyone to discuss, to work with and talk about. I think it's more useful if you are trying to think pretty closely about how a critical piece would help creative writers and yourself than if you just thought you were going to come in and write a little short English PhD which sat off over there, on its own (EX1).

**EX2**'s advice is similar.

> … the PhD that I'm currently supervising … made me think that focusing on identifying some of the key techniques and applying these in a work of fiction … [is] a more defensible way, safer way of proceeding … than trying to have some over-arching topic … the scope for examiners to say well you haven't taken into account this seminal piece of research or you haven't alluded to this primary work of literature in the field is quite alarmingly large, whereas if you've got this kind of technical focus where you're identifying key techniques from the body of work of a particular writer and utilising them in your own work of fiction you've got that demonstrable organic connection between the two components of the thesis (EX2).

**EX2**'s suggestion addresses the first of the PhD assessment criteria. However in reducing one risk, a student might increase another.

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[1] A research report containing a full version of the information given by participants is available in the Victoria University Research Archive.

Does that [key techniques] project constitute a substantial and original contribution to knowledge? I'm not sure… it's in that area that … I'm not quite convinced … It seems to me just the way in which we define what a PhD is, is the problem (EX2).

**SUPEX** believes 'there are all sorts of kind of deep and systemic problems with having the two component parts'.

Neither of them [the two components] is quite one thing or the other. The creative is arguably not long enough to be a free-standing book and the critical, equally, is not developed enough. It's the length of an MA (SUPEX).

Quite often they will be examined by people who are themselves stronger on the critical side than they are on the creative and will be very concerned that the sophistication of a critical discussion is comparable with any other PhDs that they might examine or supervise in their own discipline (SUPEX).

**SUPEX** identifies English academic background as helpful for students.

In my experience how this [critical component] works depended to a large extent on how much the particular post-graduate student has been versed in English as an academic subject.(SUPEX)

In terms of what skills are necessary to complete the critical component **SUP** says 'That is something we are working out as we go along to some extent'. **EX1** also describes students entering the PhD from a variety of backgrounds.

This is all a work in progress for me. Students coming in with such different skill sets just in terms of just educational background. At one point I thought you did need to have a really decent strong English critical background to do that kind of critical project.

I think I've moved away from that a bit because essentially I don't believe that's the only way to be a writer … But my sense is they do need a strong background in something and an academic background of some sort because they will have to think in a particular academic mode (EX1).

The desire for 'writerly' and 'reader-friendly' criticism to be seen as a legitimate form of critical writing in a PhD comes through in several interviews. Both **SUP** and **EX1** make it clear that the critical component has aesthetic aspirations.

I'd like to put a stake in the ground for a writerly idea of criticism as opposed to a purely academic idea of criticism. I certainly get a sense that there's a need to defend the writer's patch as a critical thinker and to defend the craft-oriented aspects of PhD research as being legitimate academic research in this context. My guess is a number of examiners would find it easier to deal with the critical component if it conformed to, for example, the classic English Department PhD on a famous writer… But we are and should be staking out a different territory here; territory that certainly has plenty of elements in common with the traditional academic PhD but which also plants a flag in the ground for the creative part, across both elements of the PhD.  I quite like the idea of planting a stake in the ground for friendly criticism; friendly in the sense of reader-friendly, not overly captured by specialist diction and theory. It might well provide an extensive bibliography. It might even be footnoted but I'm interested in a critical component that is as readable in its own way as the creative component is (SUP).

I would try, from the outset, to get across [to students] that the critical [component] needs to be part of the pleasure as well, part of the exploration, that we're doing two things, two kinds of writing and they both have to be, not pleasurable all the time, but a sense of the exploration that they're going to engage with (EX1).

For **EX1** students' understanding of the critical/creative relationship in their project follows from identifying the creative component's needs.

I think [initially] they need to be reading and brainstorming around the critical but also … keeping writing the creative to keep themselves asking that question about what am I trying to do? What am I interested in? What do I need to know? What am I stuck on? Where do I go next? (EX1).

Without using the term, **EX1** identified factors which support learner agency and factors which do not:

… [students] really need a sense of permission to be interested in what they're interested in … there can be a sense that the critical is this weird thing that is imposed from the outside and it's kind of a foreign body in their PhD. If they can understand it as theirs to own I do think that helps them to … find the relationship …

… which doesn't mean they don't need to find a more sophisticated vocabulary for what they're saying … I think the supervisor's job is to not just burst the bubble but to find a way to give people access to new languages for what they're actually trying to say and do. And showing them they can't do every leap all at once (EX1).

Hybrid projects, which could be seen as the ultimate expression of critical writing with aesthetic goals, raise particular issues in assessment.

I was the one who was probably always fretting about … how visible does the research have to be in a hybrid product to satisfy both sides of the equation as a single coherent thing ... (SUP) .

**EX1** recommends students maintain an annotated bibliography during a PhD. The unhurried, semi-private development of argument is seen as helpful.

Really practical things like an ongoing annotated bibliography are so useful because they [students] know when they encountered a text, they know what they thought at that point, they can go back and read it and quite often it's been revised as you go along as well. You can go back and think 'Oh, now I understand.'

If you're doing annotated bibliography you're not having to form your arguments before you're ready and you can write down intuitive things about what their argument is and how it seems to connect to your argument. Then, you've got this amazing resource in three years' time (EX1).

**SUP** looks to the community of practice to help students understand possibilities and precedents.

Access to information about how their predecessors have worked things through, the permanent products of the community as it were, is a useful thing on the very practical level as well as the more nebulous conceptual level (SUP).

**EX1'**s advice to students is to concentrate on their own work during the project and not attempt to second-guess the examiners.

> I feel like they [students] have to have an eye on the examiner but they [examiners] can only be the person who is looking over your shoulder at the end as you speak to another audience. I think as with any piece of writing, you can't be talking to the judge. You've got to be performing what you do and the judge can judge (EX1).

**EX2** describes the reaction of examiners from two different disciplines to a piece of non-traditional critical work.

> One of the elements in the critical component that worked extremely well was a short story. On the face of it [a short story] is quite obviously speculative and not the kind of methodology that would satisfy the most rigorous of PhD examiners but it actually worked extremely well because it allowed for a much more nuanced and sensitive and undogmatic approach to the material and it really made me think actually more criticism could be couched in this form.

> ... the other examiner who was from [a second discipline] didn't really feel that the candidate had a PhD level grasp of issues that were being addressed which in some senses was fair enough because this wasn't a PhD in [the second discipline], whereas we both felt that the creative component was extremely successful as a work of fiction … (EX2).

**EX2** also describes a situation where the examiners felt the creative component was much better than the critical. **EX2** attributes this problem to the degree structure, as **SUPEX** does.

> This was a situation in which there was potentially a kind of disparity in quality between the two areas of the thesis and a disparity that was, you could argue, intrinsic to the process.

> You weren't going to get a candidate who had a PhD level grasp of [the second discipline] … it would be asking too much of the candidate in a sense so from an examiner's point of view … there was a slight fudge involved that the main component of the thesis was extremely accomplished as far as we could judge and the critical component had very interesting things in it … but the other examiner felt it hadn't come up to PhD standard on that front (EX2).

**SUP, SUPEX** and **EX1** all commented on the use of bridging chapters in making it clear that the two components form a whole.

> One of the things that you're trying to do as a supervisor is encourage the student to find ways in which they can try and make these two entities seem more integrated. Sometimes there'll be a bridging section, which will try to show how studying the discourse of X helps you to produce Y (SUPEX).

**EX1** identifies key elements of bridging chapters.

> I think [the bridging chapter] is really important. It's really helpful as an examiner and probably quite helpful for the student, well probably helpful for all of us for understanding what these creative PhDs are teaching us about how people create work. I quite like the idea that there's room for them [students] to talk in sophisticated terms about the journey of the project, that they can actually explain how and why things have been approached in the way they have.

I think they can take lots of forms, like Eavan Boland's 'Object Lessons' for instance … It needs to be reasonably appreciative and reasonably brief and conceptually throw up the interesting things and formal questions that are happening. There's a vocabulary which has been acquired in the critical which can be used in the bridging chapter but often nuanced slightly…

…There is room for 'This is as far as we've got. Another step would be this' (EX1).

**SUP** also sees the bridging chapter as useful for both students and examiners.

I can see the value particularly in terms of the examining process of … a bridging essay … that might sit between the critical and creative components in which a student might briefly reflect on how they see the two things being joined or related.

It's some kind of an introduction to the creative process of this PhD as I see it and perhaps a pointing towards without necessarily being too explicit about the way the critical has underpinned the creative work.

It's big in significance in the sense that it makes the belonging-togetherness of the two things more visible both to the student and to the examiner (SUP).

**EX1** identifies elements of a poor bridging chapter.

You [the student] can't do many long close readings of your own text  because … there isn't room and it feels odd.  I feel as though, as an examiner, I'd feel told how to read things.

If you're going to take a bad example it is again 'why my text is better than anyone else's'. Then it just asks the examiner to say why it's not.(EX1)

For **EX1** the assembly of the thesis is also a message.

The question of how to present [the thesis] is one I've really struggled with with my students because I've seen in the examinations I've been involved with just how much weight gets put on the critical. The critical can be used as a slightly blunt apparatus at times for analysing the creative.

So one thing I've started to think is that when a PhD goes out, it goes out as a kind of art work in itself and that it's good to put the creative [component] up front.

I think if we have the critical up front we say this is all the thinking and then here's the creative [component] which is the example. This seems to me to make the creative follow the critical as opposed to 'Here's a creative project and here's some of the ways it was created which is the secondary thing'.

If we keep sending the signal that the critical is the important thing our students will have issues because their critical will in some way be weird or lacking … in some cases it won't be but quite often it will be odd and I feel we should believe in the creative work (Ex1).

**GRAD1**'s retrospective reflections on the subject echo this.

[If I had the PhD to do over again] I would have been braver with the critical and I would have respected the creative slightly more … Through watching other people and reading

other people's stuff I think I would have had the courage [now] to just say 'Well you catch up' (GRAD1).

## Conscious orchestration

The supervisors and examiners in this study make it clear they are aware of the tensions described by **GRAD2** and are looking for ways to be supportive of writing craft, the PhD as a higher degree and students' creative interests.

In our final discussion of this paper Damien Wilkins, Director of IIML and coordinator of the PhD programme, commented that in his experience the assessment criteria are not as rigid a constraint as they appear. 'The final assessment works itself out in the examination room,'he said (D Wilkins, personal communication, July 4, 2016). I take this to mean that in the context of a PhD, assessment is partly conversation. This conversation begins in supervision, includes examiner reports, oral defence performance and negotiations between examiners.

Given this, the most significant idea that I take from the interviews is that a student's capacity to *orchestrate* the options *consciously* is a key resource for safely traversing the territory of the PhD.

Participants in this study offered several practical methods for developing that capacity through supervision. They describe these in their own terms. I have gone a step further and suggested that 'learner agency', or a socially mediated, considered form of confidence, is the meta-cognitive dimension around which these practical methods coalesce. I note with interest that all these activities allow for individual interests and skills. I believe further research from graduate, supervisor and examiner perspectives would identify more practical advice for students. Subsequent research could usefully compare the IIML information with other New Zealand creative writing PhDs and compare the New Zealand perspectives with Australian.

I am grateful to participants for sharing their perspectives and experiences and to the IIML for facilitating this piece of reflective practice.

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