AVPHD: supervising in the dark

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“AVPhD: Supervising in the Dark”
by Alisa Lebow, Brunel University

When I came to England to teach 5 years ago, I encountered a very unexpected phenomenon called PhD by Practice. I had barely heard of it before and yet in my new job I was asked to be a second supervisor on two such projects in the space of about one month. When I asked for clarification as to what precisely this practical PhD entailed, no one could really tell me. The more I probed, the less information I seemed to get. As I couldn't quite imagine that people were actually supervising these, in this case Audio/Visual, PhDs without knowing anything about criteria, guidelines, good practice, etc., I just assumed that I must be going about getting the information the wrong way. It wouldn't have been the first time that my typically direct New Yorker approach instigated another typical cultural reaction: English reticence and self-effacement. It seemed to me at the time that my interlocutors would rather appear incompetent (though they clearly were no such thing) than present themselves as masterful or proficient in this area. Although there was something I had to admire in the modesty of the gesture, it didn't really help me come to grips with what it was I was being asked to do.

I have to admit, to my embarrassment and to the possible detriment of those I was asked to second-supervise, I never did learn much more in that first position I held about what this new phenomena informally referred to as “AVPhD” was. It was only in my new job four years later, when required to complete PG Certification training as part of my probation (after over 12 years of HE teaching in the US, Turkey and the UK), that I decided to take the bull by its proverbial horns and actually learn something about what I had come to think of as the wild-west of doctoral research. Apologies for the “OK Corral” metaphors, but from

where I stood, this was lawless territory, and I wondered if it was even a good idea to attempt a civilizing mission, trying to impose some kind of order on the chaos. Considering how badly awry most civilizing missions have gone, I thought I should approach the topic with care, and perhaps take a somewhat more “culturally sensitive” approach to the issue, asking less direct questions, doing some proper research, and hearing what the experienced AVPhD supervisors were actually saying (perhaps when less pressed) about their experience in the field. Wisely or not, I decided to write my “PGCert” research report on AVPhD supervision.

I renewed my inquiry that I had begun five years earlier, this time going to the organization that I had known to be the central clearinghouse and advocate for the AVPhD, the same group that is editing this volume of the *Journal for Media Practice*. Not practicing the very caution I had warned myself about, I approached them with my direct line of questioning, thinking that the people who have put themselves forth as the guardians of the practical AVPhD, would surely be able to answer my queries. No such luck. What I received instead of answers was an invitation to join their steering committee. This gave me a terrible panic, with visions of the blind leading the blind, and a bad case of Groucho Marx, unsure of any club that would have me as a member. But my affiliation with this group was to prove incredibly informative and I learned that people’s reticence to speak forthrightly about guidelines and regulations to AVPhD supervision had very good reason. They were neither incompetent nor uninformed. There was a method to the madness, and a kind of unspoken protocol which perhaps I am breaching by writing this article. The protocol about which I speak has to do with protecting a fragile but very valuable flexibility in how this nebulous area of academic research is being defined and pursued. People weren’t telling me the guidelines because as they stand, the guidelines differ from institution to

institution and with few exceptions remain quite open to interpretation. There is a justifiable fear that in this current climate of academic bureaucratization and increasing standardisation AVPhD regulations may be forced to be codified in a way that would be potentially undesirable or unnecessarily limiting.

In what follows I will attempt to give a brief background history of AVPhDs as I have come to understand it, as well as giving some sense of the debates and concerns surrounding the practice. Forgive me if this information is well known to you. I have written this for other novice supervisors who may not be as well versed in these practices as those who have supervised AVPhDs in the past. I will also say more about the interpretive approach to practice-led PhDs that seems to be valued by students and supervisors alike. In the end, however, I will ultimately make a few recommendations based on testimonies from AVPhD supervisors and students that might help clarify better (if not best) practice in this dynamic but somewhat amorphous area of postgraduate research.

But first, I'll briefly situate myself, so the reader may better understand my perspective. AVPhD is not a common practice in the United States, where I was educated. And although I began as a filmmaker, I came to my university studies in a fairly conventional way, through the usual "theory" route. When asked to supervise an AVPhD, I was not at all confident that I fully understood what was meant by a PhD by practice in the first instance, let alone how I was expected to supervise one. I had many questions: What is the ratio of practice to theory in an AVPhD?; What constitutes an acceptable project?; What kind of support is to be provided to the AVPhD student (academic, technical, economic)?; What are the usual outcomes and on what criteria are they to be assessed?

To be honest, I had my doubts about all of this. As I say, I was trained as a scholar and theorist in the United States, at New York University to be specific. I had worked as a filmmaker before entering the academy as a postgraduate student, and continued to make films and work freelance in the industry, supporting myself through graduate school as a practitioner. However, both of my postgraduate degrees are in the area of Cinema Studies, and are not formally inclusive of practice. My filmmaking was a “sideline” or even at times considered a potential hindrance to my academic work, both in terms of the time it took away from my studies and in terms of the reputations that practitioners are said to have in the film theory arena, considered to be less rigorous and less theoretically well-informed than their academic counterparts. When I took three years to make a film in the middle of my PhD studies, it was essentially “time off” from the PhD. When I then proposed a dissertation topic that interrogated not only my own practices but the emergent field of first person filmmaking of which my film was a part, I was actively discouraged from writing about my own work. It was made clear to me that there should be a conspicuously maintained distinction between theory and practice, a divide institutionally reinforced at NYU, with the Cinema Studies department on the 6th floor, barely if ever interacting with its much more prominent (and better funded) Film and Television production department occupying the 10th and 11th floors of the same building. I was one of the very few bridges between those two departments, hired for 6 consecutive years to teach “Documentary Aesthetics” to the MA students in the Graduate Film and TV Department. It was thought that because I was also a practitioner, the students would be less resistant to learn “theory” from me than if I were strictly a theorist. I found among the students and the faculty of the Film and Television department an anti-intellectual tendency, or at least a hostility to film theory, that only served to further reinforce the separation between theory and practice.

This experience, rather than motivating me to work actively to break down these divisions and advocate for a rapprochement between the two areas of my professional work, turned me into something of a conservative in relation to these matters, believing that they must each be pursued separately yet with full commitment. In other words, I felt it was incumbent upon the theorist/practitioner to pursue both areas of their work with full expertise. Although I did end up writing a thesis (which then became a book) that took my own film as one example upon which to theorize, I nonetheless pursued my filmmaking and my academic research quite separately. I was even told, by a relatively well-known film theorist, to play down my practitioner experience and status when pursuing academic jobs in the US. The only real benefit of this oppositional (rather than integrated) approach, is that I was held to very high standards in both arenas, where no excuses would be made in consideration of my “hybrid” status. I had to be a fully-engaged theorist and practitioner, even if that meant at times, leading a “double” professional life.

The acceptance I have found in the UK as a theorist and a practitioner came as a welcome surprise, considering the relative hostility I faced in the US with this dual identity. However, I carry within me an inculcated (and outmoded) prejudice against filmmakers who are less than rigorous in their theorizing, and theorists who are less than adept in their filmmaking. That is to say, I expect from my students serious theorizing and accomplished filmmaking (which does not have to translate into high production values, mind you), due perhaps to the hurdles I encountered and had to overcome in my own academic development. It is thus with some scepticism that I engage with this budding AVPhD world, unwilling to sacrifice certain academic standards to accommodate this new arena of

research/practice. I should perhaps meet the uncertainties encountered within the field with more generosity and extend the faith that was withheld from me to these current and prospective students, who after all have the opportunity to pursue that which I did not. But to be completely honest, I expect quite a lot from them, if they want to succeed in an academic world that is not always so accommodating of this particular dual-identity.

The Context of AVPhDs: Art or Humanities

Audio/Visual Practice-led PhDs are increasingly common in the UK, having taken hold in the late 1990s and enjoying more general acceptance in the succeeding decade. There is a history of practice-led doctoral research in the UK, beginning with many Music departments conferring PhDs based on musical compositions and performance [Burgess, 1997]. Art schools have also been at the forefront of this ever-growing field, as artists have sought to go beyond the MA or MFA stage and to pursue a practice more thoroughly steeped in theoretical and historical concerns. The Audio/Visual PhD (herein to be referred to as AVPhD), a varied area of practice in and of itself,

has developed in two general environments: art schools, and humanities departments, each having its own particular set of conditions expectations. In this essay I will concern myself

with the question of AVPhD supervision in the context of the humanities. For two lucid yet conflicting considerations of the AVPhD within an art school setting, I recommend Victor Burgin's article, "Thoughts on 'research' degrees in visual arts departments," [2006] and Desmond Bell's, "Is There a Doctor in the House? — a Riposte to Victor Burgin on Practice-Based Arts and Audiovisual Research."

[2008]

Although not necessarily making the distinction between arts and humanities based AVPhD research, there is quite a bit of writing on the subject, to which I am not at all sure I am contributing anything beyond bringing many of the sources together in one place (you may prefer to just skip to my bibliography). Especially useful in terms of learning about the conditions under which AVPhDs are conducted are the official sector websites where several reports have been published on the subject over the last decade (the UK Council for Graduate Education, the AHRC, and the RAE). But if you want to learn from those directly experienced in the field, the *Journal for Media Studies* has been the unparalleled repository for such accounts, as are the periodic symposia sponsored between 2005-2008 by the AVPhD working group [<http://www.avphd.ac.uk>]. Another useful resource is the website of the now defunct group, PARIP, which was based at the University of Bristol, and is still accessible in cyberspace: [<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/parip/>]. Against my better judgement, I also conducted a semi-formal survey of AVPhD students, to try to get a better idea of their experience. The data were collected in order to assess the conditions under which people are pursuing and supervising AVPhDs and to shed light on the areas where more or better supervisory support might be needed.

Initially my project was intended to be a descriptive study of the current environment for AVPhD research, yet from the outset, I did not have much confidence in its more qualitative aspects. For one thing, I am not trained as a social scientist and have little experience or faith in this type of research. For another, there are not vast numbers of people doing AVPhDs, and despite my best efforts, and some efforts of others on my behalf, only a small subset responded to my questionnaire, which was sent out on the most comprehensive AVPhD mailing list available in the UK. Although in the latter part of this study I

will refer to my more qualitative data, for the most part I have defaulted to the methodologies with which I am more comfortable and familiar, based on research and analysis of written material as well as informal information gathering.

Relatedly, I was able to gather a tremendous amount of very valuable first hand information and advice about AVPhD supervisory methods and strategies at the all-day symposium of AVPhD supervisors and examiners in which I was fortunate enough to have been asked to participate.¹ In fact this was a much more economical, if less easily quantifiable, manner of information gathering than if I had relied solely on my questionnaires. I will be referring to the insights garnered at that one-day symposium throughout this essay.

History of Practice-as-research

According to a study written by Angela Piccini for PARIP (Practice-as-Research in Performance, an AHRB funded initiative based at University of Bristol, 2001-2006), the earliest official recognition of practice-as-research in UK higher education was in the 1992 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). [Piccini, 2003] Since that time, both the RAE and the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) have continued to respectively acknowledge and support practice-as-research projects. As stated in the introduction, some arts programmes, such as Music and Fine Arts, began conferring doctorates for creative work well before they were conferred for Audio/Visual projects. Performance and writing also enjoyed recognition at the doctoral level before the Audio/Visual PhD began. The first recorded Audio/Visual PhDs completed in the UK, as far as I have been able to determine, were respectively by Joram ten Brink and David Farnham in 1999,

¹ This symposium was held on 1 April 2008, at Birkbeck College in London. Please see AVPhD website for full transcripts of the proceedings: <http://www.avphd.ac.uk>

under the supervision of Professor Roy Armes at Middlesex University.² The first AVPhD student to enrol at Brunel, where I currently teach, was not until 2004. As you can see, relative to other types of PhDs, this is a very new area.

Trouble with the terms

You'll note that I have used various terms to indicate this particular type of research. I have referred to it as "practice-as-research", as well as "practice-based" and "practice-led". You'll also realize that I have referred to a variety of "practices" that constitute practice-based or -led PhDs. There is little consensus as to what such research should be called or what the distinctions might be. John Adams distinguishes 5 different typologies, with each one differing in the degree to which practice constitutes the main form of "research" or serves as supplement to the research [Adams, 2007: 212-13]. At times, in Adams' taxonomy, a term is said to privilege the traditional written outcome over the practical element ("Practice-led research"), and at times a term would seem to privilege the practical as research, ("Reflexive practice"). However, from my perspective, these attributions are not inherent in the terminology, even if the distinctions between types of practice-based research remains useful. Thus, rather than delineating his fine and subtle distinctions, suffice it to say that there is some debate as to the usefulness of these terms and indeed within the Practice-Research "community" there is little consensus as to what constitutes the range of best practice in this arena. To my surprise, it even continues to be debated what actually constitutes research within the context of practice, and how it can best be "expressed." It is by no means uniformly accepted within the community of practice-based researchers, supervisors, and students that

² Information gathered from Dr. Joram ten Brink, in private conversation.

practice-based research should be pursued or performed with similar aims and our outcomes as more traditional forms of research.

The RAE and the AHRC seem to have no such doubts, as both institutions indicate on their websites that they expect similar “results” from practical work as they would from traditional written research, namely an “original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding... lead[ing] to new or substantially improved insights [RAE, 1996]. The AHRC, for its part, defines research, whether practical or otherwise, as requiring the same process (devising research questions and aims, specifying the research context and methodologies, etc.). It also expects the work to produce or contribute to “new knowledge” in the field, which is precisely what it demands from all other types of research. [http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/fellowships_in_the_creative_performing_arts.asp]. In other words, they treat practical research the same way they treat any other form of research, thus no further illumination can be expected from the regulating and funding bodies as to how best to define the field of practice-as-research. Clearly not all practice-based projects should necessarily be considered research, but I believe it is also clear that practical research should not necessarily have to be accompanied by a standard written piece of research (justifying or supplementing it), nor should it be held to the same standards or expectations of knowledge generation as a piece of traditional research.

How can one identify or define what “knowledge” or “insights” a musical composition, or for that matter a video installation, might be said to produce? Is it necessarily the role of the practitioner to make such knowledge and insights explicit for his or her work to be considered

research? Further, is it not possible for the research to have been conducted prior to the production of the work and yet for the final result to bear no clear traces or marks directly attesting to that research? How would one footnote a film? And why should that be necessary for the work itself to constitute a research outcome? Additionally, can there not be different approaches towards practice-as-research (as suggested by Adams), not considered by AHRC, but wholly in line with a more expansive notion of “contributions to knowledge”?

Different types of AVPhDs

Questions such as these are pondered in some depth in Victor Burgin’s stimulating article [2006]. Burgin concludes that as potential supervisors of practice-based PhDs, it is less important what term we use to describe them (“practice-based,” “practice-led,” “practice-as,” etc.) than it is that we understand the range of potential projects that may constitute practice-as-research. Although his categorization has been criticized as being “unnecessarily stipulative and overly restrictive” by Bell, [Bell, p???] I have found it of considerable use to think in terms of the different types of candidates who might want to pursue a practical PhD. Bergin suggests three general types of candidates who might want to pursue a practical PhD and each has its own relationship between theoretical and practical work. The first being a practitioner who seeks to enhance his or her academic research, who might in the process produce work, but the main emphasis would be theoretical research and the main outcome would be a written thesis. The second type of candidate would be someone trained in traditional academic research who wants explore their ideas by making practical work. And the third type is a more fully integrated practitioner/theorist, who would want to both make original practical work and then analyze it. [Burgin, 2006: 103]

Bell recommends that we think in terms of more practical considerations. For instance, he identifies the candidate “who while successful in their professional field wishes to develop an academic career.” [Bell p??] Bell posits Burgin’s “types” as rare and unlikely, yet, in my admittedly limited experience, I have not found that to be so. Although Burgin, and to a lesser but still significant degree, Bell, writes about fine arts students, these various typologies are nonetheless applicable to AVPhDs more generally and it is useful to think in these terms, especially when considering the variable ratio of theory to practice that can be negotiated with a prospective student.

Based on my own inquiry, I have seen a vast range of accepted practice: everything from 20% theory and 80% practice, to quite the other way around. However, most of the projects I have heard about are more conventionally either 30% theory: 70% practice, 70% theory: 30% practice, or most commonly 50:50 theory and practice.³ What that means in actual submissions is not necessarily conventionalized. Usually a 50% written component would be half of the 80,000 words required of a traditional, written thesis. It is the practical component that can vary wildly, anything from three feature length videos [Knudson, 2003b]⁴ to several short (5-10 minute) videos. I was told by a colleague at Brunel, that we expect approximately an hour’s worth of video, and a 40,000 word written thesis, unless otherwise specified. What I learned in practice, however, is that each of our three AVPhD projects currently underway has been “otherwise specified”.

Integrating Theory and Practice in the AVPhD

³ This information has been gathered both through questionnaires and private conversations with several AVPhD supervisors.

⁴ Though, to be fair, Knudson only submit a 15,000 word written thesis, making his practice: theory ratio more akin to 90:10.

It is as hard to say what properly constitutes research as practice as it is to determine what makes for a successful project. My concern here has to do with supervising prospective AVPhD projects, identifying from the beginning what would make for a successful, and hopefully innovative, piece of work.

In terms of identifying a strong project from the start, there are problems and pitfalls, many of which have to do with the very basic question of whether a video needs to be made at all. I have seen, for instance, a recent proposal where the documentary to be made had nothing to do with the proposed research into methodology, it was simply a vehicle for the producer to analyze some aspect of the making. I suggested to this prospective student that she might consider doing her research on the set of documentaries made by others, thereby effectively bypassing the need to make a video as part of her research. This tendency to include an audio/visual component to a research project either as an afterthought or unnecessary supplement should of course be addressed at the outset of any supervisory relationship.

This warning was reiterated by Professor Robin Nelson at the 1 April AVPhD Supervisor/Examiner Forum, held at Birkbeck College, London (www.avphd.ac.uk) where he insisted that the theory and practice must be integrated from the start. In other words, the prospective student may simply want to make a film, but has not properly conceptualized why and how it should be done as a PhD project. It is important to be clear from the outset that the production component is crucial to the outcome of the project. If someone simply wants to make a film, they surely do not require our resources and skills as highly trained academics and scholars to do so. They would be better advised to approach a production company or professional funding scheme. Even in this

highly professionalized world, there is absolutely no demand upon practitioners within the film/video industry to hold a PhD.

AVPhD @ Brunel

I found it instructive to look at my own institution's regulations for doctoral work. This information is available on the internet for most universities, and I highly recommend the novice supervisor of any PhD, let alone a practice-based one, to consult their university's particular set of regulations. According to the records, the Senate Regulations at Brunel have included a section on "creative" doctoral work at least since 1997 [Burgess, 1997]. It is one of at least 40 institutions of higher education across the UK granting AVPhDs [PARIP, 2003]. The Brunel University regulations read as follows:

A candidate for a research degree may present evidence of knowledge, understanding and, in the case of doctoral candidates, originality, through the medium of creative work. This might include the submission of a portfolio of substantial musical composition, an original literary text written specifically for the degree, or evidence of research in the form of practical performance in drama and/or dance. In all such cases, the submission must be supported by a written commentary indicating how the creative work fulfils, or contributes towards the requirements of the award.

[Brunel University, Senate Regulation 5.4, <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/administration/rules/senateregs/sr5>]

As you can see, Brunel's Senate Regulations do not actually specify, but nor do they rule out, AVPhDs. The regulations are quite vague in general with regard to practice based PhDs, but they leave the area of Audio/Visual work entirely unaddressed. This simply leaves it up to the individual supervisor to determine the adequate parameters and minimum standards to which the work should be held. However, as external examiners will be brought in to examine the work, it is imperative that the supervisor familiarize him or herself with the standards

developed across institutions. It is this inter-university aspect of the process that has motivated my cross-institutional research.

Research into AVPhD Student Experience

In the Spring of 2008 I prepared and disseminated a questionnaire to be completed by recent or current AVPhD students. I intended to conduct a “cross-sectional” study that attempted to gather data as to the current state of AVPhD supervision from the perspective of students. Although in the end I did not sample a huge number of students, I believe the data gathered to be broadly representative, and certainly instructive, especially in terms of where the system, such as it is, seems to break down.

No actual statistics exist for the exact number of AVPhD students in this country, but of the 40 or so institutions offering PhDs by practice,⁵ not all offer AVPhDs, and those that do, do not necessarily all have AVPhD students. If they do, they may have only one or two. Brunel currently has 3 AVPhD students and the last UK Higher Education institution in which I worked had only two in their Cultural and Media Studies programme. It is reasonable to assume that there are no more than a few hundred AVPhD students in the UK, and only a portion of those are pursuing AVPhDs in the context of humanities programmes such as film and television studies, media and cultural studies, visual anthropology and the like. The rest would be under the rubric of visual and creative arts, new media, and other practice-based programmes.

What the data reveals

⁵ As of 2003, approximately 40 UK institutions of Higher Education were granting AVPhDs according to the University of Bristol PARIP website (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/parip/hei.htm> last accessed 2 May, 2008).

In what follows, I will discuss the data from the student questionnaires, broken down into four main categories of supervisory and institutional support: Academic, technical, financial, and cultural. By cultural, I refer to the research culture provided by the institution or any consortium that the students might have access to as a result of their candidacy.

Academic Support

With only one exception, the students reported that the guidelines were negotiated between themselves and their advisors and the ratio of theory to practice established was based on their individual projects. Only one of the students who responded was working under fixed rules at her/his institution. There was a high degree of satisfaction in terms of the way in which the terms of their research were negotiated (one said it was adequate, four others felt it to be generally adequate, and only one reported that the process was neither clear nor transparent). Students felt in general that the flexibility of the process worked to their advantage and they did not seem to mind the loose or unfixed nature of the degree. I found these results surprising as it was this very “flexibility” that I had found frustrating, as I felt I was lacking clear guidelines from which to proceed. However, upon learning that they are welcomed by the students, I have had to revise my thinking on the issue.

Student satisfaction with the flexible guidelines was encouraging, as was the fairly high degree of satisfaction with academic support more generally. Three of the eight students deemed their academic support to be adequate, two more deemed it to be mostly adequate, and three found it to be inadequate. This indicates a 62.5% satisfaction rate. Of course, 37.5% dissatisfaction is not to be

overlooked, and much more can and should be done to support these students better.

Technical Support

The related area of technical support fared somewhat worse overall. Half of the students reporting indicated that technical support from their institutions (whether in the form of technical instruction or access to equipment) was inadequate, while the other half failed to answer the question at all. The non-response is mainly due to the fact that some of the students were practitioners prior to entering the academy for their PhD studies, and thus had all of the equipment and training necessary.

When taking on an AVPhD student, the supervisor must ascertain what kind of technical support the student is likely to need and before accepting that student, they should be absolutely certain they can accommodate their technical needs and demands. It seems this aspect is being overlooked by the institutions in which this sample was involved and points to a broader problem.

Funding + Fostering Research Cultures

In the 2001 UK Council for Graduate Education report on Creative and Performing Arts Research, it found both funding and research culture significantly lacking for research students in the field. While it acknowledged that the then-called Arts and Humanities Research Board had “begun to support individual research practitioners in a range of schemes,” they found there to be considerably less support available to the post-graduate level. As they note:

[R]esearch students currently benefit from the opportunity to apply for only a small number of awards relating to practice-based research in the performing

arts and design. This is clearly insufficient to address the issues of critical mass, establishment of research community and environment and the need for peer debate and dialogue identified in this report. [Green, 2001: 41]

Unfortunately, the situation seems not to have improved in the last seven years since this report was published. In the small survey I took, I actually neglected to ask specifically about funding, yet half of the respondents volunteered that funding was a major issue for them, or rather, the lack thereof. Had I had more foresight, I would have asked explicitly. AVPhDs are resource intensive. They require a considerable amount of technical equipment and time, both of which cost money. Across the board, very little money is available for post-graduate studies in the UK. This problem is compounded for AVPhD students, who not only need to meet the basic requirements for living in this expensive country, but many of whom also need to have access to the latest video and digital equipment, and to editing facilities. As institutions continue to take on AVPhD students, they must take seriously the capital needs of each student and attempt to make available to them at the very least a fee waiver, and at best a number of scholarships and grants to facilitate this rigorous and capital-intensive process.

Another oversight of my questionnaire was in the area of research culture. Although the majority of my respondents indicated that the academic support they had received or continued to receive was of a high standard and adequate to their needs, 3 out of 8 indicated that it was substandard. Furthermore, unsolicited, half of the students who responded requested more opportunities to read and discuss material relevant to their AVPhD studies. The most satisfied of the students in terms of academic support, felt she had access to an intellectual community in which to develop her ideas.

In conversation with one of my own AV PhD students, it became clear that it was not only a question of the support received from his supervisors, which he deemed to be appropriate and adequate, but the issue of a research culture or context in which to produce the work that came to the fore. This respondent felt that he was having to make the work and reflect upon it in isolation, and that the creation of a more dynamic AVPhD research culture or environment would be more than welcome to him. I asked the administrator of the AHRC-funded AVPhD resource group whether she had found a similar complaint amongst the AVPhD students she worked with, and she said that this was a very common issue.

AVPhD Supervision

The usual advice and procedures as suggested in books like *Supervising the PhD: A Guide to Success* [Delamont, et. al., 1999] are useful up to a point, but do not account for the very particular needs and concerns that attend an AVPhD. When, for instance, Delamont, et. al. recommend that the novice supervisor consider whether their prospective student is able to master his or her theoretical methodology [Delamont, et. al.: 44], they are not also considering the added technical skills an AVPhD might need to learn. When they advise about the literature review [Delamont, et. al.: 51], they are not, of course, taking into consideration that the research for an AV, or any practice-based creative PhD, might not take the form of a traditional thesis. And although there is yet to be any real consensus as to what constitutes PhD by practice, it is obvious that new mechanisms of support need to be devised to provide adequate guidance and supervision in this nebulous but exciting field.

Some sound recommendations from Robin Nelson for AVPhD supervision were provided at the

1 April AVPhD Supervisors and Examiners Forum. His recommendations can be summarized as follows:

- Be sure there is a need for the practical element in the research at the interview stage.
- Agree on the proportion of theory/practice, make sure it is integrated (and not “split”) and set a “contract” for the three year study.
- Build reading, writing and critical reflection into the schedule.
- Be clear what the candidate will need in terms of technical support, and what s/he can provide.
- Frequently ask where the ‘new knowledge’ or ‘substantial new insight’ lies.
- Hold a mock-viva.

Nelson’s suggestions are clear and incisive (as are his recommendations in his 2003 article). He does not, however, account for the two last elements that were raised in the responses to my questionnaires: Funding and Research Culture. It seems crucial to take these additional aspects of AVPhD study seriously.

Supervisors need to advocate both within their universities and within the UK more broadly, for more student bursaries specifically designated for AVPhDs. Audio visual work is resource intensive and costs more than the traditional, writing based humanities research. It is more akin, in this regard, to scientific research, which often requires highly technical equipment and skills. If institutions want to support AVPhD research, they must do so more than in name only. There must be adequate financial support for these degrees.

Additionally, as many of these students straddle both practice and academic research, and may well be forging their ideas about practice as research very much in isolation, a research culture devoted to these questions and areas of concern needs to be fostered.

Conclusion

Although, as discussed throughout, there is no final consensus as to what constitutes practice as research, nor what the precise guidelines should be for an AVPhD, I would argue based on my research that this very flexibility is in part a strength of the field, allowing for quite a bit of latitude in devising and supervising such projects. It does however, also lead to some confusion and disappointment, leaving some students without adequate support in the four vital areas that I have identified, which contribute to a satisfactory student experience and equally importantly, a successful AVPhD. While the parameters and guidelines should remain negotiable and should not be fixed or codified, it is incumbent upon both students and supervisors to understand the field in which they are working. This is best done by consulting the on-line resources (PARIP and AVPhD) as well as the frequent publications on the subject in the *Journal for Media Practice*.

In the course of my research, and through participating in the AVPhD forums, I have learned that the questions I've had at the outset in terms of supervising AVPhDs are shared by a wide array of supervisors. It is therefore recommended that any institution conferring AVPhDs join the AVPhD network avail themselves of its resources before taking on AVPhD supervision. At the 1 April forum, a suggestion emerged about requiring some formal training for AVPhD supervision, but this was received with the same cautious trepidation that I encountered upon my initial inquiries. The resistance to codify and systematize the process may well be what allows it to be so dynamic and broad ranging. At the same time, it leaves some in the dark as to how supervision can best be carried out. Short of recommending the implementation of formal trainings or workshops for AVPhD supervision, I will simply recommend the relevant set of readings highlighted in

the bibliography below. I have found them to be very helpful in my own supervisory capacity, and that, along with entering into dialogue with other AVPhD supervisors and current students, has gone some way to illuminate what had earlier seemed a mysterious and somewhat shadowy path.

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