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Mentoring Research-Creation: Secrets, Strategies, and Beautiful Failures

Caitlin Fisher, York University

Many things about how research-creation is understood in the university context provoke, challenge, and engage me. But here I will focus my thoughts on graduate education in the context of research-creation: its demands and pitfalls, as well as the terrifying unmapped spaces and potential it opens up, and the epistemological challenges it clearly poses to the work of the university.

I'll cut to the chase: if we really want innovation in the academy, tenured faculty need to say yes more bravely and more fully to supervising students' research-creation work. We also need to champion the value of research-creation faculty in examinations and hiring committees. Finally, by using our resources—including infrastructure, seniority, personal and professional networks—we must work to create spaces where students can risk failure.

Because… shh… surely I am not alone in feeling that a lot of this work fails in lots of ways. I will even say it: some of it is actually terrible. But even the failures often challenge me in compelling ways.

A Story about Failure

This seems like the appropriate moment to tell you that my own work as a graduate student was a pretty spectacular failure. But it was also successful in ways that I think need to be valued.

In 2000, I completed a native hypermedia work, probably the first Canadian-born digital dissertation with no print companion. This was happening just as my university was circulating a discussion paper claiming that the future of writing was PDF and proposing that all electronic dissertations be submitted using 12 point Times New Roman font and one-and-a-half inch margins. Then, as now, I saw the future of writing differently. I was particularly interested in the epistemological status of interface, especially the capacity of interfaces to make connections and arguments intelligible to readers.[1]

My dissertation, *Building Feminist Theory: Hypertextual Heuristics*—burned onto CD-Roms that have recently erased themselves and were tellingly never filed with UMI by my institution—was an exploration, in hypertext, of the resonances and productive couplings between digital writing technologies and feminist theories. Institutional discussions around research-creation were then still in their infancy. So in order to justify this type of project, somewhere in the introduction I included that great Isadora Duncan quotation, "If I could write it, I *wouldn't have to dance it*." Implicit in my title was the claim that the process of shaping hypertext was itself a form of feminist theory production. Rather than simply identifying feminist hypertexts and explaining them in terms of a feminist hermeneutic, the dissertation used theory to build a new kind of text, a text that sought a form resonant with the disciplinary-crossing knowledges it explored. Understanding the interface and the text to be co-constitutive of meaning, then, I struggled at all stages with the choice of interface and with the limitations of code available to me at the time of writing. The machine worked on my thoughts in a way Nietzsche had always told me it would if I could only let it… and I learned.

In the end, *Building Feminist Theory: Hypertextual Heuristics* consisted of over 1,400 lexias. But the intellectual core of the project, and the most interesting aspect of hypertextual writing to my mind both then and now, was the constellation of ideas held aloft by the technology. In the case of my dissertation, the web of original lexias, quotations, imagery, and sound put into conversation was held together by more than 17,000 links. In this way the linking structure was the intellectual core of the project.

As I look back on the production of that dissertation—and the way I hoped it would communicate—I still see the promise of hypertextual writing. I still believe it allowed me to deliver encounters with, at once, my library, theoretical orientation, visual practice, and the way I made (sometimes contradictory) sense of texts. It documented how I came to encounter and generate new knowledge and contribute to digital poetics by actually building the work.

And so you can imagine my surprise, disappointment, and horror when I realized that this was not how the dissertation functioned when it began to circulate beyond my committee. No one got what I had hoped to communicate: I had failed to reach them. For some months I understood the work as a catalogue of losses. But in the years since, I've taken stock of my failure and built on the thrill of working mindfully at the interface and with new tools to build knowledge. In many ways this dissertation became the foundation of all my future work. That said, I'm glad I'm not trying this now because it would never be allowed.

A Story about Risk with a Conservative Back-Up

I'm an external examiner for a doctoral research-creation project being undertaken at a major Canadian university with a progressive reputation. It is a thoughtful project that challenges my thinking and took the better part of six years to complete. I am also holding 200 pages of writing. Has the writing been presented in case the "creative part" of the project is unintelligible? Or is it in case I want to skip that part entirely? The relation between the two is not made clear.

This doesn't happen just once.

When supervising research-creation projects, we worry for our students and students worry for themselves: "what if my best ideas are lost?" (I hear that); "what if we can't agree on standards?" (really?). And so we make sure that there is a written document to back up any creative component of the dissertation, regardless of the needs of the research itself. I'm sympathetic, of course, to the reality that everyone is focused on graduation. We owe our students an examination day without horrible surprises. We feel we can't risk failure at the doctoral level. We can't even risk a B+. And so we nudge students to safety: try everything, but in the end please also produce a traditional dissertation. But at what cost?

In my own university "All theses and dissertations must contain a written component; however, theses and dissertations may include other components as well," and I think that's generally a very good idea. But not always. The assumption that the written component of a research-creation project must perform the same work as a stand-alone textual dissertation and that longer is always better (because it's safer?) is part of a habit of thinking that we need to challenge.

Increasingly work created by continuing faculty in art/science areas or in the digital humanities produces deliverables that are not twinned with written articles or books. And, at the same time, we make persuasive arguments to tenure and promotion committees at our universities that these constitute research and concretize our thinking. However, we do not champion this possibility for the students we mentor.

The Story about the Canoe

I direct a research lab (the Augmented Reality Lab at York University) funded *through* research-creation initiatives. We encourage students in the lab to be both theorists and practical experimenters. We work iteratively and across disciplinary boundaries, particularly among film, computer science, creative writing, communication and culture, and history. We emphasize rapid prototyping and learning from failure. I supervise many research-creation theses and dissertations. Currently, none of my research-creation students are from the fine arts, and so most are working on research-creation doctorates from departments that have no tradition of practice-based work.

Students in my lab make spatial hyperfictions, database documentaries, interactive storyworlds, interfaces, experience design, knowledge domain visualizations, custom code, augmented reality installations, mobile cinema, and alternate reality gaming. Theses and dissertations have taken the form of iPad apps, augmented reality books and environments, locative media, and immersive visualizations. Their subjects include postcolonial theory, memory, digital identities, new media theory, magic and early cinema, digital aesthetics, and the theorizing of making and tinkering as a powerful practice in itself. As one of my lovely and brilliant doctoral students, Geoffrey Alan Rhodes, writes,

> I have special respect for the impetus of creation, that is, without the artist's desire, need, or obligation to produce art, there is no media, regardless of reception. I find "expression

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> studies" as important as reception studies and seek to take into consideration what I and other makers find expressive, engaging, or what is productively encouraged economically, socially, or technologically.[2]

I love my doctoral students. And the ones undertaking research-creation dissertations really are amazing. I know you think I'm just saying that. But here is the truth: I carefully select them. We do this all the time, of course… we say yes to one student and no to another for all sorts of reasons. The students I accept are, as you might expect, those who make a compelling case to engage in research *through* creation not research *and* creation. Indeed, why would they bother going through the trouble of making things, embarking upon a long journey, and assuming the expenses related to equipment, if they could achieve their goals better and faster by another route?

Here is what I sometimes think when a graduate student comes to my office: I love that you're brave enough to risk unchartered waters, but if I don't think you're ridiculously well-equipped and a bit of a genius, it's mostly irresponsible for me to encourage you. Even if I feel in my heart you could do an amazing job. The conditions in the university are such that I really only want to let my most brilliant students attempt a research-creation project at the doctoral level. Honestly, given the shifting guidelines and expectations, I worry about becoming, myself, that professor who asks for two hundred pages to be on the safe side. So when research-creation students come to my door, it's both like and utterly unlike the way I select graduate students generally. Come back when we've sorted this out.

Sometimes I sit on examination committees and I marvel, as we go over procedures for creative dissertations or research-creation, that everybody assumes students are going to hand in a canoe or something: an object impossible to assess. We don't assume this in the context of our own research of course: being the gatekeepers we can, presumably, experiment with rigour. But students? Canoe.

We Don't Talk about the Extra Work

Shh… I know what sometimes happens. A student undertakes a brilliant and complicated installation that will be seen by only four people. Two committee members watch only a few moments of it on video. The internal examiner never even accesses the WeTransfer file. Good thing we had a safeguard.

I'm convinced one of the reasons we don't actually want to encourage research-creation may have less to do with intellectual standards and fears and existing competencies and a great deal more to do with effort, time, and workload, as well as the fact we generally can't skim through research-creation projects. In fact, research-creation in the context of doctoral work often requires from its examiners new forms of attention and expertise, and an incredibly open mind and heart, especially if the work is not outstanding and the way it works not obvious. I think we sometimes say we're afraid of the canoe so we stand on the side of rigour. But, really, we are too busy.

A Story about What's behind the Curtain

One of the ironies of defining research-creation and putting guidelines for graduate theses into place at our institutions is that the act itself reduces the horizon of possibility. Perhaps it's a productive constraint. But I do know this: at a time when my own experience tells me we are tending to be more conservative in our guidelines and our advice to students, those of us with faculty positions stand on excellent ground to experiment and receive funding, sometimes major funding. In fact, I review many research proposals relating to research-creation, tinkquiry, critical-making… There is a lot of money available for infrastructure, cross-disciplinary building, and turning STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) into STEAM (add Art). It's becoming a better time for faculty in all disciplines to be makers. And when we engage in this work it looks like this: collaborative, sometimes crowd-sourced, partial prototypes, documentation of process, multiple authors, failure. These are not the qualities we value in a dissertation. We know why. But are all those reasons equally persuasive?

I always tell my students that if they are truly inventing something, I cannot provide them with an utterly reliable roadmap. None of us ever wants to direct a student's project with too firm a hand. But even though it can feel riskier, I'd venture it is more important to let a research-creation student experiment and see what happens. But then we need to seek better ways of capturing, honouring, and evaluating those experiments and practices. At this point I try hard to create the necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for success, as I see them now. I try to acknowledge both the beauty of risk and the necessity of graduation; I take advantage of expertise within the fine arts, including a long history of refining tenure and promotion procedures to capture the contribution of creative practice. I protect my students' time and energies, mostly working behind the scenes to ensure they are not required to do twice the work. I work alongside students in making claims for the necessity and relevance of their chosen forms/practices. I keep track of places that peer-review new forms of scholarship (pioneering efforts like the journal *Vectors*) and I make it clear that, yes, there are audiences hungry for this work and a professional community

of practice and employment prospects. I assist students in identifying where making things connects meaningfully with their intellectual practices as projects progress and change. I work with colleagues and the administration to identify what we value most about the way the dissertation is structured now, even as we reimagine how dissertation practices will evolve in the future. I remind people both that the dissertation is a living form and that our own guidelines are only a few years old and, yes, can probably change. I use my networks and connect my students and find interlocutors for their work. I try to create a space where a student can be bold.

And, above all, I encourage sharing stories about failure: it is beautiful, generative, and the starting point of most good things in my life.

Notes

[1] These thoughts on my own dissertation were first shared at the 2007 HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory) conference in a presentation entitled "Interface Epistemology: Hypermedia Work in the Academy."

[2] From Geoffrey Alan Rhodes's 2012 dissertation proposal.

Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments

Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, Concordia University

As university-based creative makers, we argue for a more expansive category of research-creation that does not foreclose new possibilities for making and learning and does not unwittingly bolster disciplinary thinking and divides.

From 2010 to 2012, we collaborated on writing a text that aimed to clarify the idea of research-creation for our students. "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and Family Resemblances"[1] outlined four different modalities in which research and creation are linked within current academic practices. In brief, these categories were:

1. "Research-for-creation," the gathering of materials, practices, technologies, collaborators, narratives, and theoretical frames that characterizes initial stages of creative work and occurs iteratively throughout a project.
2. "Research-from-creation," the extrapolation of theoretical, methodological, ethnographic, or other insights from creative processes, which are then looped back into the project that generated them.
3. "Creative presentations of research," a reference to alternative forms of research dissemination and knowledge mobilization linked to such projects.
4. "Creation-as-research," which draws from all aforementioned categories, an engagement with the ontological question of what constitutes research in order to make space for creative material and process-focused research-outcomes.

Out of the four modalities we identified, "creation-as-research" received the least attention. Yet our own experience as creative makers and as professors increasingly incorporating creative practices into our courses tells us that this vexing category deserves further reflection. In this short contribution we therefore seek to draw out some of its productive ironies and tensions.

In our 2012 essay, we used Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances"[2] to compare projects with inconsistently shared features, without insisting on certain defining characteristics for each of the four categories we developed, and therefore for research-creation as a whole. Considered from a queer studies perspective "family" is, of course, a contested term with normative connotations. Family resemblances, in their Wittgensteinian variation, are typically generational and implicitly chronological. Features are recognized as things we inherit. They can be shared across different members of a family, but it is rare that one would say, "Grandma has four-year-old Becky's hazel eyes." In the same way, since terms are ultimately granted meaning through their relationships to pre-existing ones, it becomes difficult to even imagine how neologisms such as "research-creation" could be the objects of radical reconfiguration. What can be done through the articulation of entirely novel situations, lexicons, or discursive priorities? As last year's *Practices* underscored, understanding research-creation a certain way often comes down to what sorts of examples one is willing to consider alongside the moniker. It therefore remains a contested terrain that has consequences in terms of funding and support, for both student and professional researchers.