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Unlearning, learning, learner: a provocation for super vision

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Figure 1: *Estate a Reverie* by Andrea Zimmerman (2015). Photo: Campbell (2015).

Abstract

Considered and effective supervision of practice-based PhDs requires an expansion of, and challenge to, established modes of hierarchical academic and peer relationships. The production of knowledge, especially in this form-breaking field, cannot be separated from the means by which that output is assessed and circulated. This paper explores these tensions through case studies based directly on the writer's experience. It proposes embodied learning – a revisioning of earlier parameters of scholarship – and an informed overhaul of the perspectives, positions and priorities of institutional expectation. It proposes instead a spectrum-wide inclusivity, one whose radical generosity and creative openness benefits all involved.

Keywords

embodied pedagogy; unlearning; embodied learning; knowledge production; supervision; practice-based PhDs

Context
My research interests are co-existence (including non-human subjectivities), filmmaking as engaged social and political practice, participatory re-enactment, military/spectacular relations, imaginative hybridity and narrative de-framing in documentary practice, forms of reverie, class and culture, place and senses of belonging.

I completed a practice-based and led PhD at CSM in 2006 on the idea of 'secreting history', exploring the spectacular and spectral relationship between Hollywood cinema and secret military operations, between personal history and public narrative on that history. This space *in-between* informs my research-based work. Practice-led PhDs have increased since my completing it, however, the discussions concerning what constitutes practice as research are as alive now as they were then.

This text is a provocation along with a thinking through approaches to knowledge production and in particular PhD supervision, which, I believe, are ongoing processes that cannot be laid to rest if we aim to partake in a worldmaking whose focus is not simply 'the way it is', in particular in relation to western dominant, binary and capitalist normative trajectories of knowledge production.

Embodied pedagogy
In practice-based PhDs, some candidates may find that a distinct differentiation between theory and practice leads to confusion. It can seem daunting and even intimidating when first having to develop a language to suit the academic aspects of their study. On the other hand, they may find their practice as illustrating their theoretical explorations. This may be all the more frequently the case as more conventional ways of thinking and educational models are divided into 'theory' and 'practice'.

So, what do we do when stuck in this dilemma? There are many texts on supervisor – student relationships, and here I will outline a slightly different approach. As a film practitioner working with people over extended periods of time, and as an educator working in critical pedagogy, power dynamics need to be addressed early on and regularly, they are part of any 'relationship', and have to be acknowledged, negotiated and worked though.

A student may express a feeling of being 'stuck', uncertainty, indirection, self-doubt in various ways, most often also doubt in relation to working 'in the field', especially within art-based research, as it is less formalised in approach and guidance (than, for instance, archaeological or ethnographic fieldwork might be). We are taught that we need to prioritise one aspect of our being above another, enacting a body / mind split. Less often, a re / centring, grounding, breathing back into the body, or a thinking *through* the body towards a critical contribution of knowledge is observed, explored, experimented, tested.

To get un-stuck…

… there is the productive side to this …

… although the main criteria of a supervisor and the supervision team is to facilitate and nurture self-directed learning, research, practice and dissemination in the student researcher, to help students recognise being 'stuck' at some point or another in an insecurity bubble is an important part of agency giving.

To be stuck might lead to Samuel Beckett's "fail, and fail again, fail better" (1983).

To be stuck is inevitable and I also believe in a way essential (as without doubting one's place and knowledge, there is no reason to progress), for else we would 'know it all' and just have to prove it instead of genuinely gaining 'new' knowledge. So, instead, in particular in relation to practice-based art and performance related research, moments of doubt usually produce a deeper purpose and unique offering in terms of experimentation, testing and adapting in relation to inquiry, and output.

The most important consideration in power dynamics may emerge between the student and their subjects and collaborators. The first student whose supervision team I was part of explored the legacies of Brazilian colonial histories and his own (privileged) part within that history and felt 'stuck' in relation to making work collaborative and at the same time being able to address the power dynamics that would emerge. There was a feeling of uselessness here, of non-agency in the lived aftermath of extreme violence. Although close in proximity but unshared in lived experience (benefitting from the extraction of resources in ways that are profoundly unequal) there was a disjunct of a joint experience of history, and the student felt that he would not be able to work in a manner that could do justice to collaboration and so considered changing his practice towards an individually authored work. The question raised so often raised by those conducting research with people outside their community often goes like this: why are people not willing to be part of my conversation? Then: how can I allow people to be part of my conversation? Less often: if people do not want to be part of my conversation, how might one become part of another conversation? Perhaps another's participation is not welcomed under any circumstances, at this time and perhaps the work demanded the researcher to open up the spaces yet unknown within them, to be able to become part of a conversation, has yet to happen, and how? How to listen with attention? How to find the conversation? How to enter into an absence, one produced by colonial erasure and perspectives?

The opportunity here was to think about collaboration as a method.[1] Especially as an encouragement to continue with his early impulses without possibly avoiding the more complicated questions raised by the research and the ethics of working across colonial legacies and trauma – where does one speak from, who does one speak with, who is allowed to speak, whose knowledge becomes acknowledged, etc.

As well as ideas such as transformative justice, in order to think through power relations in these practices, I introduced him to Brazilian born Augusto Boal's 'embodied pedagogy' from *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974) also outlined in his *Rainbow of Desire* (1995). These techniques are a tool in relation to performance research frameworks, of freeing the body from 'direct/ed' thinking to enable a place where the body may think itself (embodied knowledge, such as trauma, stress, restrictions of movement) in a way that we may then think through. Barbara Santos (founder of the Ma(g)dalena International Network (Feminist Theatre of the Oppressed) uses theatre of the oppressed techniques to provoke and enable imagining and 'practicing' (like a rehearsal for living differently) society from the grassroots up. At the core of this practice are creative and ethical approaches to collaboration and the recovery of supressed histories, while re/framing and re/imagining a new set of future references.

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[1] For those new to working in collaborations where hierarchies of power, and other privileges need to be addressed I recommend *Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017) where doula, healer, social justice facilitator and black feminist writer adrienne maree brown outlines a worldmaking where embodiment is essential. brown proposes strategies of working and facilitation, directly implementing ways of group work or mentoring that bypass and / or challenge hierarchies of power, including working through those internalised. *Listening* to the world (including non-human subjectivities and recovery or holding of ancestral knowledge, rituals and non-linearity of knowledge prioritisation) offers an approach to knowledge generating that is transformative in its layering outwards towards societal change. It consciously shifts the way in which knowledge is held, produced, utilised, and ultimately, shared.

Collaborative working with communities offers different ways (of repair) by engaging on the terms set by the communities affected. Since language is part of a complex web of erasure and recovery, including in oneself, somatic strategies and embodied pedagogy aim to enable critical thinking without privileging speech above physical expression, whilst at the same time allowing for a deepening of 'thinking' through the body 'holding'.

Forum Theatre director Mamadou Diol, with Kàddu Yaraax, developed Boal's techniques as a 'popular' form, enabling participants in groups to (do transformative) work, as themselves, amongst a challenging and even confrontational setting, in order to move beyond 'known' perspectives (often universalist positions that are deeply engrained) especially around differing opinions and conflict, with a clearly defined task but not a pre-determined manual for the solution (2017). By route of this work rifts in communities are able to make the space for each other, to hear, to solve problems and understand structural forces.

One example of long-term research and community engagement around state conflict and colonial legacies is Cahal MacLaughlin's *Prisons Memory Archive* on the Northern Ireland conflict and those directly related to Armagh Gaol and Maze and Long Kesh. Here participants can deposit their memories (on tape) and decide when it is released, some interviews are held until the people have passed, after which they will enter the live archive. Some participants chose to be filmed in the locations of their internment and tell their stories. These filmed sections are unedited and presented as one take, so as to not intervene from another perspective in cutting up time.

Another example of how art can formally intervene, or challenge, the production of knowledge is Raya Martin's *Independencia* (2009), a feature film which visually re-frames colonial legacies by using studio painted backdrops of jungle environments. Although the environment could be found outside the doorstep, this re-making of the jungle on canvas was chosen as a critique of the Western Gaze which framed and appropriated [Philippines] nature in their image in their Hollywood films and narratives.

If power dynamics are foregrounded, co-supportive and co-mutual recovery of the past could be part of a radical reworking of historical narratives and a wider recognition of (often also intergenerational) embodied trauma.

I draw on Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy (of the oppressed), developed in, and for, a post- and neo-colonial context, which remains acutely relevant to contemporary models of thinking about learning through his analysis of power dynamics at play in learning models, undoing the teacher as "narrating subject" and student as "listening object" being "containers to be filled". For Freire, students become active participants (instead of passive recipients) because knowledge gained relates to their own contexts (and of course may also challenge their role within these contexts).

I believe that in supervising we need to acknowledge the inevitable gap in embodied knowledge, educational frameworks, and other kinds of privileging of certain models above others. This also frames the question of how knowledge is produced, embodied and presented. Freire's and other visionary educationalists' ideas (indigenous, disability and social justice, etc) bring ideas to knowledge production that offer different parameters, for a world where power dynamics are part of an ongoing legacy of violence, culturally, spatially, politically and physically cannot rely on its established modus operandi to produce 'new' knowledge.

Inclusive pedagogy
Approaches to supervision need to be practiced though critical pedagogy, placing inclusivity and social justice at its core. This demands an ongoing learning about one's own privileges and ongoing unlearning of processes of domination and oppression. How can we make spaces inclusive so people can bring their whole being to the table?

As part of my professional practice I have worked extensively with communities of difference, collaboratively, socially engaged, produced films that prioritise a vernacular poetics in opposition, or, regardless of, dominant visual tropes (realist, abject, in need of help, victims, criminals, etc) by which marginalised communities are frequently shown, portrayed and imagined, and therefore, become 'seen' (cultural hegemony).

For four years I worked with theatre maker Adrian Jackson (CEO of Cardboard Citizens, a theatre company working with homeless and formerly homeless people) to make a feature film, *Here for Life* (2019). This process allowed me to explore acting as an engaged social practice, group work to disperse conflict, and how to safeguard discussions on trauma and triggers.

At CSM I received training and mentoring in inclusive learning with Clare Warner, Alexandra Pitt and Annabel Crowley, which was invaluable especially in relation to supervising PhD students (and others) that may have visible or invisible disabilities. Government research (2017) shows that between 10% and 20% of students in the UK declared a disability, which may be invisible. Considering there is a significant attainment gap between differently abled people across universities this is an urgent matter.

It is crucial to recognise that space is both a physical thing as well as an attitude. This means that as well as the content of sessions, agendas set, by students, supervisory teams and otherwise, we need to think about the 'environment' in which we deliver a session, be it face-to-face or virtual. Relationships can be reinforced by the environment in which we meet.

In the university, the environment shapes learning but we often find ourselves meeting in rooms that have no windows to the outside, are neon lit, with straight walls in rectangular shapes, filled with grey office furniture. We are often limited to arrange furniture only, but even this can make a huge difference. Chairs in a circle allow for an equal space where hierarchies are less pronounced and someone can lip read several people without too much trouble.

However, crucially, when environments, architecture, and in the University, meeting rooms accommodate difference not as an 'other' but as part of a wider intersectional approach, they become inclusive. I would like to acknowledge the important work done by disability justice artists and scholars that address all forms of oppression. Environments that emerged and were shaped by perspectives (such as of whiteness, ablecentric, neuro-exclusive) need to be carefully interrogated as an ongoing intersectional practice so as to not further silence.

As staff and facilitators, we need to be aware of the multitude of unconscious biases. If one has a less visible, or invisible, disability, it can be difficult for others to understand the barriers they put in place, and it may feel deeply uncomfortable for someone to address this repeatedly, especially publicly. During her talk at Goldsmith's Centre for Feminist Research, *Against Racist Ableism in Arts Education* (23 June 2020), poet, artist and writer Dr Khairani Barokka (known as Okka) shared her experience of being excluded by 'usual' modes of operandi such as, for instance, expecting a speaker to walk up a flight of stairs when she indicated before accepting an assignment that she cannot. She may 'appear' to be able to, but the pain inducing strain would deny her ability to perform the lecture. The labour,

emotionally and physically, is put therein on the one already disadvantaged by structures that normalise access and behaviour classified through ableist universalisms. The responsibility of the University, and within it, educators, is to ensure the provision of learning spaces where people are welcome in their whole being (meaning also feeling welcome to challenge when something is not yet working – which is entirely different to having to point it out).

The film *In My Language* (2007) by the late Mel Baggs shows that when why we prioritise one way of expressing above another, we not only deny a way of communicating but also are continuing to be impoverished (alongside erasure) by route of narrow normative frameworks. Communicating in non-verbal ways, and translating into a language held common is crucial to be understood, but also throws up the world we have made such that this extra labour of needing to explain one self, is essential, literally, for survival. Those who have more frequent interactions with non-verbal communicators know that communication is of course rich beyond speaking itself. As a university we are part of producing knowledges for the future, but if conversations are exclusive and people are missing from the conversation, this knowledge is therefore missing, and so, whose 'future' is being made?

(non) Inclusive pedagogy
Forms of inclusion begin (or not), of course, within the relationships between the teaching and administrative staff. Members of any supervision team will develop their own interactive dynamic, and this, established early, will undoubtedly inform the pedagogical process forwards into the student encounter. This supervisory environment, to be effective, needs to allow for a multitude of approaches, as well as an acceptance of genuinely differing experience and frameworks of engagement from the practice and professional background of its participant members. It is understood that generational divergencies of approach might be apparent at this point, as well as aesthetic, cultural and political differences of opinion. I have experienced both positive and negative version of the above interactions, both as a graduate student and as a participant in a supervisory team.

Some time ago I had been placed as an observer on a supervision team with two staff members I had not met before. When our first meeting with the student was arranged, I was early to help set up the room and introduce myself to the other two staff members, but both supervisors came just at the same time as the student. They barely acknowledged me, and the supervision began. During this first meeting, the main supervisor talked across the other supervisor. There was a moment that seemed to last for a long while, when they both spoke over each other.

So, here, I was conscious of dynamic and always asked if they wanted to say something before I spoke. Neither of them were friendly towards me, not antagonistic either, and it felt simply as if I wasn't there in the room with them. The meeting was finished and the student left, and I thought now would be the time when the two supervisors would talk to me, however briefly, about their plans for this student, or even to inquire about me, especially as neither of them ever met me before. They had not even introduced each other to me, after I introduced myself to them. They simply left, both in different directions. What might be happening here?

I believe that as supervisors we need to continuously reassess conventions and traditions, especially in relation to intersectional modes of thought, non-hierarchical pedagogy and 'master slave' relationships. Supervisors are not machines, but can default to certain learned patterns (Deuchar, 2008, p.497; Grant, 1999, p.8). Am I a different 'type' of supervisor, confronted with a model that is fundamentally different to my approach? According to Deuchar's research, students preferred a mode of supervision that could be negotiated intermittently, and a responsive style of supervision, due to the flexibility to respond to the various stages of the journey (2008, p.498) so as to avoid a sense of

dependency arising from lack of communication – something of concern that is reflected in all aspects of our work as teachers. The same of course applies to teamwork and supervision teams. So, I needed to figure out a way to open up the communication stream. After about a month I wrote to both supervisors asking for a catch-up meeting. I never heard back from them. I only heard back from the other two supervisors when I sent an email checking in on the student, so see if he was coping ok.

I genuinely didn't know what to do. I started doubting my approach, maybe I was too new to know how things go, maybe this is how it *is*, and I need to learn yet another language to 'fit' into these structures.

There is no obvious or easy single fix for such a situation, one of the tensions perhaps is a difference in the energy committed to the supervisory project, coming as I did, to this team as a newcomer, it is perhaps more productive to conserve the energy and to save that for enthusiasms generated directly with the student. When, several months later, I finally was able to speak with one of the other supervisors, I discovered their own feelings of alienation within the structure of the university. So, one thing leads to another…

Our approach as educators needs to be able to adjust over time and according to circumstance. I sense there is a 'way of doing things', almost an attitude of 'just deal with it' that I at least wish to avoid in my relations with colleagues, however new to the team they may be. When I was a student in the 1990s, I was told to forget wanting to be an artist as I could not afford to be one unless I was willing to trample over other people. It was seen as a psychological test, can you be tough enough in a world that's tough? What world is this when only those willing to climb over another artist's body would succeed?

Possible futures
What kind of supervisor may I become?

I am learning and exploring the field to understand the needs of the student supervisor relationship, but also, crucially, the shifting nature of PhD's purpose, the range of approaches, and requirements for enabling the student to become an independent researcher. I have learned about the different kinds of layers of supervision (Grant, 2010): institutionally mandated (supervisor knows, student learns), triadic relationship (supervisor/s, student, final submission), mutual relationship (meeting as 'real' people with 'real lives'), fractured selves (unknowable to themselves).

The department in which I work does not demand staff to hold a PhD, we don't even suggest it to be of any relevance when recruiting new staff members. I like this a lot, for it does not prioritise academic knowledge above experience by practice (I am still the only member of staff in my department that holds a PhD).

In 'PhD and the manager's dream: professionalising the students, the degree and the supervisors?' Frederico Matos (2013) outlines the differences underpinning a PhD in the social versus the natural sciences. As opposed to, say, natural science-based PhDs, where the student researcher may be embedded within a team (such as in a laboratory etc) most social science PhD students, such as those found in an art school, would be expected to work independently without provision of an office / studio space, funding etc. This could be liberating for some but isolating for others. This is why research communities can provide a sense of belonging, and some places have a more established culture.

In addition to this work towards community making in the PhD student experience, I hope that in the future we could have PhD students nested within the performance department where I work, enabling them to be part of a community of practice, and allowing them to use a desk in our office. This does not mean, however, that their research has to be attached to any of those in the department, instead, it might provide a rich and multifaceted culture of diverse approaches to what the 'performative' may be.

Matos explores the benefits and risks of the increasing professionalisation of research degrees and the subsequent dilemma concerning depth of research (greater uncertainty as to the outcome, increased intellectual risk taking, working in fields of previously uncharted territory etc) vs 'managed' completions. "The timeline, the skills and training, the avoidance of topics deemed too original, all appear to have led the PhD to become a credential above anything else." (2013, p.635). Putting the emphasis on 'easy to monitor' frameworks and timelines for both student and supervisor, riskier subjects with more creative frameworks may be side-lined. To me this seems one of the most significant aspects of the changes that have taken place even since I conducted my own PhD research, when the field was not yet charted according to an increased standardisation of research frameworks. If we aim to be supervisors that attract students that may engage in research of great depth but riskier subjects or approaches, we need to not only understand how the frameworks of funding, structures of support, and wider monitoring language works, but be versed also in order to argue for cases that may fall into the less predictable categories of research. This is particularly important when it comes to recommending students in selection panels for funding such as Techné.

In short, while the more supportive aspects of increased professionalisation could provide a shared platform that can also be important for the supervisor, as a new supervisor I hope to not simply see supervision 'as a job' to be done. To aspire to the highest levels of research and conceptual and creative risk-taking is what makes me feel alive. We need to engage in ways of opening frameworks of excellence that may yet be unconsidered, contested, to challenge what academia may be or become, what knowledge may be or become. Each art and design PhD by practice is different. Each approach is different, because each person conducting research is different. This is the potential of such advanced research and what draws me to the subject matter – we need to be part of defining what constitutes knowledge and also develop new avenues for practice-led research that is yet unthought and under-represented. What constitutes new knowledge and what do we, in the realm of research as practice, or practice as research, consider as knowledge? There is still a vast debate on this issue, and this is an exciting time for practice-based PhDs within the context of art school education. It seems crucial to insist and ultimately defend these different models of supervision in social sciences to natural sciences precisely because doing otherwise, imposing a model developed within such different disciplinary frameworks, "denies the historical reality of the latter and the considerable diversity in the essence and nature of these two types of PhD" (2013, p.636).

Applying the principles outlined above will be a journey and I am currently working my way through understanding these processes in practice, and until I have more experience this is, of course, hypothetical.

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Biography
Dr Andrea Luka Zimmerman is Professor of Possible Film at Central Saint Martins. Andrea is a Jarman Award winning artist, filmmaker and cultural activist whose multi layered practice calls for a profound re-imagining of the relationship between people, place and ecology. Films include the Artangel-produced 'Here for Life' (2019), which received its world premiere in the Cineasti Del Presente international competition of the Locarno Film Festival (winning a Special Mention), 'Erase and Forget' (2017), premiering at the Berlin Film Festival (nominated for the Original Documentary Award), 'Estate, a Reverie' (2015) (nominated for Best Newcomer at the Grierson awards) and 'Taskafa, Stories of the Street' (2013), written and voiced by the late John Berger. Andrea's films have screened at international film festivals including Berlinale, Locarno, BAFICI, Art of the Reel, Anthology Film Archives, Tate Modern, ICA, Whitechapel Gallery, CCA, Oberhausen, IKSV.