

The Practice-based PhD at the Department of English and Humanities, School of Arts, Birkbeck College

1. Preparing a proposal :

- 1.1. In preparing a proposal the applicant should identify a research question or questions that will be addressed by both the creative and critical work undertaken during the degree. Creative practitioners undertaking doctoral study must be able to articulate a research question that their practice addresses or illuminates.
- 1.2. Applications for Practice-based Research PhDs should include a statement of intent, clarify the proposed weighting of the practice and critical components of the thesis (see section 2), and set out a clear rationale in which the relationship between practice and theory is justified.
- 1.3. In preparing a proposal applicants should reflect on the following:
 - What are you hoping to find out through both your practice and research?
 - How has your practice led you to your research question? How would you frame your 'practice' as 'research'? Does your practice reflect, modify or test an academic research ethos?
 - Is a research question embedded in your practice, or do you view practice as somehow separate from research? If so, why is this separation necessary?
 - How and why might your research question necessitate creative practice? Are there questions you can only articulate or answer through creative practice?
 - Why is it necessary/desirable/important to situate your creative practice within an academic context?
- 1.4. When you apply to undertake a practice-based or practice-led PhD please submit the following documents:
 - (a) a 2,000 word proposal
 - (b) a sample of creative work between 2,000 and 4,000 words or 8-10 sides of A4 if this a more appropriate measure for your practice (applicants in creative or creative/critical writing only)
 - (c) 1,500 words situating your practice within a critical, literary, clinical, or performance tradition.

2. Practice-based and Practice-led Research

'In practice-based research the creative work acts as a form of research. Whereas practice-led research is about practice leading to research insights.' Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 5.

2.1. The Practice-based PhD

2.1.1. In Practice-based research towards a PhD, the practice constitutes the creative/ clinical work: i.e. the poem; the fiction; the creative non-fiction memoir or essay; live performance; play or film text; visual art; photography; new multimedia formats; medical memoir; or curatorial project. The creative work might be presented in any number of forms, including

but not restricted to text, score, exhibition, online presentation, film or video. In these cases, the critical research takes the form of inquiry into and analysis of the sources, history, meanings and intentions of the creative practice, set in a rich and concentrated context that demonstrates the student's grasp of the wider significance of their own effort. This critical part of the PhD would grow from a record kept during the practical research and build on that experience.

2.1.2. Students need to be reflexive in their practice from the start, moving between the two modes of creativity and criticism, so the story of their own processes is not lost. However the emphasis for the first period of the Practice-based PhD should be on the practice and its development, with consistent documentation of their thinking maintained throughout.

2.2. Practice-led PhD

2.2.1. In Practice-led research towards a PhD, the practice consists of the experience and practical expertise of the student in his or her creative practice or profession, scrutinized from a chosen angle of view, or question, which may often be comparative. Eg. a dancer or carpenter could inquire into the metaphorical agency of a certain aspect of choreography/carpentry, or the psychological and therapeutic potential of those skills. The creative part of this Practice-led PhD could become a memoir, but even if it were highly creative in a literary sense, it could be considered practice-led.

2.2.2. Practice-led research is comparative and interdisciplinary. The final submitted creative and critical work would not inevitably fall into two parts (as in the practice-based PhD project), but may be combined into one main text.

3. Practice PhDs in the Department of English and Humanities

In English and Humanities at Birkbeck we aim to have a generous but also rigorous approach to the remit of creative practice. What follows are examples of supported areas. We also consider projects outside these areas of specialism.

3.1. Practice PhD Research in Creative Writing

3.1.1 A prose or poetry based PhD project in Creative Writing should be a book length work – a book of poems, a novel, a collection of stories or a piece of creative nonfiction, or a hybrid of fiction/non fiction. The finished work is expected to be of a publishable standard and students are encouraged to show and publish work in progress. This must be accompanied by a critical essay which can be between 50-30% of the submission. The exact percentage of creative and critical will be decided at upgrade. Candidates must demonstrate why the project needs to be undertaken as part of a PhD and show a good critical understanding of their own practice and the cultural framework within which the work is created. The critical piece could take different forms such as: a record of detailed archival research for a collection of poems, a historical novel or a piece of creative non fiction; a critical inquiry into writing methods; a case study of innovation in practice, or a critical engagement with a particular writer or written works which speak to and of the creative work. Both the creative writing and the critical component are seen as responses to the same research question.

3.1.2 PhD in Creative-Critical Writing reflects a flourishing area in contemporary literary production, and practitioners such as Katherine Angel (*Unmastered*, 2012) or Maggie Nelson

(*The Argonauts*, 2016) are pioneering a distinct hybrid genre that has attracted the label 'fictocriticism', but that could also be thought of as 'research-led practice', in that an engagement with critical ideas shapes and informs the creative practice. We would welcome applications from research-led writers who are keen to explore such critical-creative interactions in their work.

3.2. Practice PhD research in Medical Humanities

The field of Medical Humanities at Birkbeck incorporates doctoral students from both clinical and non-clinical, Humanities backgrounds. As such the student cohort represents a broad range of skills-sets, work, academic and training experiences, and previous exposure to the critical methods central to the Humanities disciplines. Clinicians and healthcare practitioners come into the field of research with substantial situated knowledge of the real-life settings and practices of medicine and surgery but often with the need to acquire, through training in the first year (compulsory attendance of MA Medical Humanities Core 1 module), the requisite skills of critical thinking and writing (where students have already undertaken study at Masters level in the Medical Humanities they may already have acquired these skills). Conversely, non-clinicians and Humanities scholars are much better versed in the critical practice and inquiry common to the Humanities disciplines but lack the grounded, lived experience of clinical practice. The range of research projects undertaken in the field is markedly diverse, ranging from practice-led (examining the nature of clinical practice), to practice-based (using clinical practice as research), to purely analytic (discursive analysis) modes of inquiry but all undertake to situate medicine, disease, patient experience, clinical practice and medical education within socio-cultural and/or historical contexts in such a way that critical analysis and discursive understandings may be produced. The aims of Medical Humanities theses may, or may not, have the avowed intention of contributing to the practical fields of clinical practice, delivery of healthcare or medical education. All Medical Humanities theses must adhere to the core methodologies and practices of the Humanities disciplines and this means that critical thinking and writing skills are key requirements of the Medical Humanities doctorate.

3.3. Practice PhD Research in Theatre and Performance Studies

In theatre and performance studies at Birkbeck, practice-based and practice-led PhD projects are undertaken by researchers who may have an existing background in practice and research at postgraduate level, or a track record in professional theatre and performance practice, and sometimes both. By their very nature, practice-based and practice-led PhD projects in theatre and performance studies are interdisciplinary, investigating a set of research questions and contexts that are not restricted to the creative processes involved in developing theatre and performance works. The Department of English and Humanities has supported practice-based PhD projects investigating a range of practices, texts and contexts: most recently, an investigation of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* in terms of performance as a mode of writing; and an enquiry regarding the ecological and theatrical politics of land art, and 'digging' as a mode of practical research. A practice-based or practice-led project may thus address historical scenarios through a contemporary lens, or a cognate discipline or cultural practice through the lens of theatre and performance studies, in order to generate new knowledge. There may sometimes be a blurring of the two models of research as articulated in section 2. It may or may not be the case that the creative practice produced as part of a PhD project is presented in professional contexts during the research process or at its conclusion. PhD candidates in theatre and performance studies are invited to audit MA lectures where appropriate and relevant, and opportunities for interdisciplinary research training are likewise sought out for candidates on that basis.

4. Supervision

- 4.1. You may have 2 supervisors, one supervisor for the creative part, the other for the critical part. Normally the supervisors will hold joint supervisions. The joint supervisions may continue until the student has successfully upgraded and the critical and creative elements of the thesis have definitive shape in relation to one another.
- 4.2. Where joint supervisions are not possible, continuity can be instituted through the student's minuting of meetings and the writing of action points. We also acknowledge a mix of co-supervision and periods when one of the two supervisors take the lead, can also be beneficial (for example, having one supervisor come in with fresh eyes at a later stage in the production of a piece that requires more initial input from the other supervisor).

5. Storage

In line with college regulations, you will be required to archive your practice in the College Library.

6. Length:

Current regulations maximum of 100,000 words, including footnotes/endnotes and bibliography.

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