Friedman, K. (2005). Book review: 'Doctoral study in contemporary higher education', by Howard Green and Stuart Powell


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Ken Friedman


Green and Powell offer a large-scale overview on doctoral education in UK higher education today. First, they review the development and context of doctoral study. Next, they examine different kinds of doctorates, including the PhD, professional doctorates, and practice-based doctorates. Then, they discuss developing and managing doctoral study, funding, program length, supervision, monitoring, and examination to conclude with a section on future directions. The reference list is extensive and useful.

While this book focuses on the UK, it examines issues that are important to doctoral education everywhere.

Two issues in this book involve problems in many UK PhD programs in the art and design sector.

The authors emphasize the fact that the PhD is awarded for an original contribution to thinking and knowledge in a research field. Given this emphasis, they are not as clear as they should be about the importance of publishing an accessible thesis. Instead, they focus on the challenges to publication that specifically involve electronic submission and intellectual property rights, and on such incidental problems as plagiarism.

Green and Powell (2005: 61-67) do not seem to recognize that the system developed at UMI (Proquest) seems to solve these problems. At the same time, the UMI system allows all universities to publish doctoral theses through a central service that makes them available on paper, in microform, and now in electronic formats. As to the incidental problems, there is no reason to worry that increasing accessibility to completed theses will lead to more plagiarism. Quite the contrary. Increased access means that more people can learn about the work, making theft of intellectual property less likely. The problem of plagiarism requires other solutions. Withholding research for fear of plagiarism damages the field.
Most UK doctorates in art and design are inaccessible outside the library of the granting university. Some are not even filed in the library. Since knowledge only enters a field when others have access to it, inaccessible doctorates cannot contribute to thinking and knowledge in the fields of art and design. Interestingly, Green and Powell (2005: 113) emphasize the importance of an accessible research record in their discussion of practice-based doctorates.

This leads to a second and more interesting question for the art and design sector, the specific form of doctorate known as the practice-based PhD. The key issue here involves awarding a doctorate in full or in part for an original work of art, music, or design. Because this issue remains a hotly debated topic in art and design, this chapter requires more space in a short review than other chapters do to cover a key issue that Green and Powell (2005: 100-118) fail to discuss as fully as they should. This issue lies at the heart of the chapter.

One of the troublesome questions in practice-based PhD awards is the failure to show how the candidate achieved his or her results. This is a crucial distinction between awarding a PhD for what is confusingly labeled "practice as research" and awarding a degree in art or design for skilled practice.

Some apologists for the practice-based PhD raise a distinction between "knowing how" and "knowing that." This distinction is inappropriate. The fact remains that an original contribution to thinking and knowledge in any field requires us to show (and say) how. Unless those who "know how" EXPLAIN how, their knowledge remains a trade secret. This is the key distinction between the old culture of craft guild secrets and the new culture of art and design research. It is perfectly fine for skilled artists and designers to keep their hard-won knowledge secret. We do not award a PhD for secret knowledge.

This debate is not new. More than a decade has passed since Nigel Cross (1993: 226-7) opened a key phase of the debate with an editorial in Design Studies that pointed to distinctions between practice and research.

Two years later, Cross (1995: 2) argued that little progress had been made in practice-based research. Part of the problem involves the claim that "works of design are also works of research." This applies to the related claim that works of art are also works of research.

Five years further on, Cross looked back at failed efforts to produce valid examples of practice-based research. In a post to the JISCMAIL DRS list, he wrote (Cross 1999: unpaged), " . . . I
still haven't seen much strong evidence of the output from the 'research for and through design' quarters. Less of the special pleading and more of the valid, demonstrable research output might help." Once again, Cross's comments apply to art.

Another five years have gone by, and the same issue came up yet again at the recent DRS symposium on research quality in London.

The problem is not the relationship between practice and research in a field that is, after all, rooted in professional practice. Research is linked to practice in many professional fields. Law, medicine, nursing, and the information science are but a few. Only in the arts and design do people simply claim that their practice is research. In no other field do universities award a RESEARCH degree for examples of practice.

A legal brief or a nursing protocol might be a brilliant example of practice. It might even represent a brilliant new way to work. As part of a PhD, however, a doctoral candidate must explain the "how" of his or her practice. Since no one can "know how" for anyone else, a research degree requires the candidate to state a "that" for any kind of "knowing how." This statement enables members of a field to examine, adopt, adapt, and internalize the knowledge of another person. It is the explanation that constitutes the original contribution to the knowledge of the field, and not the fact that the candidate "knows how."

As Stephen Scrivener (2002: 27) argues in an article cited in the book, a contribution to the knowledge of the field requires that "the knowledge exemplified in the solution can be abstracted (i.e., described and/or formalized)."

If the candidate alone "knows how," the field does not. The field requires an "explanation that" to "learn how." Practice-based artifacts - including process documents - may constitute a valuable part of a doctoral submission. Artifacts can exemplify, demonstrate, document, and test. Even so, the artifacts in a doctoral submission require an articulate explanation to show what a researcher knows and "how" he or she knows it. This requires the meta-narrative of research in the form that allows others to "know that" before they "know how." This review is not the place for a lengthy discussion on how the ability to articulate a "that" helps us to "know how."

Nevertheless, articulating a "that" to explain "how" is one aspect of double-loop learning. This articulation is what Donald Schon and Chris Argyris meant by the frequently misunderstood concept of reflective practice.

The facile notion that research in art and design is about
"knowing how" in contrast to "knowing that" neglects key issues in the relationship between research and practice. While this question is not central to the larger purpose of Green and Powell's excellent book, it is central to current debates in our field.

A reviewer in another field probably would not focus on the single chapter covering the practice-based PhD because few fields face the exaggerated claim for "practice as research" rather than practice as part of the research process. One cannot blame an urbanologist like Howard Green or a psychologist like Stuart Powell for missing this point. They do not examine the art and design sector at a detailed level. It would be difficult for scholars in most fields to realize just how poor the quality of doctoral education is in the weaker art and design schools, particularly if they have not seen the more obscure thesis projects leading to the practice-based award. I, too, would find it hard to believe that anyone is still confused about these issues if I had not revisited the web sites of a few such schools while writing this review.

Nevertheless, one can picture the problem in a thousand words, as I have done here. A similar discussion of these issues would have made a strong contribution to the otherwise useful chapter on the practice-based doctorate. The objection one must raise is not the quality or excellence of the creative contribution. It is the award of a research degree for a creative project - no matter how excellent - that fails to make a research contribution. Unpacking and examining these issues would have made this book far more useful to the art and design sector, particularly in the UK where some schools grant a PhD for what would be an MFA or a diploma project elsewhere, or even - reasonably enough - a DA or DCA.

As it is, this remains a timely and useful book for those who seek to understand, develop, and manage doctoral education.

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