

CAN MY THESIS BE A NOVEL? TOWARDS A LEARNER-CENTRED PROCESS FOR DEFINING THE PRACTITIONER THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

Garnett (2007) described how the development of the work-based doctorate means institutions need to develop new structural capital so as to protect the work-based doctorate from being colonised by inappropriate academic perspectives. In this paper, we contribute to that structural capital by exploring the needs and drivers for a negotiated process approach to the form and nature of final assessment in work-based doctorates.

We ask what will happen when a candidate wishes to present a non-conventional practitioner thesis, a play or an interactive documentary. We present a framework for considering the narrative structure and devices used in professional practice and apply this framework using previous non-linear professional practice research as provocations for discussion.

This work may have greater importance as work-based learning, practice-led research, and self-determined learning become more widely adopted. We expect this work will be of interest to others for whom usual assessment norms are becoming the exception rather than the rule.

Assessment is the process of measuring learners' achievement against predefined outcomes within a set of standards. It should be done in a way that is valid, reliable, explicit and equitable. In the case of the work-based doctorate, that means demonstrating 'doctorateness' to the same level as the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree but, as Johnson (2005) has argued, it would be a mistake to simply co-opt the conventional thesis/examination.

The Doctor of Professional Practice at Otago Polytechnic provides a context for this discussion.

Third Generation Professional Doctorate

The Doctor of Professional Practice (DPP) is a third-generation professional doctorate (Stephenson, Malloch, Cairns, & Costley, 2004; Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015; Costly & Lester, 2012). The first generation professional doctorates were developed by specialising within a PhD structure, and the second generation by taking this specialisation to the work-place. The third generation professional doctorates were developed from the ground up – focusing first on practice-led, self-determined development – and then ensuring that the level of qualification is sufficiently doctoral.

It is the intention in this paper to describe the features of the DPP and how they relate to a need for a negotiation process for the form of the "thesis". It is not the intention in this paper to describe all the differences between a PhD and a DPP. We also recognise that there are other forms of doctorate – such as a Doctor of Education degree. We also recognise that some of the features of the DPP are possible under a PhD system, particularly in the social sciences and the humanities. There are, as we will explore later, examples of candidates who argued for

alternative formats. Their descriptions are of the tone of “fought for”, “battled the system to be allowed to do what was right all along” (see numerous such comments on Twitter #remixthediss hashtag). Our goal is to provide a structure that allows for such flexibility, with rigour but without the antagonism. While some institutions allow a non-conventional thesis alternative, these are usually closely specified: thesis by publications, or artefact/exegesis. The DPP is positioned such that these features are the norm rather than the exception; flexibility is inherent in its philosophy.

There are several principles underpinning the third generation doctorate. The learner is the expert in their own field (hence ‘mentors’ rather than ‘supervisors’), the research is practice-led, and crucially for this discussion, the doctorate is explicitly designed to be self-determined – the candidate manages their own journey (Wildy et al., 2015). The institution sets the level of qualification – the ‘doctorateness’, according to national and international benchmarks – and it is up to the candidate to develop not just the content of their argument that they have reached that level – but the very form that argument takes.

The Otago Polytechnic DPP curriculum document describes these goals:

The programme outcomes to be produced by these candidates are real time projects with tangible results that have a useful purpose within a responsible set of values and ethical considerations. It is a work-based doctorate which is a trans-disciplinary, learner-centred research and development programme, offering benefit for both the individual professional development of the practitioner, and their area of practice. Motivationally this group is much less likely to be interested in pursuing research as an end in itself, or contributing to the stock of academic knowledge, than in using an inquiring and innovative approach to practice and producing knowledge that has direct application to their professional endeavours.

The goals of practice-led research are about change, to “transform the world from “what is” to something better...concerned with intervention, innovation, and change – rather than designing research according to what is measurable, publishable” (Scrivener, 2000). Combined with the control lying with the participant (Wildy et al., 2015), and the ethos of practice as research (Costley & Lester 2012), the third generation doctorate is geared specifically to addressing complex organisational and social issues. It is developed specifically for the swampy lowland (Schon, 1983), mess (Ackoff, 1997) and wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973), of real practice situations. All this results in a situation that Stephenson (2004) described as not allowing “intellectual imperialism based on pre-defined contexts or methodologies” – and this includes the methodology of assessment.

PRACTITIONER THESIS

The Otago Polytechnic curriculum document for the DPP has deliberately left the nature of the ‘practitioner thesis’ undefined – it is equivalent to 50,000 words but the form is purposefully left open and even has an “or negotiated alternative.” It is interesting to note that this double ambiguity – a lack of definition and permitted alternative – could lead one to ask “alternative to what?” For the sake of argument here, we presume that the default is a written monologue thesis, though as we argue below, we believe that the decision to present a conventional thesis in the DPP should equally go through a process of consideration and approval.

Candidates are already asking difficult questions of their academic mentors:

- Can my thesis be a novel?
- It is inappropriate to reduce this sacred knowledge to text. How will you deal with that?
- Can we do it together?
- Can I do it as a diagram?
- Why should I explain this indigenous knowledge in western-academic terms?
- A conventional thesis doesn’t work for my practice, can I do something very different?

The challenge we have, as an institution, is to respect the principle of control in the hands of the candidate while ensuring excellence and rigour.

In this paper we describe the approach we are taking to the process of the 'negotiated alternative' and the questions driving ongoing research to validate this approach.

Problem Statement

Murphy (2007) argued that requiring applied research but mandating a traditional dissertation "is the most flagrant example of privileging the university over the realities of practice."

The Professional Practice Doctorate is an opportunity for critical exploration of candidates' professional framework of practice, and in keeping with a deeply reflective approach, this process and the evidence it generates may be decidedly personal, creative and transformative.

The practitioner thesis – in the sense of the defensible argument – is represented in a "thesis" or "dissertation" in the sense of an extended piece of scholarly writing. However, there is no general method to integrate the learning aspects of critical reflective narrative with the more technical (or creative) work-based project report. One approach widely used in creative practice fields is the exegesis – essentially a separate document (or sections) containing the critical review of the project. This approach fails to recognise that for many, the project is deeply integrated – the creativity and reflection are in common and the notion of separate sections or documents makes little sense.

We need to come to terms with how a work-based, practice-led or creative work with all its non-linearity, metaphor and ambiguity might form the thesis, not merely be a subject of the thesis. This is already happening in earlier stages of the doctoral process; we have seen a diagram and a novel for reviews of learning, and a Socratic dialogue for a literature review and other forms of experimental writing.

Indigeneity is a significant factor in the practice of our learners, mostly Māori, but also Pasifika and beyond. This kaupapa has implications for their research paradigms and methods, and also reporting and assessment. The educational concepts of heutagogy, or self-determined learning, closely align with tino rangatiratanga. We have people coming through who will be asserting their right not just to present in te reo Māori (well protected by law), but to do so orally (which may challenge our systems) or in quite abstract narrative form. It is a highly colonial act to require written work. It is important, especially in a time where indigenous knowledges are becoming increasingly valued and recognised, that we acknowledge that these ways of knowing are not based on a written tradition and that we provide for other forms of communication.

There is much written on the history of the conventional thesis as a proto-monograph (Dalglish & Powell, 2015) and how it could be improved. Patton (2013) described it as "broken...but the stubborn relic lingers on" while Sugimoto (2016) described a conventional thesis as anachronistic in the twenty-first century and there "is no longer alignment between the dissertation and contemporary models of knowledge production." Despite all these, however, it is not the purpose of this paper to criticise the conventional thesis. Our scope is restricted here to the DPP, and we fully accept that for some of our learners the conventionally structured written monologue will be appropriate. But, we argue, even for them, the individual learner will benefit from a process of negotiating this form as the best vehicle for their claim of 'doctorateness.' For example, questions such as the role and position (in the thesis) of the literature review could be examined. For Bourner, Bowden, and Laing (2001), conventional research (that is, PhDs) will "start out from what is known", hence the prominence of the literature review, while professional doctorates start from what is not known – perceived problems in professional practice.

Stephenson (2004) observed that the professional doctorate challenges PhD-based orthodoxy in that it is explicitly concerned with practical knowing and doing, and does not set out to license researchers. It therefore suggests a need for conceptualisations that are not defined by academic knowledge generation (Lester, 2004).

It is important to stress that these alternative modes of knowledge generation and academic processes are an “expansion and enrichment of the doctoral landscape, not a watering down” (Stock, 2011). The fundamental shifts, whereby “propositional is replaced with the emergent, where findings may encompass paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty.” Note that we recognise similar arguments could be made for grounded theory and other qualitative research approaches – perhaps they too would benefit from a more permissive thesis structure – but that is beyond the bounds of this paper:

These shifts are reflected in the descriptions of assessment in the DPP curriculum document:

Assessment of the candidate as a self-managing practitioner-researcher will focus on how they make critical judgements in the work context, and reflect the social, cultural and contextual knowledge and skills that they use and develop in the workplace. The primary evidence for that will be their articulation and exposition of their new professional framework of practice.

In the DPP, there is an emphasis on reflecting and enquiring into work activity, and on developing people as reflective, self-managing practitioners (Lester & Costley, 2010). The emphasis on the ‘work’ is as a purposive activity that gives rise to learning through work based research. In this doctoral qualification, the candidate will be expected to ‘problematise’ the learning within the context of both an academic community of practice and the workplace setting as part of a broader national and international environment. This reinforces the idea that the work-based nature of the DPP locates the candidate’s learning and research in a transdisciplinary field that sits outside of subject frameworks and has its own set of norms and practices (Lester & Costley, 2010).

For Johnson (2005), the problem comes down to a question: if the assessment of the professional practice doctorate is “indistinguishable from PhD... why bother?” They observe that, ironically, the institutions that are “prepared to be creative, nevertheless are conservative when it comes to academic rigour.” Further, “all the golden prizes are held by academics with PhDs... so tend to be assessed in ways that are familiar” (see also Loss, 2016).

The New Zealand Qualification Authority’s approval for the DPP noted that:

... the doctoral distinctiveness of the DPP in relation to other doctorates needs to be more apparent. The nature of the ‘original and substantive’ contribution to knowledge does not lie wholly in the applied practice or research project (‘the artefact’), but in the resultant level of understanding and competence that will manifest itself in practice. Communicating this concept of personal/professional transformation as the distinctness of the DPP, as opposed to the artefact-bound PhD or Professional Doctorate, is immensely complex. It is also critical that it be clearly articulated in order that students, mentors, examiners and stakeholders consistent and realistic expectations.

The task at hand, then, is both complex and critical. Costley and Lester (2012, p.15) suggest that:

... those institutions that want to engage with the work-based Doctorate need to create a distinctive ‘space’ where it is emphasised ... but with a purpose and culture that are distinct from research-focused ... This is likely to be characterised by a clear (and clearly articulated) paradigm of work-based learning as a field in its own right ... that moves it on from being simply university involvement in workforce and professional development.

To some extent, we have lacked a language for describing what it is we do in the Professional Practice postgraduate qualifications. Our descriptions often resort to concepts and terms developed for research conducted without a learning (qualification) element, such as that for PhD study, or for undergraduate education. In not having a language of our own, we fall back on these earlier models and in doing so, do our learners a great disservice –

enforcing norms and processes that poorly fit the context. As a third generation professional doctorate, the DPP is a very long way removed from a PhD. Without strong descriptions of what it is, we risk it being considered an unruly or watered-down version of a PhD, instead of a doctorate with its own norms – processes that are different to, but equally as robust as the conventional structures. We urgently need to reinforce our own conventions – a language and processes to describe the shape of our approach (Mann, in press).

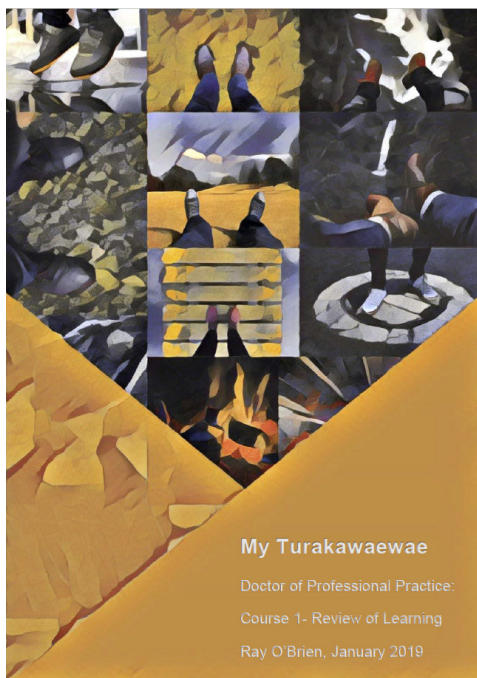
Learners (researchers) in professional practice are expected to find their own voice that integrates their personal, professional and academic perspectives (see for example Hall, 1995, for one approach to an integrated voice). The process is inherently reflective and ethnographic (or related methodologies). Combined with the principle of self-determination, it is unsurprising that we see a wide variety in those 'voices' but also the form and structure of work submitted for evidence. While we knew that the 'practitioner thesis' was different from a conventional thesis, we have been surprised by the creativity shown in approaches to the Review of Learning, Learning Agreement and the Practitioner Thesis (Figures 1-3).

We are aware of the tensions that this brings. McAuliffe, Hargreaves, Winter, and Chadwick (2009) questioned whether "guidelines set by certain internal and external stakeholders (would) allow students to have 'control' over what is or isn't assessed." Our responses to date have largely been permissive – "of course, if that's the best way to explain your experience then we'll find a way to assess it", but rigorous investigation is needed here. As more learners move further away from orthodox academic texts, or even from sequential linear narratives, there are critical questions of how we support this process and assess the outcomes.



Figure 1. Mawera Kareta's literature review took the form of a theatrical manuscript where she imagined conversations with the giants of literature. (Note: Figures 1-3 used with permission).

There is an interesting space between the auto-ethnographic basis of Professional Practice research and the creative expression such as those in storytelling of comics and graphic novels or, perhaps staying with words, in narrative devices more commonly seen in literature than academic text. There are further interesting links in the areas of indigenous knowledge frameworks that don't necessarily fit a conventional academic structure but might be better considered creatively – leading to questions such as the representations and ossification of knowledge, and whose responsibility is to encode and decode the messages in forms suitable for assessment. Professional Practice learners are already pushing the boundaries and we have an obligation and opportunity to understand that. To give learners certainty and ensure rigorous processes are in place, we have to get ahead of the questions being posed by learners pushing the boundaries of what is already innovative academic practice.



Banter on the Beach

As I disembark and wander down the old creaky jetty past the hulks of decaying boats, a kayak arrives in the enclosed bay. As it reaches the rocky beach the kayaker, seemingly without thinking, tilts the boat far to one side and curves the hull around landing carefully and gently on the rocks without damage. A small wave scurries away from him niggling the jagged rocks of the beach as it goes. We greet each other, and he seems as surprised as I am to hear how similar our accents are. A west coast Scottish rolling "rrr" is unmistakable. He sits on a rock near his kayak and I dangle my legs from the jetty. I am curious. Who is he? How did he get here? With common ground established, we start a conversation.

"That's a fairly unusual paddle you've got" I say.

"Yes, it's a Greenland-style Paddle." His reply rolls off his tongue, like a well-practiced elevator pitch. He seems to welcome the interest and continues. "It's great for long distances and windy conditions. The Greenlanders use this style partly because they couldn't make fancy carbon blades, but mainly because it was better for hunting with".

"Have you kayaked in Greenland?" I ask.

The kayaker obliges, keen to tell me more of himself. "Yes. I went to compete in the Greenland Kayak Games. It was a really special thing. I've spent most of my adult life sitting in a kayak for work and for play. I work with the military, training leaders through outdoor activities, so get into some fairly challenging situations. That trip was so different. There is such a strong link between kayaks and the Inuit that there was a whole other layer to understand".

"There was also this thing going on in our heads about colonialism. Although it is Denmark governs Greenland, we were there on a Winston Churchill Scholarship. I had to wear a suit and meet two of his Grandchildren for an interview in some posh club in London- it didn't feel very Braveheart!" We both laugh. The irony of how Mel Gibson has become such a non-Scottish Scottish icon, isn't missed on a Scotsman. Perhaps it's the ultimate form of colonisation in its own right.

Having satisfied his need to share what he had done, the kayaker asks what I do for a job. His reciprocation of interest is welcome, but the question he asks betrays the fact that he has not been in New Zealand for very long. Even the least useful of expat websites will tell you that asking that typically British question before getting to know the person shouts in screaming LED lights that you have just stepped off the waka- which he has.

When I share that I am a lecturer at a local Polytechnic".

Ray O'Brien, Course 1- Review of Learning, DPP, 23/1/2019

Figure 2. Ray O'Brien's review of learning included a story of him exploring the landscape and having conversations with people he met, people who were later revealed to be visions of younger versions of himself.

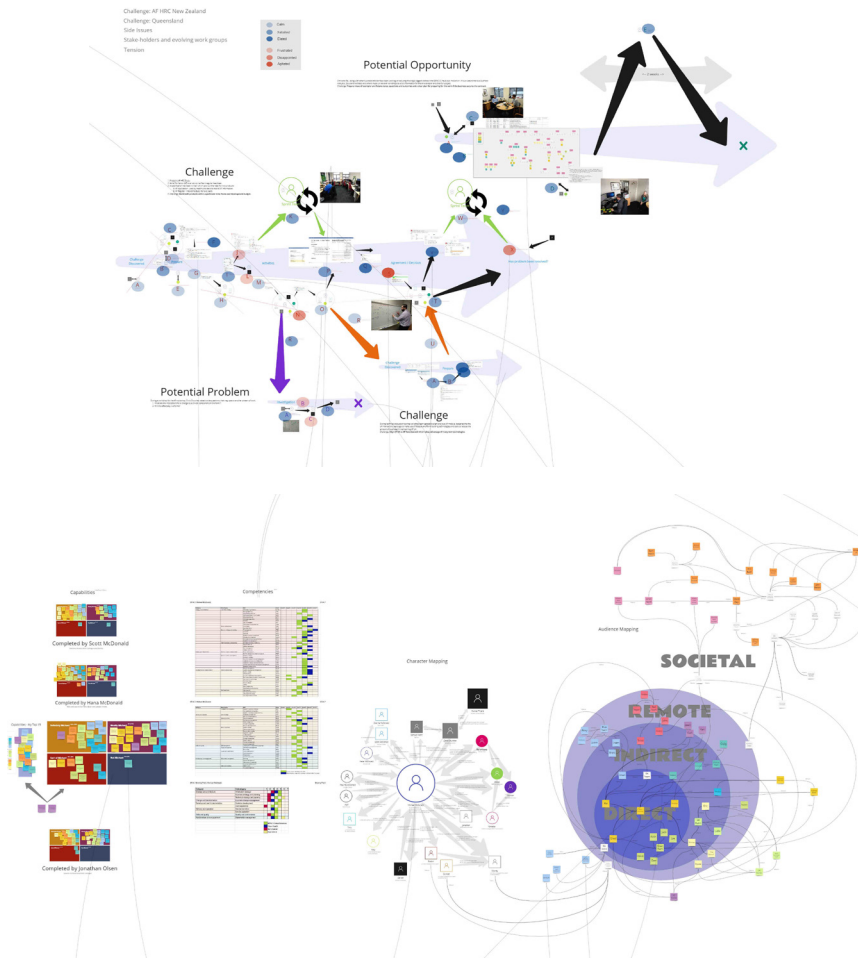


Figure 3. Michael McDonald developed his Review of Learning as an interactive diagram

Why not just write a list of acceptable formats?

One approach would be to supply a pre-approved list of acceptable formats. We do not favour such an approach.

A primary objection is practical. To presuppose a finite list would be counter to a critical and creative process. We foresee challenges to this list as some proposals will almost certainly fall between the cracks.

Second, and more fundamentally, a list that has only “thesis” or “creative/practice work plus exegesis” presupposes a separation of the work and the commentary. For many of our learners, such a separation would be arbitrary and not in keeping with notions of reflexive practice.

Functional Approach

Our default structure of a practitioner thesis integrates a practice work and an exegesis containing critical commentary, with varying degrees of integration.

We are questioning whether this model is appropriate for all – in essence, our question is: can the critical commentary be embedded? We know it can if it is text-based – can we extend the principle of integration to less text heavy works? We worry that a separate ‘academic’ document assumes precedence in status over the creative/ performance which is not the intention.

We know that an embedded model works for the myriad of digital humanities dissertations, and for comic-book theses, for example, Sousanis’ Columbia doctorate (published as “Unflattening” 2015) but this is really a monologue in another form. Others have performed a thesis (for example, Carson’s 2017 rap thesis Clemson). It becomes more challenging if ephemeral – for us the recorded evidence will probably be needed, but this recording – especially spiritual aspects – may be challenging in different contexts.

PROPOSED APPROACH

It is not the intention for the institution to be the arbiter of what is a legitimate reason for not wanting to write a conventional thesis (or even write at all). Rather, what we have to do is find a process by which we both empower the learner and mitigate risk for all concerned. For some, a conventional thesis structure might be appropriate, for others a creative work and exegesis. For yet others, the separation of project and learning in the form of an exegesis might be inappropriate. For some, words in the form of a typeset book might work, for others it might be a comic, or a performance or lyrics. For some, the conventional structure of predictable chapters might be sensible, for others the journey might be a creative narrative that is decidedly non-linear.

In short, our premise is that whatever the learner plans to do, they propose (Figure 4) at the Learning Agreement stage how it will deal with the things that might appear worrisome, mostly the complex issues that a conventional thesis struggles with too – collective ways of knowing, collaborative work, primacy of writing and so on. The second part is that they describe how the format will enable them to present the content in a way that that they can make the claim of doctorateness and for that to be scrutinised and challenged. While this will be done at the Learning Agreement stage (one year in), it can be modified for substantive change up until six months before final presentation and by escalating after that to allow for late-emergent understandings.

Learner describes:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likely form of Practitioner Thesis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How Practitioner Thesis allows for complexity of their practice: collective ways of knowing, collaborative work, primacy of writing and so on.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How that format will enable them to make the claim of doctorateness and for that to be scrutinised, challenged, and archived – all in a manner that minimises risk for all parties, particularly the learner.

Figure 4. Proposed negotiation steps

STRAWMAN EXAMPLES

We present two “strawman” hypothetical cases to illustrate and test the proposed approach.

Strawman example 1: Novel as a thesis

Figure 5 and Figure 6 explore different approaches that a hypothetical learner whose practice is written communication might be exploring when she expresses “can I write my thesis as a novel?”. Figure 7 provides the basis of the hypothetical answers to questions raised by the proposed negotiation process (Figure 4).

This strawman has highlighted that a negotiated 'format' is not just about the nature of the artefact, but the process of engaging with it. If our writer was to propose a novel with an entirely integrated critical commentary, the institution would have to be satisfied that it could provide assessors who would be comfortable reading the novel as both the practice work and its own critical commentary.

It is also worth noting that if we are to honour the principle of the learner being an expert in their own field, the approval process should not become bogged down in discussions about the artistic merit of a proposed novel as a thesis – it might indeed take considerable skill to accomplish – but that is not a relevant consideration for the institution, only whether it can be assessed.



Figure 5. Novel as a thesis. Conventional approach whereby a thesis provides an analysis and critical commentary on separate artefact.

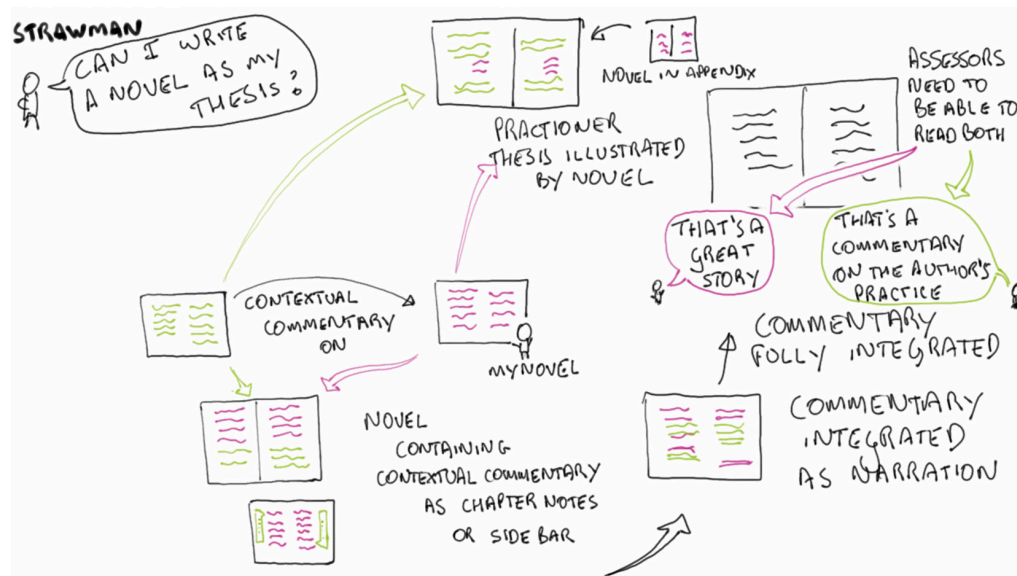


Figure 6. Increasing degrees of integration of the two aspects of the practice/creative work and the exegetical commentary

NEGOTIATION PROCESS:

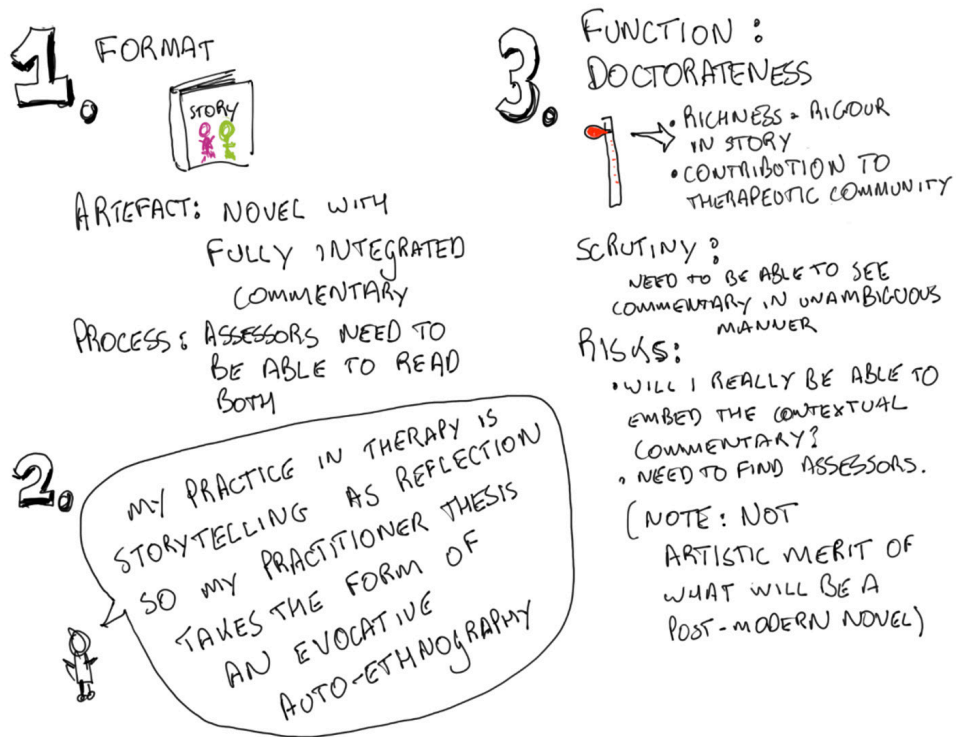


Figure 7. Elements of hypothetical answers to questions raised by the proposed negotiation process (Figure 4).

Strawman example 2: Partnership Assessment

Figure 8 explores a hypothetical proposal for a Te Ao Māori partnership assessment. In this example 'Pita' worked with his community to develop hapu-based fisheries management processes and wishes to present for his DPP with a professional practice statement to the effect of "I am a kaitiaki in fisheries management." This, for the sake of our argument here is both a technical artefact and embedded indigenous ways of being. It would be inappropriate for this to be assessed away from that cultural context and so a partnership assessment process is proposed involving the doctoral panel and Pita's rūnaka. (Note a more empowering goal would be to have suitably doctorally qualified assessors from the community, but for the sake of the strawman, take that as not possible, and indeed Pita is a major step towards that goal). Figure 9 provides the basis of the hypothetical answers to questions raised by the proposed negotiation process (Figure 4).

This strawman has also highlighted that a negotiated 'format' is not just about the nature of the artefact, but the process of engaging with it. It takes Johnston's (2005) argument that we need to recognise that candidates know more about their field of practice than their assessors and lifts that argument into areas in which that knowledge might even be unknowable to the examiners.

STRAWMAN: PARTNERSHIP ASSESSMENT

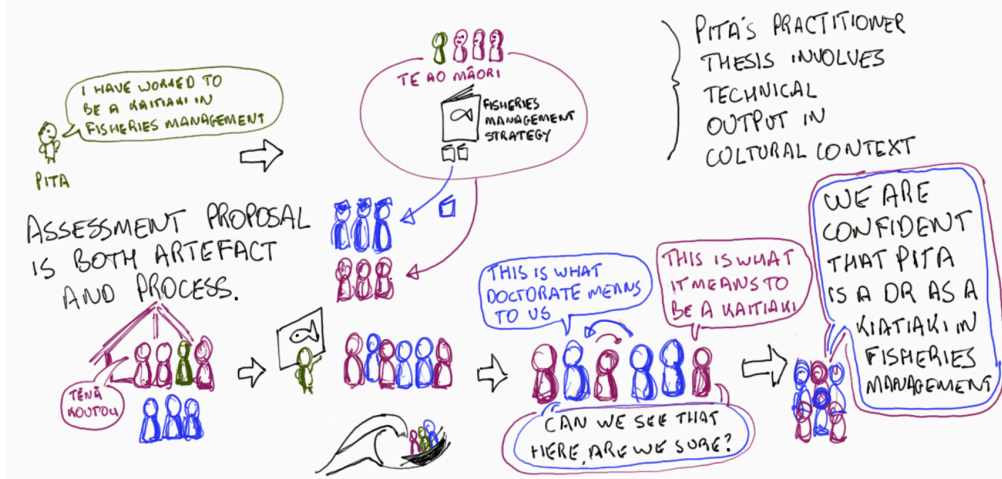


Figure 8. Hypothetical proposal for a Te Ao Māori partnership assessment process.

NEGOTIATION PROCESS:

I HAVE WORKED TO BECOME A KAITIAKI IN FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

1. A PARTNERSHIP ASSESSMENT THAT BRINGS FORMAL ASSESSORS + COMMUNITY TOGETHER

2. MY PRACTICE INTEGRATES TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE WITH A WAY OF BEING. WHILE THE LATTER IS LESS TANGIBLE OR MEASURABLE, IT IS AT LEAST EQUALLY AS IMPORTANT

3. FUNCTION: DOCTORATENESS

- TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF STRATEGY
- RICHNESS + RIGOUR OF RELATIONSHIP.
- CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNITY + ENVIRONMENT

SCOUTINY:

NEED TO BE ABLE TO CHALLENGE BOTH SIDES + INTEGRATION

RISKS:

NEED TO FIND ASSESSORS ABLE + WILLING TO ENGAGE.

Figure 9 Elements of hypothetical answers to questions raised by the proposed negotiation process (Figure 1).

CONCLUSION

Sugimoto (2016) argued that reconfiguring the thesis “doesn't mean a lessening of the rigour of doctoral education. In fact it may actively make it more rigorous.” Similarly, the Modern Language Association (2014) argued that reimagining the dissertation is an opportunity to “demand excellence in whatever form the dissertation takes.” They argued that “standards of excellence are strengthened through creative flexibility rather than strict constructions tied to particular forms.” In this paper, we have begun to explore how we can strengthen the DPP through creative flexibility that demands excellence.

This paper has not explored notions of doctorateness in professional practice (see Wellington, 2013).

Anecdotally, there are many learners internationally who have wanted to submit an alternative dissertation (see the hashtag #remixTheDiss). Almost without exception these people describe months and years of fighting the system to be allowed to submit in a way that honours their practice. It would be useful to collect some of these stories, not just as interesting narratives, but to get an insight into what the institutions saw as barriers. These barriers may just be conservatism, but they may also highlight areas that we should consider in the development of our negotiated assessment process procedures.

In purposefully leaving the form and structure of the final artefact – the Practitioner Thesis – undefined, we have put the ball in the learner's court to create the structure that can carry the justification why they should be awarded a doctorate. If we get the next year or so right, we will see innovative DPPs that we can be truly proud of.

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