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What's 'critical' in creative writing PhDs?

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ABSTRACT

The PhD in creative writing, like other practice-oriented advanced degrees, suffers from academic scepticism and even disdain. Unlike other practice-focused degrees, it claims the label concerning philosophy, and with it a standard of contributing to knowledge. This paper responds to a challenge to make explicit what types of knowledge the hybrid model of the degree – with its expectation of a book-length piece of creative work and a long essay – creates. It does so through examining accounts of the detrimental effects of the lack of clarity and the remedies students and supervisors have identified. It analyses the expectations that universities in Britain set and a personal account of undertaking such a project, before relating accounts of the practice in one such university and the problems that arose there. While prior accounts have considered workarounds, this paper suggests we focus on what knowledge such work creates, how it is created, and to whose knowledge it contributes. Practitioners can thus see ways to decide whether to make more explicit what types of knowledge the degree can create and decide whether a different label might better describe the nature of the degree they choose to offer.

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Introduction

The degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing is viewed sceptically in academia. It's not the only discipline that's seen not to be 'serious enough' to be designated a PhD. People in other practical fields, like pedagogy, law, business administration and medicine, can take advanced degrees with a non-philosophical label: EdD, JD, DBA, MD. But PhDs in creative writing suffer from sceptical side glances from colleagues, even those in English and literary studies. 'It's not really a PhD,' one academic told me. He's a creative writing lecturer – with a PhD in creative writing.

In creative disciplines, the evidence of scholarly intent used to be satisfied by a master's in fine arts (MFA), which is – or once was – the 'terminal degree'. Five decades ago, as an undergraduate and master's student at a prominent US state university, I took modules on writing poetry. My instructors, no, my *professors*, held MFAs, not PhDs. The most senior of them likened any terminal degree, including an MFA, to a terminal illness.

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So, is our PhD merely an example of grade inflation, a fudged concession to institutional pressure to outfit all lecturers with doctorates? If not, what is its contribution to knowledge? Whose knowledge? How do we know what knowledge it has created?

A 2021 editorial in the journal *New Writing* captures the problem. Universities just don't understand this degree. Graeme Harper writes: 'The reason for this is simple: we have failed so far to create an adequate global conversation about the nature, reasons behind, intentions, range of outcomes, and significance' of it (Harper 2021, 123). He argues that the 'fix' lies with creative writing academics themselves. His essay concludes:

And fix it we should – together, globally, actively, and really soon. There are too many current doctoral students in Creative Writing around the world, and too many doctoral graduates in Creative Writing to leave this important task a moment longer. (124)

It is a problem that has occupied the minds of many academics working in the field. Jeri Kroll (2015, 161–162) puts it this way: 'The hybrid creative – critical doctoral thesis can take many forms and produce various types of knowledge Creative writing researchers must in some way contribute to this stock of knowledge'. The phrase 'in some way' encapsulates the problem but does not solve it. In what way? To what body of knowledge? To whose?

This paper goes some way towards answering these questions by summarising scholarly debate about the subject and professional attempts to provide guidance in the conduct of these programmes, by examining how the universities in Britain currently describe their PhD programmes in creative writing, and by recounting personal experiences of undertaking a programme. The anecdotes it relates fall short of scientific evidence, but they point to issues in the conduct of programmes of study, processes of research supervision and examination, and most forcefully of orienting those involved in offering and undertaking such degrees. It thus identifies two lines of inquiry for more systematic analysis. But perhaps more importantly, it seeks to raise awareness about ground-level problems and encourage those involved to engage in the global 'conversation' that Harper argues is needed.

The scholarly concern

PhD programmes generally – across disciplines and in countries around the world – are characterised by their focus on *research* that develops *contributions to knowledge*. Examiners are supposed to look for originality as well as contributions (Clarke and Lunt 2014). In creative disciplines, the originality of the creative component of the PhD may be obvious. But the knowledge created and the originality of the critical component, or the contributions that either the creative or the critical component makes to the field of inquiry, are much less so.

Contributions need not change our view of epistemology itself, but they must rely on epistemic methods and appreciate their limitations as well as the possibilities they provide. In the context of creative writing, Jan Webb (2015, 2) defines research as 'seeing, apprehending, making sense', which in a scholarly setting results not just in a literary work but also 'to answer research questions'. She argues that creative practice, 'if properly organised and managed', can be a 'mode of knowledge generation', and research can invigorate the writing. But conducting this work in an academic community

raises the intellectual stakes. Students need to observe scholarly disciplines of research; members of university academic staff need to publish research to be able to show that their teaching is based on contemporary knowledge. The creative work is not just entertainment. It will ‘enlighten, disturb, invigorate, contradict, upend or otherwise engage the reader’ (4). That is, while the *research* processes inform the researchers, the outputs *communicate knowledge* to others – scholars to students and each other, writers to audiences. Research is more than ‘searching again’: Webb notes that the etymology of *research* stems from the Old French, in which the prefix ‘re’ adds intensity to the ‘cherchier’ of ‘to search’. We must search intensively. This is more than visiting a location to add local colour to the setting of a novel. She continues:

By looking intensively and then reflecting on what is known and what is being made, it is possible to craft a piece of work that is not only original but also accessible by, and able to connect with, its readers. (Webb 2015, 7)

And she notes: ‘Research isn’t really research until it is published, or otherwise publicly disseminated’ (206).

I want to say, *no* and *yes*. No, because her observation about ‘recherchier’ is not quite correct; the Old French literally means ‘search again’. But yes, because her rendering is a good description of creative practice. Looking ‘intensively’ is what writers do to move from merely adding local colour to peering into the minds of however small a population and representing their sentiments in the actions of complex characters. It’s what artists in other media do. Looking intensively is also what researchers in the physical and social sciences do with their large datasets in their pursuits of knowledge.

As for the requirement that qualifying as research means the work must be published, again I’d say, *no*, though with a more reluctant *yes*. Searching, and searching again, is the literal meaning of ‘research’. Disseminating what you have found is an important next step, whether in the form of a book or just an electronic artefact gathering virtual dust in the cloud servers of a university after two examiners have deemed the work a ‘pass’. But its importance comes not from it *being* the ‘research’, but instead from how it *contributes* to the knowledge of others. Moreover, that contribution is the justification universities give for awarding a research degree.

And what of contribution? The problem of contribution far from being specific to creative writing. Looking at research degrees in scientific disciplines, Neumann (2007, 465) reports on fears that changing expectations about doctoral studies have led to contributions that are ‘significantly less significant’.

Batty and Holbrook (2017) cite research across disciplines in Australia that found that PhD examiners often had vague conceptions of both *originality* and *contribution*. They also note that some of those examining PhDs in creative disciplines make very general use of both terms, while others do not mention them at all. The latter group instead employ instead terms like “‘clever”; “compelling”; “remarkable”; “exciting”; “interesting”; “intriguing”; “exemplary” to distinguish what they see as the more impressive theses (Batty and Holbrook 2017, 8), perhaps inspired by the creative components of such theses.

Attempts have been made to flesh out possible answers to the more fraught question of knowledge contribution in creative disciplines. Drawing on the seven categories of ‘contribution’ outlined in the analysis by Wellington (2013) of PhDs in general, Batty and Holbrook (2017) build a typology of five forms contribution in creative doctorates,

comprising (1) generating new knowledge, (2) using original processes, (3) creating new syntheses, (4) revisiting and issue or debate, and (5) replicating or reproducing earlier work differently. They give examples of each type. Even in their more granular analysis, however, supervisors and examiners face a difficult task in helping students plot a path to contribution across creative and critical components.

While Webb's prescription points towards something closer to the scholarly expectations of research degrees, it raises two further questions: What sorts of knowledge constitute the contributions expected of research degrees? Whose knowledge should the research benefit? And building on Batty and Holbrook (2017), a third question arises: How do we ensure that scholarly standards are upheld during the highly personal actions that the research process entails and the deeply interpersonal nature of the relationship between student and supervisor and then student and examiners?

This lack of clarity about the contribution that either critical or creative components of creative writing PhDs presents a problem for candidates. Cosgrove and Scrivenor (2017) discuss the fear that students feel as their application for study becomes a commitment to complete a work judged by an opaque academic standard. In a first-person account by the student (Scrivenor) of a meeting with the supervisor (Cosgrove), we learn:

Today we're talking methodologies, but we are not alone. Ghosts of research students hover in the doorway. The candidate no one else would supervise (anger issues). The writer is more accomplished than me with the unfortunate examiner (no, the project is not about Foucault, it will never be about Foucault). (Cosgrove and Scrivenor 2017, 2)

The solution they develop relates to the practice of supervision – alternating work on the creative and critical elements to relieve the dread. But the lack of clarity about both the *contribution* and how it will be judged remains.

In another account of knowledge creation, Finlayson, Kroll, and Murphy (2017) see a contribution arising from student-supervisor negotiation on the need for symbiosis between creative and critical as a source of new knowledge. The thesis, as a coherent entity, they found, 'made an original contribution to knowledge through the connection of the parts'. Kroll (supervisor to both Findlayson and Murphy) then writes:

The conventional approach of the exegesis as a scholarly study of comparative texts (including situating the project within historical and cultural contexts) as well as a critical reflection on the creative work as a knowledge contribution was most favoured in this newly born degree, as it offered security in an environment where colleagues might be sceptical of the program's rigour. (Finlayson, Kroll, and Murphy 2017, 4)

But in the face of scepticism – both institutional and professional – what sort of knowledge has it contributed? One answer to that comes in the form of standard-setting.

Guidance to the rescue?

In Britain, the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE 2018) has published guidelines to address the vagaries in practice. Creative writing research should be investigative and exploratory, stating:

... some may be called 'situated' or action research; some reflexive; some responsive; some may result from an engagement with 'poetics'; some may adapt or adopt the investigative procedures and methodologies of other disciplines, where useful. (Paragraph 2.1)

Still others may 'include performative elements; the research is often fluid and responsive ... utilizing emotional, intellectual or psychological stimuli to shape their work in mutative ways that may be difficult to plan for or predict' (2.2), or it may draw in interdisciplinary research or interactions with other disciplines (2.5). Creative writing research is 'not primarily a vehicle for what may be termed "factual" knowledge', but instead 'brings about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative interpretation and representation of experience' (2.4). More (or less) specifically, creative writing PhDs specifically 'involve the study of how a work of literature can be made when working with specific artistic aims and research ambitions' (4.4). The guidelines do not explicitly require or even recommend a critical essay. Instead, NAWE says: 'Where a critical or reflective commentary in combination with the creative submission is required, this should demonstrate consideration of, and or response to, the various contexts in which the work was generated' (4.6). In so doing, it acknowledges the presence of a dichotomy of degree types between the essay-oriented 'critical' and the personal and more narrative 'reflective'.

Even the recommended 'contribution to knowledge' in the guidelines is general to the point of vagueness: 'The individual nature of the work and its particular exegetic focus are the elements that offer key contributions to knowledge' (4.4). Where critical essays are required, 'These contexts can be, for instance, historical, theoretical, cultural, formal or aesthetic, and such considerations should be viewed as part (but not all) of the project's contribution to knowledge' (4.6).

The variety of practice validated by these guidelines has a benefit in keeping open the scope for creativity of both the candidates and the institutions that offer such degrees. But at the same time, its lack of definition may well add to the confusion over what this degree means and therefore its credibility in wider circles of academia. Let's consider what happens on the ground.

Another attempt to articulate standards comes in an Australian guidance paper for practice-based research, including creative studies published by the University of Technology in Sydney. Linda Candy (2006) argues that a PhD must be more than the creation of tacit knowledge, known to the individual in less-than-conscious or even non-literal ways, but neither articulated nor communicated. Nor is 'subjective or private knowing' good enough because it is not shared. It is aligned with Webb's expectation of publication.

Pure argumentation, without empirical evidence, can contribute new knowledge, Candy says. Much of mathematics and philosophy does just that. A problem arises, however, as we move into the realm of practical work, where questions arise about validity, generalisability and reliability – the hallmarks of explicit knowledge and the stuff of doctorates in physical, natural and social sciences, and even in the humanities.

Candy distinguishes between two types of practical research, ones she calls practice-led, in which the practice is itself the field of examination, and practice-based, where knowledge arises from engaging in the practice. Practice-led research can arise without the researcher conducting the practice at all, as in an empirical study of people as they engage in a practice. Practice-based search, by contrast, always involves the researcher engaging in the practice. In practice-based research, 'the artefact plays a vital part in the new understandings about practice that arise' (Candy 2006, 3).

Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009) argue that alluding to ‘practice’ in such descriptions is a response by practitioners to the increasing focus by administrators in higher education on qualifications for academic staff. Using a different terminology from Candy’s, they distinguish between research-led practice and practice-led research. In the former, research informs the practice that results; in the latter, practice precedes and is itself a form of research. They write: ‘Increasingly it seems that practice as research can best be interpreted in terms of a broader view of creative practice which includes not only the artwork but also the surrounding theorisation and documentation’ (Smith and Dean 2009, 5). Providing such theorisation and documentation is the justification that the critical component gives to the research element of many creative writing PhD programmes.

Creative writing PhDs in practice

Such definitions help to clarify the concepts, but concepts can become muddy when practitioners do something else. Empirically, then, what is this degree? From its inception in the 1980s in Australia (Candy 2006), creative writing PhDs have proliferated around the world. Here’s a selection of the descriptions of them in Britain (Table 1).

King’s College is a research-intensive university, boasting many Nobel Prize winners in the sciences, medicine and economics. It offers a PhD in creative writing with little apparent need for academic rigour: a book-length creative work, but just 15,000 words of something academic-looking but even that rooted in the creative. By contrast, the University of Birmingham, also research-intensive, wants something much more serious, discussing creative process only ‘where relevant’.

In Manchester, the two big universities take different lines. This time, picking up on Jeri Kroll’s invocation (on p. 159) of Aristotle’s *epistêmê* vs. *technê* and extending it, I’ll interpret: The research-focused University of Manchester seeks rigour, both *sophia*, that is, theory and the love of knowledge itself; and *phronêsis*, conscious and recurrent practice. The younger Manchester Metropolitan wants interdependent *epistêmê*, empirical knowledge, and *technê*, the development of subliminal craft, the expression of tacit knowledge (Burke 2020; Johannessen 1988). The Greek words *epistêmê* and *technê* are often described as *knowledge*; *sophia* and *phronesis* as *wisdom*.

Edinburgh invites either type of study that Candy (2006) identifies, practice-led and practice-based, *epistêmê* or *technê*; *sophia* or *phronesis*. Swansea sets its sails for the practice-based. Cardiff dodges the issue, at least in the face it presents to would-be students. (NB: Cardiff has a parallel programme for students writing in Welsh.)

In the South West of England, where I live, two places stand out: Bath Spa and Exeter. At Bath Spa, a bevy of well-published writers helps students learn the craft and understand the industry they’ll join. PhD students reflect critically, even autobiographically, on their practice. The academically minded University of Exeter, with one of the top English departments in the country, positions its PhD as a qualification for university teaching, a useful Plan B for writers who don’t cut it in the cut-throat world of publishing. In addition to a book-length creative piece, it prescribes a long academic essay, the near equivalent of a Master of Philosophy degree. It also demands a 1000-word ‘bridging’ chapter to connect *explicitly* the creative with the critical.

Table 1. A selection of British PhD courses in creative writing, Spring 2024.

University	Description of a creative writing PhD
King's College, London https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-research/areas/creative-writing-phd	After three years (full-time) or six years (part-time), students are expected to submit either: • a novel or short story collection • a poetry collection • a full-length work of creative non-fiction In addition, they are also required to submit an essay (up to 15,000 words) that examines their practical approach to the conception, development, and revision of their project, and which explores how their creative work was informed by research (archival, book-based, or experiential).
University of Birmingham https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/research/fcw/creative-writing	For prose: a creative document of either long-form prose/a novel, or a collection of short-form prose/stories supported by a critical paper. The total word count will be between 80,000 and 100,000 words, though the weighting between the two elements will vary slightly. A novel, for example, usually has between 60,000 and – 80,000 words. The critical paper can therefore be between 20,000–40,000 words. ... The creative document will be an original work of significant, publishable quality which demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of craft, genre, and form. The critical document will present a structured and developed argument that demonstrates an awareness of literary context, and discuss – where relevant – critical and creative processes.
University of Manchester https://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-research/programmes/list/02957/phd-creative-writing/	There are two elements to the programme. The first is a creative element that can be a novel or a collection of short stories of up to 100,000 words, or a book-length collection of poetry of up to 60 poems. The PhD also has a critical element, which is a piece of literary or cultural criticism of 30,000–50,000 words maximum.
Manchester Metropolitan University https://www.mmu.ac.uk/english/research/research-degrees/creative-writing-phd/	The emphasis is not on creating two separate pieces of work, but on integration. Your dissertation will consist of an interdependent project of contextual and practice-based creative work. Both sections of the PhD should contain work of 'publishable standard', and the contextual and creative elements must make a new contribution to knowledge.
University of Edinburgh https://llc.ed.ac.uk/english-literature/postgraduate/phd/frequently-asked-questions	Doctoral degree candidates in Creative Writing spend three years writing a manuscript in consultation with a supervisor. This manuscript consists of two components: 1. A creative component that comprises 75% of the final manuscript. 2. A critical component, which comprises 25% of the final manuscript. The critical component of a thesis manuscript in Creative Writing can be where you analyse how a precise, focused theme or a specific element of craft (character, form, voice, etc.) operates in selected published works. Sometimes, this will be a traditional academic or 'critical' essay. Other times, this part of a thesis might tackle more craft-driven questions: in what ways does plot operate in Virginia Woolf's <i>To the Lighthouse</i> and Thomas Pynchon's <i>Gravity's Rainbow</i>, and how do these 'operations' affect readers? ... Alternatively, the critical component may take the form of a

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

University	Description of a creative writing PhD
University of Cardiff https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/research/programmes/programme/creative-writing	critical-reflexive essay, in which you situate your creative project in a critical context. Such an essay is not simply an account of what you did and when you did it; instead, it should be a rigorous and scholarly work that aims for some deeper insight. The PhD programme involves the preparation of an original piece of creative work – fiction, non-fiction, script or screenplay, a collection of poems or short stories – and a critical commentary. Candidates for the PhD in Creative and Critical Writing will submit one of the following: • Prose: novel, short story, work of creative non-fiction or play/film script; the creative portion and critical commentary will not normally exceed 100,000 words, with the critical commentary comprising not less than 20,000 words. • Poetry: a collection of poetry, prose poetry or micro-fiction amounting to around 60 pages, with an accompanying critical commentary of not less than 20,000 words. • An integrated Creative-Critical submission of no more than 100,000 words.
Swansea University https://www.swansea.ac.uk/postgraduate/research/culture-communication/english-literature-creative-writing/phd-mphil-creative-writing/#assessment=is-expanded&how-you-are-supervised=is-expanded&welsh-provision=is-expanded	The PhD in Creative Writing falls within the category of ‘Creative and Performing Arts’, which permits the thesis to take the form of a portfolio of original works, to be accompanied by a commentary, placing the portfolio in its intellectual context. The PhD in this area is understood to constitute research into a subject, research into a form, and research into the relation between them. . . . While the creative work is considered as the scholarly heart of the PhD, the critical essay should engage with the choices made in the creative work, addressing, for example: concept and process; drafts and revisions; questions of style (lexis, diction, voice or voices, setting, plot or fable, perspective or perspectives); theme; characterisation; the research undertaken for the book; historical and cultural context; where the work stands in relation to other works in the chosen genre and tradition; any other relevant issues.
Bath Spa University https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/courses/phd-creative-writing/	The PhD in Creative Writing combines a proposed manuscript (e.g. novel, short story collection, poems, playscript, narrative non-fiction, digital writing) with an element of supporting or contextualising research. The proposed creative manuscript will be volume length (the natural length of a book, depending on genre). The supporting research will be 20,000 words.
University of Exeter https://www.exeter.ac.uk/study/pg-research/degrees/creativewriting/	The Creative Writing PhD requires students to produce either a 75,000-word piece of prose (fiction or creative non-fiction), 90 pages of poetry, or 120 pages or minutes of screenplay, accompanied by a 30,000-word of critical essay, and a short 1000-word ‘bridging chapter’ linking your creative and critical work.

These examples fit a model of two main ‘schools’ of thought that appear in both the NAWÉ guidelines and Candy’s dichotomy of practice-led and practice-based. One is more academic, the other more practical, though with considerably blurred boundaries in both

specification and practice. These two ‘schools’ seek engagement (though differently) with both contingent knowledge and the types that Aristotle thought of as certain and universal.

The distinction has implications for both supervision and examination, where the practitioners have themselves studied in institutional contexts that differ from where they teach and examine. Absent well-articulated and accepting guidance (and using Candy’s terminology), a supervisor with a degree from a practice-led PhD could steer a student studying at a practice-based programme into danger. The guidance might differ from that of a second supervisor. Even if both speak the same language, the examiners might speak another.

On the ground through one such problematic PhD

Much like creative writing programmes, business schools face academic scepticism and even outright scorn for their emphasis on practical knowledge, rather than theoretical wisdom. In recent decades, many universities have required that lecturers in both disciplines have doctorates or work towards them, however strong their prior practical experience might be. I came to academia after many years of business experience.

I have an unusual background: a long-time financial journalist and editorial executive who had gone into management. Then, aged 55, I started work as a business school academic with the definitely-not-terminal MBA. I faced scepticism, if not quite outright scorn. Facing such dismissiveness, I undertook a PhD, part-time, in corporate governance, completing it aged 62. A couple of books and scores of research papers later, I had supervised a dozen PhD students and examined seven doctoral theses.

Then, aged 69 and a business school professor, I became a student again. I had unfinished business from those undergraduate and master’s-student years: creative writing, this time, focused on the novel of ideas. If I were to make a contribution to anything, I ought to get started.

In 2019, I applied to two. Bath Spa: *rejected*. They couldn’t supervise my philosophy-oriented study. Maybe didn’t want to. Maybe both. Exeter? *Please come*.

Experiencing the process

Now, it’s the 2021–22 academic year, and a new crop of students has joined a study group of more seasoned but still confused and panicking candidates. They see themselves as novelists or poets. Many hold a creative writing MA. Several arrive with creative work published. *But what*, they wonder, *is this ‘critical’ thing?* Their supervisors give them signals, sometimes contradicting each other.

After unsuccessful vivas, two of the seasoned students now face resubmission. Their examiners view the degree as something radically different from what the supervisors had said. *And what is this ‘bridging’ thing?* We could find little evidence in the university database.

I’m not panicking. After all, with my background, I should know what a PhD entails. It’s a ‘contribution to knowledge’, and I’ve already seen quite a few, albeit in social sciences, not humanities. As a semi-retired academic, now aged 72, failure might damage my ego, but my career won’t suffer. And I know what good critical writing looks like. For me, the

puzzles lie elsewhere: (a) *personal*: Can I even write a novel; and (b) *epistemological*: How does writing creatively *create* a contribution to *knowledge*?

My novel concerns dysfunction in a family, the lack of communication over decades, and the legacy it left. A critical component might focus on the psychology of family life, on the effects of poverty resulting from the death of a parent. It could be sociology: social alienation based on race, ethnicity or religious belief.

But I want to study philosophy, specifically pragmatism and its evasion of ontology, its sceptical epistemology, and its perverse implications for ethics. The pragmatism of William James ([1907] 1955), John Dewey (1916) and others had a profound influence on the field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it fell into disrepute after Hitler and the holocaust. Even Richard Rorty's reworking of pragmatism (1979) couldn't solve that. Other philosophers were outraged by the lack of moral anchors in pragmatism and continental philosophy, among them the novelist-cum-philosopher Iris Murdoch (1992, 1970). I'll read philosophy as I write my novel.

However, for the critical component, I want to examine literary theory – the novel of ideas – drawing on cognitive, developmental and social psychology to develop a theoretical framework. Three chapters of it – two theory development (Nordberg 2023, 2021), one using that theory analytically (Nordberg 2024) – appear in journals even before I submit my thesis. That's 80 per cent of the 30,000 words. I'm confident those papers will meet the criteria for a contribution to knowledge from the critical component.

The core of my novel is set in an orphanage that faces a crisis as the first generation of leadership wanes and a Deweyan theory of education takes hold. I'll write about that for the remaining 20 per cent of the critical component and then, somehow, find that 'bridge'. I can't.

The concluding chapter, nearly 5000 words, becomes a hybrid: part academic essay on philosophy, part personal reflection of the choice of setting and how it established the dimensions of philosophical inquiry. But it does not concern the central themes of the novel or the rest of the critical essay.

In the creative element, I can't see any contribution to the knowledge of philosophy, literary theory, psychology, or sociology of the standard I had come to expect in social science projects. Yes, the process of creative writing has contributed to my personal well-being and even intellectual growth. Readers of the novel might somehow sense that, but they might not. Absent that communication, I doubt my creative work met any standard of a knowledge contribution, whether Webb's, Candy's, NAWE's, or Smith and Dean's.

Then a surprise: Almost finished with the first draft of the novel, I stumble into a moral philosophy called the ethics of care, sometimes labelled 'feminist ethics'. At first glance, it seems a secondary applied branch, like business or medical ethics. Reading its seminal works, however, I find that it challenges the paralysis between deontological and consequential ethics; some of its theorists see it as a solution. I'm on to something! My draft novel already has dozens of references to the problems of care, within a family, and within the orphanage. I'll explore that in the final critical chapter.

Analyzing the product

Thus, the concluding critical chapter took shape. This is not the place to examine the insights I found in the ethics of care. But for the PhD in creative writing, had I *done*

philosophy in my character development, plotting and exploration of setting in the creative component? Did that create knowledge, and if so, of what sort and for whom? While the creative part might communicate insights about orphanages and families to its readers, I couldn't see any *new* knowledge arising from it. The way it depicts care – and that most of it arose before I was conscious of the theory – gives feelings about what's at stake. Are feelings knowledge?

For one fellow student who read the draft, the critical component seemed too academic, for another, it lacked the required integration. I worried that the final chapter was too personally reflective to meet our academically oriented regulations. And I ignored the specified 1000-word bridge, though about a thousand words in that final chapter specifically linked the novel to the chapter's treatment of philosophy. My thesis thus bent the rules of the Exeter PhD. I passed.

Looking at the process analytically, doing the creative work (i.e. 'practice-based', in Candy's terms) helped me gain knowledge experientially (Dewey 1916) – some merely tacit, some privately known but not expressed. Neither meets Candy's standard of knowledge contribution that a PhD requires.

Most of the critical component combined theoretical argumentation and empirical analysis, making explicit additions to knowledge in literary theory and criticism. It also generated a framework of the techniques through which writers build texts that examine philosophical issues through fiction (i.e. practice-led). The concluding chapter reflected on how the creative process pointed me to a possible future contribution to philosophy itself. But I had not even made that hunch explicit – or even worked it out in any detail (i.e. 'practice-based' but only privately known).

In their confusion over standards and expectations, however, other students on the programme felt uncomfortable contemplating the approach I had taken. Unlike me, they were facing their first encounter with this aspect of academia. They also had more to lose. My 'success' at the viva made them even less confident that they knew what the university or the examiners expected.

Fixing the problem

If we are to 'fix' the problem that Harper (2021) identifies, we need to articulate better what sorts of knowledge such a degree entails, anchoring it in epistemology without tying rules tightly to any of its versions.

One 'fix' is to change the labelling. Some universities in Britain offer doctoral-level degrees with a different name, avoiding the 'philosophy' designation. Middlesex University, for example, awards an ArtsD degree,¹ while the Universities of Hertfordshire and Glasgow offer a DFA.² The University of East London adds a 'Professional' label, creating what it ineloquently calls a 'Fine Arts Prof Doc', to emphasise its focus on practice and the distinction from PhD programmes in other disciplines.³ Their descriptions are broadly similar to PhD programmes in creative writing at other universities. Changing labels could acknowledge the advanced status of the work, compared with MA and even MFA degrees. It could reduce but perhaps not eliminate the stigma associated with not having a 'real' doctorate.

However, retaining the PhD label may be better justified if standards and their implementation made more explicit the forms of knowledge the degree entails. Under the regulations

at places like Manchester, Birmingham and Exeter, the knowledge contribution of the critical component should be self-evident and dependent on its discipline. Mine was literary studies; others in my cohort worked in sociology, environmental science, archaeology, and law. Those universities could specify that they meet the standard of contribution *to those fields*, rather than to some loosely defined *knowledge*, albeit in a shorter form. Others, like Kings, Manchester Met and Bath Spa, might set a different standard for the creation of knowledge, not consciously conceptual and theoretical, but instead more focused on individual and personal discovery. It *illuminates* the ground, rather than *breaking* it.

In Aristotle's terms, one might pursue *sophia*, which informs the *phronêsis* of writing creatively. Alternatively, the critical side might be deeply integrative – explicitly a personal reflection on how the *technê* of the writing process led to the *epistêmê* the candidate developed – an essay about writing creatively, grounded in psychology and linguistics. Either approach bridges the distinction Aristotle makes between certain and contingent knowledge. Departments that teach creative writing could insist that university regulations articulate the special circumstances of this 'hybrid' PhD.

So far, we've dealt with what sort of 'contribution' there might be, and how we might know it had been achieved. Whose knowledge, then?

The creative component is bound to contribute to the knowledge of the *writer* in two ways: (1) knowledge of how to and how not to write, and (2) knowledge of oneself as a thinking and emotive person, a cognitive and affective being. Neither is the sort of knowledge universities typically accept as the material of a doctor of philosophy.

The work created, moreover, might well contribute to the knowledge and even the creativity of the reader, if we accept the notion that the pragmatist Dewey ([1934] 1958) endorsed: that reading – or engagement with any work of art – is itself a creative act. But it might not. The creative work might be just an exhibition of concepts already well understood. It may be executed with aesthetic qualities that field experts might enjoy and admire, but without contributing to their knowledge of the field.

The critical component from either of the two 'schools' also contributes to the knowledge of the candidate, though that's not what usually counts as a PhD. Field specialists might gain some knowledge from a well-executed physical or social scientific study, though to a lesser extent (that is, 15,000 or even 40,000 words) than what a conventional PhD entails. But there's a risk that such studies might fall short of contributing to the field, if that field is, say, environmental science, social work, or law. A literary study could well present new knowledge to field experts, but it might prove merely to be a gloss, without generating something new.

If we accept this analysis, then we should tell the public – would-be students, supervisors, academic colleagues in other disciplines, and university administrators – just what sort of knowledge a PhD in creative writing signifies. Doing so would also help current students, too, as they face their examiners.

NAWE's guidance for assessment of PhDs includes rigour, significance and originality, and consideration of the scope of whether it involves production of new knowledge or the re-combination of existing knowledge (Paragraph 5.2). The next paragraph stresses that such research is 'inherently interdisciplinary', fostering 'diversity in its approaches' to methods and contexts. As a recommendation, this view has value, keeping the door open to innovations in the research process and creativity in its execution. As a guide for examiners, however, it could lead to vague outcomes.

One student I know had this exchange with an examiner:

Point 1

- Candidate : What do you look for in the **creative** element of a PhD in creative writing?
 Examiner : As with everything else, a contribution to knowledge.
 Candidate : How do you know there is a contribution to knowledge?
 Examiner : When you read it, you know.

Point 2

- Candidate : How do you judge the **critical** element of a PhD in creative writing?
 Examiner : It has to contribute to knowledge and have some relation to the creative part.
 Candidate : What kind of relation?
 Examiner : When you read it, you know.

Conclusion

This paper has some obvious limitations. It's not an empirical study, but instead a personal collection of anecdotes that illustrate some of the problems that the literature of PhD supervision and examination has articulated. Moreover, even this on-the-ground experience is drawn from only one country (Britain), with its greatest detail drawn from only one cohort at one university.

It also draws its epistemology from Aristotle, thanks to Kroll's guidance. But as a reviewer of an earlier draft pointed out, much of the practice in our academic discipline, as well as in the practice itself of creative writing, might be better viewed using a Socratic method. By following the methodology that Socrates used in pursuit of truth, Plato wrote in the form of dialogues, interrogating, and when an answer led to a paradox or contradiction, to interrogate again, and again, until the problem at least becomes clear, even if the solution remains elusive. The reviewer made an astute observation. My creative project may have started in an Aristotelian mode, but its discoveries arose as I, the writer, entered an off-the-page dialogue with my narrator about what happens next, concerning on the one hand plot and characters, and on the other the philosophical puzzles I and the characters encountered along the way.

So, the reviewer was right, but in a way that also illustrates the two schools of thought about creative writing PhDs – one leaning on Aristotle, the other Socratic. In Candy's terms, my critical component started as practice-led, which can be 'described in text form without the inclusion of a creative outcome' (Candy 2006, 3). My creative component started with an impulse from Aristotle, but I dug Plato out along the way as Socrates intervened from the shadows. I learned a lot. But was any new knowledge created in a way that contributed to the knowledge of others? I'm still not sure.

Which raises a question: Is creativity itself a form of knowledge? Do creative artefacts always contribute knowledge? I am sure literature at its best creates knowledge, whatever 'best' means. I have read creative works and viewed creative artefacts that seemed to be thin mimesis, creating personal knowledge for the maker but not adding to the general

stock of society. I'm not sure my creative component is much more than that, but perhaps I'm just too old-fashioned about knowledge, as well as being old.

The insights I have tried to provide, however, point to possible ways to conduct further research, for example, through surveys of students, supervisors, and examiners, to better understand the points of consensus and confusion. But they also call out even more forcefully for stronger dialogue on the ground between students and supervisors, supervisors and department heads, examiners between themselves about where the standards sit, even approximately, in a field where the boundaries are far from clear. What should not happen is that students sit at the end of the whip when it comes to the final examination.

At examination time, is 'when you read it, you know' good enough? Surely not. If we – we 'doctors of philosophy' in creative writing – accept Harper's diagnosis, we must do better in explaining what this creature is and how it contributes to the stock of human knowledge, or of human understanding. We might start by prescribing what sort of epistemology guides the knowledge each programme entails. Is it just practical (i.e. *phronêsis* and *technê*) and thus involving just contingent, subjective knowledge? If so, is that better called an MFA or given a non-philosophical label, like other practice-based doctorates? Or does it aspire to creating knowledge that is more nearly – if never quite – certain? If so, then does the contribution to knowledge arise mainly through *sophia* or *epistêmê*? And connected in what way to the *phronêsis* and *technê* of the writing project? In describing our programmes, we can probably avoid the ancient Greek terms, but the way we describe knowledge and guide frightened writers through their explorations of it should embrace the question of knowledge creation, dialectically and dialogically. We shouldn't let them – these would-be doctors of philosophy – lose sight of how we create different types of knowledge.

Notes

1. The regulations at Middlesex can be found at <https://www.mdx.ac.uk/media/middlesex-university/about-us-pdfs/Regulations-for-Research-Degree-Programmes-2021-22.pdf>.
2. Hertfordshire's description is at <https://www.herts.ac.uk/courses/research/professional-doctorate-in-fine-art> while Glasgow's is at <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/apg/policies/uniregs/regulations2021-22/arts/dfa%20creative%20writing/>.
3. East London's description is at <https://www.uel.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/prof-doc-fine-art>.

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