AHRC Practice-Led Research Review: Summary Statements

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Dear Friends,

My Thomas Aquinas moment has arrived as I plod through a few thematic summaries. These 1,478 words will address the issue “being academic.” Nothing bold here – just a few common sense thoughts to round out the workshop.

1) Perspectives on the academic enterprise

We started the workshop on the issue of being academic. It seems that many of us have an uneasy relationship with universities or academic life. Some of us suggested that life is greener in business, private industry, or design practice -- or even struggling to maintain an artist studio without a steady salary. Having held all these jobs, I find that academic life offers a good balance of responsibility and freedom. Even so, academic work does not provide the freedom many of us hope for in art, design, or the creative industries. Few jobs do.

Not even art offers freedom for most artists. Fewer than 1% of all practicing artists earn a living making and selling art. The vast majority of individual artists buy artistic freedom by doing something else to subsidize their art.
Professional design is challenging and it offers many rewards. Most designers work for someone and follow directions as employees do in most industries. Design firms follow the old guild patterns. It is no democracy. The master runs the studio. Bryan Byrne and Ed Sands (2002) describe the working life of design studios in a book on the creative industries.

Most of us work in the education sector. Our schools do not pay us directly to work as artists or designers. Even those of us who sometimes live as artists or designers work in academia. We are paid to teach, to help others develop skills, and to do research. This entails demands and responsibilities. The majority of us in this workshop relate to different industries or professions from positions in academia. We serve the community by teaching aspiring professionals the skills they will need in professional life. Let’s begin by acknowledging that fact.

2) An imperfect life

Large organizations such as universities maintain bureaucracies to meet mandated responsibilities. Adapting to an administrative network one price I pay for the academic freedom I enjoy. I welcome the professional administrators who manage the important activities I am unsuited for. I do my best to support their work.

Is academic life perfect? No. Academic work entails contract responsibilities to employers, students, colleagues, and community. This limits our freedom. Even so, most of us sought the jobs we hold. Some aspects of our jobs have changed in recent years as art and design schools shift from practitioner schools to research schools. Those who enjoyed the old way of life may not enjoy life after the transition. The change is here to stay. That’s the starting point. We cannot go back. This issue is how to move forward.

3) Moving forward and creating change

An important branch of inquiry called “the scholarship of teaching and learning” has blossomed in recent years. (Google that phrase for more information.) The scholarship of teaching and learning involves reflection and reflective practice along with research, interpretation, and other forms of inquiry. This has come to focus on universities and academic life at a time of great change. The Carnegie Commission is active in this area, as it has long been active in higher education. Other organizations and many universities work in the field.

Those who genuinely question university work and academic life might find this a useful field of inquiry. It offers opportunities to frame problems in ways that open them to solution. It offers ways to understand the nature and rationale behind the activities that have a genuine purpose even though they may seem useless. Moreover, it offers opportunities to examine issues from multiple perspectives, learning from others and adapting their solutions to the genuine problems we face.
Any system requires improvements. This is especially true of systems such as universities and professional schools. These systems accumulate cultural patterns, behavioral artifacts, and rules that seem to take on a life of their own. Nevertheless, we can enact creative change when it matters enough to invest time. Change requires developing a case and building a constituency. An important case has many stakeholders with divergent interests and a high investment in preventing change. Important changes take time.

Like any system with an opening to representative democracy in a legitimate constitutional structure, action based on expertise and participation goes further than complaint. While I have never lost a major case, I have learned that winning a major case can take as long as five years. If you want institutional change while accepting an institutional salary, you must be ready to work on an institutional time scale.

Life outside the academic world is much tougher than the life most of us live. I have never liked the colloquial expressions contrasting the “real world” with the world of universities. This, too, is a real world. Nevertheless, this real world offers us protections and benefits that few employees have along with a steady salary. Freelance designers and artists have the freedom the want to do as they will. Eating on a regular basis may not come with the job.

Times are changing. Perhaps they should. During the 1970s and 1980s, I observed life at many art and design schools. I saw many cases in which the system worked well for faculty members and badly for students. The old art and design school system failed to meet many important needs. It often failed to provide mandated services and benefits. As we reflect on being academic, I suggest reflecting on our responsibilities as well as demanding our freedoms.

4) How should we manage universities?

Several notes complained about misplaced managerialism in universities. This is a problem for everyone, in all the fields I know. Managerialism represents a serious threat to academic freedom and to university life. This is a serious problem. It is not the point of this workshop. The point of this workshop is a review of practice-led research and our responsibilities as academics in relation to practice led research.

5) Are there too many academics?

One note suggested that there are too many academics in the world. I may be mistaken, but it seems evident that we need more than we have today to serve the growing population of students and scholars that most governments have decided should attend university.

Nevertheless, the question of whether we have too few academics, too many, or just the right number is irrelevant. We work as academics now. This workshop is an opportunity to examine our work for better service to our students, our colleagues, our schools, and our fields.
6) Differences in academic work between studio and research faculty

In “Design Science and Design Education,” (available on Chris’s web site) I propose a simple solution for university-based art and design schools. Some people should do research. Others should not. Some people should be studio professors or craft masters. This works well when studio specialists and practitioner experts do not control research programs, and it works well when research experts do not control the studio and craft skills programs. The problem in many schools is that studio professors without research skills sometimes attempt to control research programs. This is where problems begin.

Art and design schools routinely see cases where unqualified teachers demand authority over courses where they have no knowledge of subject matter and no expertise in required skills. Several notes in the workshop suggested that some workshop participants do not want academic careers and have no interest in research skills. This puzzles me. Why does anyone who does not want to be an academic wish to debate academic questions? Why does anyone with no interest in research want to debate research problems?

The answer is clear. It involves power, politics, and wealth. Research means access to money, staff positions, and resources. For this reason, many people who have no interest in research want to designate their activities as research to enjoy the benefits of the resources allocated to research.

Nobel laureate Richard Feynman once proposed that researchers should be honest enough to state what they are doing truthfully. If society wants to support what researchers want to do, he said, that is a political choice. Integrity demands that researchers present their work honestly without mislabeling it to secure funds. That is the case here. It goes both ways. If research does not interest you and practice does, you should not demand research funds. You should make the case for the value and importance of your practice.

There is room in academic life for all of us. Our responsibility is being clear and doing well at what we do.

Yours,

Ken

Reference

Summary 2: Research

Friends,

These 1,475 words summarize issues on research.

1) Research definitions

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines research in a way that clarifies the term as living speakers use it: “1: careful or diligent search 2: studious inquiry or examination; especially: investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws 3: the collecting of information about a particular subject” (Merriam-Webster’s 1993: 1002; for more, see the Oxford English Dictionary).

These definitions cover clinical, applied, and basic research; theoretical and practice-led research; qualitative, quantitative, descriptive, interpretive, logical, mathematical, empirical, positive, normative, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and philosophical research, as well as expressive research.

What distinguishes research from other activities is what Mario Bunge (1999: 251) describes as the “methodical search for knowledge. Original research,” he continues, “tackles new problems or checks previous findings. Rigorous research is the mark of science, technology, and the ‘living’ branches of the humanities.” Synonyms for research include exploration, investigation, and inquiry.

2) Clearing up confusions

Discussing practice-led research often generates two confusions, values confusion and category confusion.

The first confuses value issues. Research is not “better” than painting, playing football, or feeding the poor. Research is different.

An angry design student once asked me whether research is more important that feeding the hungry as though I could choose between solving a particular mathematical problem and ending world hunger. If I could choose, I would end hunger. I do not get to choose between these two.
(Ending world hunger involves political and economic choices. See, f.ex., Fuller 1981 or Sachs 2005. We do not need to choose between two different social goods, research, and ending hunger. We must persuade our citizens and governments to end hunger for all humans. This takes the kind of research Sachs has been doing.)

The second problem is category confusion that involves the frequent appeal to many ways of knowing. There ARE many ways to know, to learn, and to transmit information.

While there are many ways to know and many kinds of knowledge, not all ways to know or learn constitute research. Theology and comparative religion entail research. Religious prophecy and divine revelation do not. This is why Dr. Wojtyla and Dr. Ratzinger found no conflict between church doctrine and evolution theory.

Guilds transmit knowledge as a form of embodied information and modeling in the master-apprentice relationship. Apprenticeship is not research.

There are hundreds of similar examples. Research is a range of systematic approaches to finding, learning, and knowing. There are others ways to find, know, and learn, and they are valuable. This workshop focused on research.

Definitions help us to understand what we discuss so that we can deepen and improve our fields.

3) Other definitions

At different points, participants posted valuable but limited definitions of research. These are useful. They simply have less covering power than the large-scale definition I use. I prefer to postulate a definition with the greatest covering power.

If you prefer another definition, the way forward is not to say that my postulates are wrong. Present your own articulate definition instead.

Definitions must be reasonable as well as articulate to be useful. Every workshop of this kind elicits definitions of research that are neither accurate nor useful. The common denominator among these is a tendency to label different kinds of non-research activities as research.

In a private note, a doctoral candidate argued against my definition of research by referring to a diatribe against “colonizing research” and “positivism” in a book on “decolonizing methodologies.” The book argues that colonizing research includes “having your genealogy and identity (cell-lines) stolen, patented, copied; having the umbilical cord blood of aborted babies ‘farmed’; having your cultural institutions and their rituals patented either by a non-indigenous person or by another indigenous person” and so on (Smith 2002: 100-101). On this basis, the author argues that research is bad.
While these are unethical practices, they are not research. That is rather like saying: “Dumping raw nuclear waste into the ocean is research. Therefore, research is bad.” some of the practices are based on knowledge derived from research, but they are not research practices. Instead, this resembles the relationship between metallurgy and killing people with swords. The same research that produces swords makes better plowshares. We choose how to use them.

Our focus is research rather than other practices, good or bad.

4) Research goals

One participant stated the goals of research as knowledge or understanding. That fits most definitions, broad or narrow.

5) Research and instrumental knowledge

The goals of knowledge and understanding have many purposes. In contrast, we read an argument for instrumental knowledge that pointed to action research as an example of research where the goal of research is change. This requires a distinction the author did not make.

The notion of instrumental knowledge fails to account for the diversity of research or change built on expanded knowledge and understanding. The year 1905 saw several contributions to basic research that had no practical application at all. The scientist who did the work said that he could imagine no foreseeable use or practical value in his work. The research expanded human knowledge by providing a better model of the physical forces at work in the universe. It had no other purpose. Over the following century, this supposedly useless research opened the way to much of the technology we use today, including the computer technology and Internet technology that you are using to read this summary in a workshop that enables us to meet in real time around the world.

If all research were required to serve instrumental ends, we would live a world where 90% of all human beings worked in farming, fishing, and forestry, rising with the sun and retiring at dusk. Most of the products and services we use today began in some form of basic research. Many of the benefits we enjoy begin in non-instrumental experiments by people who want to see whether things can work in new and different ways.

The demand for immediate application of instrumental knowledge is often associated with narrow political goals. Because the value of instrumental knowledge is always a political decision, history has seen many cases of instrumental research with destructive results. This is particularly common in dictatorships where those who fail to achieve serious research careers become “research politicians” through an ability to argue for instrumental knowledge without the deeper understanding that leads to improvements.
Research works best when our goals are knowledge and understanding. This is even the case when our research has such instrumental goals as feeding the world or making tools work better.

6) Action research

This clarifies the distinction between action research and action without research. The goal of research is knowledge and understanding. The goal of action research is informed action based on knowledge and understanding.

If all action and all practice were informed by knowledge and understanding, we would not need action research, practice-led research, or any other kind of research. Consider, for example, the debate that occurred when practitioner physicians believed that their social standing required them to make hospital rounds and perform surgery in street clothes. The arguments against Pasteur, Lister, and Semmelweiss often posed action against academic theory. “We’re surgeons,” they argued, “Let’s get on with our practice! Invisible ‘microbes’ have nothing to do with medicine.”

Kurt Lewin, Chris Argyris, Donald Schon, and the other founders of action research would have sided with Semmelweiss. Semmelweiss learned how to save patient lives by practicing the legitimate action research and sound science that medical practitioners opposed.

Action based on knowledge and understanding is the goal of action research. Anyone can “change” things. The point of action research is to know and understand what we change, why we should change it, and how to change it effectively.

The goal of action research is not “change” but “improvement.” We must decide what we mean by the term “improvement,” but one thing is certain: the word means something better and more desirable than what exists today. Change is something else.

If the difference is not clear, just consider how dramatically George Bush has changed the world during the past six years.

The goal of our workshop is knowledge and understanding for improvement rather than instrumental change established by uninformed political preferences. That is the difference between research and politics.

Yours,

Ken
References


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2006 July 7

Summary 3: The PhD Degree

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Friends,

Our second week examined the issue of the PhD. These 1,500 words will review several key issues.

1) Purposes of the PhD

The PhD degree has several purposes. Several of these purposes distinguish the PhD from other kinds of degrees.

The PhD is a research degree and a license for those who practice and teach research.

The special role of the PhD as a teaching license determines several aspects of the criteria for a PhD. This license covers several kinds of teaching. First, it establishes the expertise of the graduated doctor to teach the content of a specific subject field. Second, it establishes the expertise of the graduated doctor to teach the research methods of that field. Third, it establishes the ability of the graduated doctor to conduct independent research. Fourth, it establishes the ability of the graduated doctor to supervise research and train researchers.
Each of these key purposes determines central criteria for the PhD. Other aspects of any specific PhD program may entail other criteria. A summary does not permit a full discussion of the PhD. The relevant issues are those that affect the PhD in relation to practice-led research.

2) A special aspect of the PhD

The role of the PhD as a license to teach research methods and train research students establishes criteria for the PhD that may serve no purpose in any other research project. We must demonstrate skills to earn a PhD that we may never use again in our own research. We require these skills for our future students.

I once spent two weeks with a master chef who prepared magnificent meals for a conference while he ate tuna sandwiches. I asked him why. He told me that cooking was an art form for him, but he did not want to eat food after working with it all day. He tasted most recipes twice; first when another chef taught him to cook it so that he would know how it should taste; second, when he prepared it to make sure that it tasted the same way. He had the equivalent of a photographic memory for tastes, so tasting became a tool in his work. While he only ate tuna sandwiches for the two weeks that I watched him cook, the “twice only, never again” principles may have been a slight exaggeration. However, the principle was clear.

Some of the skills we learn to earn a PhD are like the recipes in my friend’s repertoire. We master them so that we can cook with them for our students. We may never eat them again ourselves.

The point for us is clear. If we cannot work with these skills, we are not properly prepared to teach research methods or to train research students. As research teachers and supervisors, our own research needs comes second to the needs our students have.

As long as the PhD is a license to teach and supervise, the PhD has specific criteria that may affect no other research we ever do.

3) Criteria for the PhD

These conditions establish the criteria for earning a PhD. Since a PhD is a research degree, the candidate must demonstrate that he or she is prepared to undertake and complete unsupervised research by demonstrating the ability to make an original contribution to the knowledge of the field.

Because the PhD is a license to teach and supervise research, the candidate must demonstrate research skills that will eventually qualify her or him to teach research methods and research methodology before moving on to teach and supervise research students.
This entails many skills. Gordon Rugg and Marian Petre (2004: 6-7) offer a useful partial list of skills in their excellent book on earning a PhD: [Use of academic language] “correct use of technical terms; attention to detail in punctuation, grammar, etc.; attention to use of typographic design ... to make the text accessible; ability to structure and convey a clear and coherent argument, including attention to the use of ‘signposting’ devices such as headings to make the structure accessible; writing in a suitable academic ‘voice’; [Knowledge of background literature] seminal texts correctly cited, with evidence that you have read them and evaluated them critically; references accurate reflecting the growth of the literature from the seminal texts to the present day; identification of key recent texts on which your own PhD is based, showing both how these contribute to your thesis and how your thesis is different from them; relevant texts and concepts from other disciplines cited; organization of all of the cited literature into a coherent, critical structure, showing both that you can make sense of the literature – identifying conceptual relationships and themes, recognizing gaps – and that you understand what is important; [Research methods] knowledge of the main research methods used in your discipline, including data collection, record keeping, and data analysis; knowledge of what constitutes ‘evidence’ in your disciplines, and of what is acceptable as a knowledge claim; detailed knowledge – and competent application of – at least one method; critical analysis of one of the standard methods in your discipline showing that you understand both its strengths and its limitations; [Theory] understanding of key theoretical strands and theoretical concepts in your discipline; understanding how theory shapes your research question; ability to contribute something useful to the theoretical debate in your area; [Miscellaneous] ability to do all the above yourself, rather than simply doing what your supervisor tells you; awareness of where your work fits in relation to the discipline, and what it contributes to the discipline; mature overview of the discipline.”

If a candidate cannot demonstrate most of these skills, he or she cannot teach and supervise research students. It is likely that he or she cannot conduct research without these skills. Therefore, demonstrating these skills establishes the basis for awarding or denying the PhD.

4) A useful proposition

Donna Carty’s excellent summary offers a wonderful idea that more of us should use in supervising. The nature of the PhD as a license requires the candidate to demonstrate solid skills – Rugg and Petre compare these to carpentry and cabinet making. That generally entails a standard, grind-it-out project. There is more to research, however, and the interesting idea is encouraging students to pursue a high-potential and possible high-risk personal research project at the same time.

This proposal also clarifies the distinction between the wide latitude available to us when we choose our own research with full freedom, and the necessary qualities and skill we must demonstrate to pass our licensing exam.
5) A problematic proposition

While no one was willing to challenge the criteria I propose, one note suggested that these criteria are matters of personal preference and taste rather than common standards across most fields. When I asked for specific substitute criteria, there was no reply. Instead, a post to a parallel thread suggested that normative technical research skills or formal criteria are irrelevant if one can nevertheless persuade an institution to award the PhD.

This argument proposes political and pragmatic grounds for degree awards. Here, I use the term pragmatic in a narrow sense rather than using it as Dewey or Peirce might. This sense of pragmatism seems to argue that a PhD award is little more than a negotiated outcome. In effect, negotiating a PhD from an institution that has the right to award one is, in itself, a reasonable criterion.

This criterion renders the PhD something like awarding the rights to an oil field or unclaimed farmland. The qualities do not rest in the demonstrated work that earns the degree. The quality of the PhD rests in the political right to grant the degree. This raises a second political question. The authorization that gives an institution the right to award a PhD is a public good. It reflects the claims and goals of any given society acting through the educational system and a national structure of rules and standards governing legitimate degree awards. If there are no stated standards based on common criteria, then a PhD would soon have no legitimate transferable value.

The failure to establish common values would effectively mean that the PhD itself has no consistent meaning. That is odd, since only a consistent meaning makes the degree valuable. I presume most candidates want a PhD precisely because it has a widely recognized legitimate meaning. As a criterion, therefore, politics begs the question.

6) PhD research is a specific subset of all research

PhD research involves a subset of all possible kinds of research. It is a subset because the PhD serves to train researchers in the skills they will use in independent research. It is specific because it entails demonstrating skills that graduated doctors will need in teaching, supervising, and training the next generation of researchers.

Best regards,

Ken

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Reference

Summary 4: Research

Friends,

Much of the conversation in this workshop emphasized research skills, as distinct from methods, methodics, and methodology. Several notes expressed interest in the occasional references and resources that workshop participants posted. This 1,500 word summary (plus checklists) offers a short, systematic selection of outstanding research resources.

Later this year, Design Research News will publish a deeper analytical review of excellent research resources. (If you do not subscribe to DRN, you will find a note at the end of this summary to tell you how.)

This summary differs from other summaries. It provides a short, useful guide to resources on the skills we discussed. These books help teachers and supervisors to transmit research skills more effectively, and they will help research students to develop and improve their skills.

1) Research Skills: a Growing Literature

We face understandable problems in building a research culture for art and design. Ours is a new research field, in contrast to fields with a research culture that goes back through decades or even centuries of development.

Humans construct and shape cultures through behavior and by encouraging specific forms of behavior. In apprentice programs, modeling and adopting behaviors creates tacit knowledge. Effective apprentice programs require an environment well populated by skilled journeymen and masters. Art and design schools differ from most research environments because they lack a large enough population of skilled journeyman and master researcher to anchor and embed research culture. The result is a gap in cultural knowledge.

One way to improve the situation is by providing research students with skill information and giving them courses that allow them to practice the skills they study.

Despite the fact that other fields have well-established research cultures, it is interesting to note that many fields face similar problems. Until recently, oral tradition and a master-apprentice system trained research students in most fields and helped transmit academic research skills. These skills differ from field to field, and discipline to discipline. They often differ among related sub-disciplines and they may differ within the same disciplines in different universities and nations. Nevertheless, most disciplines recognize a common core of skills. Rugg and Petre (2004: 6-7) describe these common skills in their book on PhD research.
The enormous recent growth of universities and the explosion of research training and doctoral programs have changed the situation in nearly every field. The shift to the Bologna 3+2+3 system makes problems even worse. The intense, highly selective relationship that once existed between doctoral supervisors and candidates has shifted to curriculum-based teaching and learning. The 8-year Bologna scheme reduces the former time for research training and doctoral completion in most fields by anywhere from 2 to 5 years, depending on the former patterns and norms of any individual university. With many more students and far less time, it is impossible to rely on the small-scale, intense practices that once led to graduated doctors.

Even in the past, however, research training and supervision was not perfect. Supervision skills differed, excellent researchers might be poor teachers, access to opportunities varied. These differences stay with us, even as the situation becomes more difficult for everyone.

As a result, scholars in all fields face some of the problems we face in art and design. Today, we are fortunate to have a growing literature of resources to help individuals and schools to solve these general problems.

This growing literature outlines and explains the craft, guidelines, and traditions of research. These books can help to teach and develop good research habits, habits of mind and habits of behavior. These resources can help us to shape a research culture.

This is a short, selective bibliography of useful books. This is not a list of books on research methodology, methodics, method, or technique. These books address the larger habits of mind within which specific research acts take place.

2) The craft of research


This is a central volume in the series of books on different aspects of the profession and practice of research from the University of Chicago Press. It is a superb introduction to research issues.
3) Supervising the PhD


The issue of research supervision is now a central theme in many fields. The skill of tutoring and supervising research is even more difficult to acquire than the skill of doing research. In theory, studying for a PhD should help the doctoral student to develop research skills. No degree programs or general courses train research supervisors. Greater attention to the issue of supervising research students means that this literature is an important contribution. This book is one of the first and still one of the few that helps supervisors, whatever field they work in.

(3) Working for a PhD


Several dozen books offer advice on earning a research degree. Most are pedestrian. Some are uninformative. A few bad books will mislead students who do not know enough to ignore incorrect information and problematic assertions.

These two books are useful and well structured. These cover all fields, providing information on general research issues and skills, as well as useful information on surviving and thriving as a doctoral student. I recommend these books to students and to their supervisors.

4) Research careers and academic life


One common gap in doctoral education involves helping research students prepare for the transition from study to career. These two books are particularly helpful. The first covers all fields. While the second is written for the sciences, it offers ideas that every scholar can use.
5) Scholarly publishing


Two excellent books address the craft of scholarly publishing. Huff’s book addresses the art of writing. Silverman discusses the relation of publishing to career development, offering important advice on conceptualizing and preparing a publishing strategy.

6) Presenting research


Conferences and seminars are a central medium for sharing research and for becoming visible in a research field. Many books now help students – and others – learn how to present findings in seminars and at conferences. The best of these is Robert R. H. Anholt’s book. Anholt, a professor at Duke University Medical Center, has been helping students in many fields learn to succeed on the conference circuit.

While this book is written for natural scientists, it offers equally valuable advice for the humanities and social sciences. The title is too catchy, but the book is solid, concise, and well crafted:

7) A grand overview of art and design research

Pirkko Antilla’s book and CD are unique. Anttila was Finland’s first professor of crafts. This book on research methods is a masterpiece of its kind. She wrote this book to help scholars in arts, crafts, and design develop a research tradition. She surveyed research methods and approaches across many fields, summarizing central themes and common issues. Then, she structured a book that shows the researcher how and why to make specific methodological choices, and then she gives rich bibliographic data that helps the scholar locate deeper and more extensive information for each choice.

This book is thorough and extensive in structure. It is so broad in its applied value across fields that scholars from economics and biology to history, anthropology, and information science now use it.

While the book is in Finnish, the diagrammatic structures are so clear and the bibliographic compilations so useful that scholars who do not speak Finnish can use it as a source guide and checklist.
8) Have your library order these ten books

Every art and design school library should have these books.

If you are a research student, the time you invest in reading these books will be time gained in developing a successful research career. I know you will not read every word. I also know that you'll learn a lot by careful browsing.

If you teach and supervise research, you may already know these books. If you don’t, you should. Those of us who are paid to teach and supervise research owe it to our students and we owe it to ourselves to know this literature – and use it.

Ken

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Ten Outstanding Research Resource Books: a Checklist


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How to Subscribe to Design Research News

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Summary 5: Practice-Led Research -- Personal Summary and Farewell

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Friends,

This is my last summary for the workshop -- and, at the end, my farewell until the next time.

My summaries are based on a simple conceptual preference. Clarifying and simplifying issues that can be resolved through systematic analysis frees us to struggle with the difficult and ambiguous issues that remain.

1) Necessary conditions

My Thomas Aquinas moment took me through a discussion of being academic, a definition of research, the nature of the PhD, and research skills. These are more difficult and complex than my summaries make them out to be, but they remain relatively simple. Einstein said that the best models make things as simple as possible but not more so.
Practice-led research must have both necessary and sufficient conditions. The first two summaries establish a number of necessary criteria and conditions for two kinds of practice-led research. By developing these necessary conditions, we clear a lot of ground for the difficult work ahead.

Necessity without sufficiency is incomplete. Nevertheless, understanding necessity allows us to recognize cases that do not constitute practice-led research. One summary clarified the nature of research. If something does not meet the criteria for all forms research, then it cannot be practice-led research no matter how useful, valuable, or interesting it may be.

The PhD is a research degree and a training program. It prepares those who hold the degree to conduct independent research and it is the first-level qualification for those who will teach research and train and supervise researchers. The specific requirements of a PhD award as demonstration and license means that PhD research projects have additional necessary conditions over and above other forms of research. Even though a project may constitute research, if it does not meet the additional necessary conditions for a serious PhD award, it cannot be a practice-led PhD.

The second two summaries addressed related issues that involve context and skills rather than criteria.

Academic life is neither necessary nor sufficient for practice-led research, but it is the context for the workshop. Moreover, since only universities and university-level school are permitted to award the doctorate, academic life is a necessary condition for PhD studies and PhD awards.

Research skills involve key issues for research in general, and for research education in specific.

There is value in plodding through these necessities. Having done so, we are free to examine the possible and the uncertain.

In this sense, necessity both constrains us and frees us.

2) Postulates

To open a territory for practice-led research, I am going to offer several postulates. While I believe that I can argue them in full, this is a summary. I will therefore postulate these points as the foundation of what follows.

Postulates:

Postulate 1) many forms of meaningful research may be subsumed under the rubric of practice-led research. I will elaborate these in the third part of this summary and consider what they entail. At this time, I postulate many possibilities and examine how they interact with the specific criteria and constraints I have already presented.
Postulate 2) Practice-led research must necessarily meet the conditions for any form of research. This is not true of all forms of practice. Rather, it defines the difference between practice and practice-led research.

Postulate 3) Practice-led research for a PhD award must fulfill the criteria of a PhD. Even though a research project may be excellent in other contexts, the specific nature of the PhD award places special demands on the research project presented for the degree.

Postulate 4) While it is not necessary to demonstrate all research skills in any project or at every moment, mastering a robust range of research skills is necessary for anyone who hopes to practice research at a serious level. Even though some forms of practice-led research will break boundaries and move beyond standard definitions, I postulate that those who engage in practice-led research need to master a full range of research skills to do serious work. The deeper and richer the mastery of research, the better the research.

3) Practice-led research – personal propositions

At one point, the discussion moved toward a very general proposal of practice-led research as some form of research in which the practice of our professional art is necessary either to the research process or to the outcome.

This gives a wide territory for exploration even under the constraints I postulate. It allows for research that leads to improved practice. It covers research on how practice functions in the world or contributes to the world. It may cover research that leads to new kinds of materials, to better processes, or ways to understand how we work. It can cover our products, our relations to the artifacts we create -- industrial products, processes, art, and craft -- or the ways that our products influence others and how they relate to them. In short, practice-led research can probably function in any of the recognizable research modes: qualitative, quantitative, descriptive, interpretive, logical, mathematical, empirical, positive, normative, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and philosophical research, as well as expressive. While much practice-led research functions as clinical research and some as applied research, I am less certain about the conditions under which practice-led research might constitute basic or pure research. Even so, we cannot rule out the possibility.

In an off-list note, Kenny McBride asked me whether I consider The Fluxus Performance Workbook (Friedman, Smith, and Sawchyn 2002) to be an example of practice-led research.

My answer was cautious.

It was a good question. Interesting issues ensued. The first scored collections I organized were working sheets for Fluxconcerts. I assembled them as an artist and composer conducting a concert of work by colleagues. I organized them for publication as a Fluxus editor.
The 1989 edition of the Fluxus Performance Workbook involved some retrospective research, but this was the kind of research any artist or composer undertakes in organizing past work with a sprinkling of updates. The same was true of the 2003 electronic edition with Owen Smith and Lauren Sawchyn.

The nature of my relationship to the Fluxus event scores and my status as a rights holder with authorization over Fluxus copyrights places this kind of project in a category partly outside curatorial or research ventures, at least with relation to work copyright by Fluxus. It may be research-based and curatorial for work not copyrighted by Fluxus, but the research is not especially tricky, just time consuming. It involves writing or calling everyone to ask for updates and missing scores.

The vast amount of research in every field is clinical and simple. Every time an engineer calculates a load or a power supply requirement, clinical research is involved. Every time an account reviews current law to seek the best advantage on a client’s tax return, he or she is doing clinical research. Every time a band runs a sound check before a concert, every time a physician tries to find out why a patient is coughing -- he, she, or they do clinical research. The same goes for any kind of historical or archival research that simply seeks to locate or establish unproblematic information such as the content of a score. In that sense, the Workbook required research and it was research-based. While this takes skill, knowledge, and judgment, it is not high-level research. Again, my specific relation to this body of work also adds dimensions that would be different to the work of someone curating or editing if they were not themselves part of Fluxus.

Afterwards, I began to wonder what this research would have been were I not one of the artists. Then, talking with Chris, I began to wonder why – or how – this should change simply because I am also an artist.

The answer is that I don’t know. Nevertheless, the question is good. One reason I went back to school to earn a PhD was the fact that so many art ventures failed to achieve the goals we set for them. I wanted to learn more about creating effective social change. I relate some of the answers I discovered in a recent article on why art networks so often fail to achieve their goals (Friedman 2005). For me and for others in Fluxus, our art involved experimental approaches and research of some kind. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, I have always been cautious in the kinds of epistemological claims I make based on research, as opposed to the claims I might allow myself based on intuition, feeling, or revelation.

My hope is that we can all move forward together, making progress by opening new territory in a robust way.
Some of the proposal here delighted and startled me. Lubomir’s proposals have me thinking on forms of research that I clearly accept for philosophers, theologians, and sociologists. Artists and designers must surely have the same freedom. Ranulph and Martin describe degree programs that are different to past forms of PhD while clearly offering ground for standing as PhD work. Kristina’s doctoral work raises challenging issues that would be impossible without both her crafts practice and her philosophical and social inquiry. Eduardo’s conjectures on what a school might do and be are of the same important nature. I could go on, and I will after I read the workshop transcripts carefully. For now, I’m past the 1,500 word summary limit, so I will stop with these examples and make my farewell.

I have been reading Paul Schrader’s (1988) book on Transcendental Style in Film. Schrader is a legendary screenwriter (Taxi Driver) and director (Mishima, American Gigolo, Hard Core). His art and his intellect both inform the development of this book. Reading it in the context of this workshop, I realized that it, too, might constitute a form of practice-led research. I would say much the same about books I have mentioned here by Miyamoto Musashi, Yagyū Munenori, or similar books by David Mamet.

Even with the constraints of necessity and clarity, we have much territory left to explore.

The freedom to explore does not allow us to propose false truth claims, to change history, or to avoid the claims of rigor. To the contrary, rigor, discipline, and skill make it possible for us to develop. In some cases, artists and designers have done more to hinder the development of practice-led research than any other group. This is precisely why I follow plodding Aquinas in attempting to develop a systematic approach to these issues.

Richard Feynman, physicist and amateur artist, once said, “Poets say science takes away from the beauty of the stars – mere globs of gas atoms. I, too, can see the stars on a desert night and feel them. But do I see less or more? The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination – stuck on this little carousel, my little eye can catch one-million-year-old light. A vast pattern – of which I am part… What is the pattern, or the meaning, or the why? It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it. For far more marvelous is the truth than any artists of the past imagined it. Why do poets of the present not speak of it? What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane must be silent?” (quoted in Gleick 1993: 373) Understanding how things work and why expands the powers of the human mind and soul.

There is important territory ahead of us. I believe that we do not need false truth claims and weak arguments to open this world. There is enough genuine pioneering to be done and enough true chaos to explore.
During the course of the workshop, I’ve played with Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, and Duns Scotus. I have used Albert Einstein, Richard Feynman, and Ignaz Semmelweiss as examples, along with Pablo Picasso and Miyamoto Musashi. Marcel Duchamp has made an appearance, and Soren Kierkegaard should have, since he is both a systematic thinker and a poet.

I’ll end with Friedrich Nietzsche, who said, “You must have chaos in your soul to give birth to a dancing star.”

This is the emptiness at the center of things that gives all things their use.

Here I end until Chris and I return in 2008 to host our new talk show.

I bid you goodnight and thank you for an excellent three weeks.

Warm wishes,

Ken

References


About Ken Friedman

Ken Friedman works at the intersection of design, management, and art. His research focuses on strategic design and value creation for economic innovation. Friedman has done research in theory construction, research methodology, philosophy of design, doctoral education in design, knowledge management, and philosophy of science. He has done design policy studies for Australia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Wales. In 2007, Loughborough University awarded him the degree of Doctor of Science, honoris causa, for outstanding contributions to design research.

Friedman is Chair Professor of Design Innovation Studies at Tongji University College of Design and Innovation, and University Distinguished Professor at Swinburne University of Technology, where he formerly served as Dean of the Faculty of Design. He is Adjunct Professor at the James Cook University School of Creative Arts, and Visiting Professor at the University of Technology Sydney Business School.


Friedman is a practicing artist and designer, active in the international laboratory of art, design, music, and architecture known as Fluxus. In 2015, James Cook University will tour an international exhibition of Friedman’s Events.

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An extended biography and bibliography of Ken Friedman is available in PDF format at:

http://swinburne.academia.edu/KenFriedman

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