

## **IDENTITY CHANGE: DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN ART & DESIGN**

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### **Abstract**

For over a decade, practice-based research degrees in art and design have formed part of the United Kingdom research degree education portfolio, with a relatively rapid expansion in recent years. This route to the PhD still constitutes an innovative, and on occasion a disputed, form of research study and students embarking upon the practice-based doctorate find themselves in many ways undertaking pioneering work. To date there has been a dearth of empirical studies of the actual experiences of such students. This paper, based upon qualitative interviews with 50 students based at 25 institutions, represents an attempt to begin to fill this lacuna. The paper charts the biographical

change which students undergo as they pursue their doctorates. It examines the ways in which they construct, maintain, and modify their identities whilst in the role of 'creator/maker', and seek to manage and combine the different modes of being required of a 'creator' and a researcher.

**Keywords:** Art & Design; biographical change, identity; practice-based doctorate; research students.

**Running head:** Research degree students

**Word count:**

### **Biographical Note**

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## INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, practice-based research degrees in art and design have formed part of the UK research degree education portfolio (CNAAB, 1989). There has been a relatively rapid expansion of this form of doctorate in recent years (Candlin, 2000a), with evidence of analogous development internationally (Buchan et al., 1999). This doctoral form differs markedly from more 'orthodox' UK research study in a number of ways (UKCGE, 1997), although in varying degree according to institution. In general, however, at the time of writing, the following factors apply. First, the student's written thesis work must be of equal or near equal importance to the practice element. Second, the length of the thesis, whilst substantial (usually up to 40,000 words), is considerably shorter than the traditional doctoral thesis. Third, the student's creative work must be located in its relevant critical, visual, historical or theoretical context. Fourth, the final submission must be accompanied by a permanent record of the student's creative work(s). Whilst more orthodox criteria still apply, such as evidence of originality and independent work, it is the challenge of *combining* creative work with substantial analytical commentary, in some form (CD, text, etc.), which characterises this kind of relatively innovative PhD.

Although there has undoubtedly been an advance in knowledge about doctoral students in the disciplines of the natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities (Burgess, 1996; Delamont et al., 1997; Graves and Varma, 1997), this does not hold for empirical studies of students undertaking practice-based research degrees in art and design. This route to the PhD still constitutes an innovative, and on occasion a disputed form of UK research study (Macleod, 2000), which emerged primarily out of the Council for National Academic Awards' framework (CNAA, 1989). In an attempt to fill this lacuna, some exploratory, qualitative research was undertaken within the UK higher education sector. The research aimed to examine and chart the biographical experiences and transformations of a group of doctoral students engaged in practice-based research degrees in art and design.

## **DATA, ANALYSIS AND THEORY**

The research was based upon qualitative interviews with 50 research students, located at 25 UK universities and colleges. Interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and tape-recorded. In an attempt to explore a wide range of experience, interviewees spanned the spectrum of art and design subjects - including painting, ceramics, installation, photography, printmaking, sculpture, glassmaking and design - and also of study level, from first year to near the point of submission of the PhD. Forty per cent

(n = 20) of the students were studying part-time, many of whom had considerable experience of earning a living *via* their own creative endeavours. The gender division was around 60% male to 40% female.

In order to gain an understanding of students' lived experience, the interview agenda covered topics such as relationships with supervisors; linkages between theory and creative practice (or, as the students termed it 'making'), between making and the artistic community, making and the self, making and writing; and students' own conceptions of identity. Students were also strongly encouraged to raise any other issues they wished. Given the relative paucity of research on practice-based doctoral students, the aim of the project was not to provide statistical generalisations but, rather, to reveal something of the complexity of students' academic biographies in their progression towards doctoral status. In common with much qualitative research, extrapolation from the data relies on 'the validity of the analysis rather than the representativeness of the events' (Mitchell, 1983). Data analysis was carried out along the lines of the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1993), although to a much less formalised degree, with the process of analysis continuing until no new categories - in terms of social processes, practices and conceptions - were emerging from the data (Creswell, 1998).

One of the primary research aims was to examine the ways in which students construct, maintain, and modify their identities whilst in the role of creator/maker and, eventually, researcher. Accordingly, this paper seeks to portray some of the processes and experiences of identity construction and modification through an analysis of the students' interview accounts, or narratives. Note that of course these accounts themselves constitute the focus of the analysis, and that in such circumstances 'accounts are all we have to work with and shaky inferences to what is/was really going on should be dispensed with, as a pointless metaphysical exercise' (Gilbert and Abell, 1983: 2-3). In addition, the limitations of the 'single research technology' approach (Berg, 1989: 4) should be borne in mind, as unfortunately it was not possible to use other enquiry methods (such as participant observation) within the financial constraints of the study. Nor was it possible to undertake longitudinal research, and therefore to chart individual and group change over a certain time span. Nevertheless, assembly of the interview transcripts generated a rich *mosaic* (Becker, 1977) of student experience at all stages of the doctoral process. It was therefore possible to create a composite picture portraying the biographical changes that the students described to us in some detail.

To return to the role of narrative in the research, the importance of this activity has been emphasized by many, including those who contend

that narrative and self are in fact inseparable: narrative being born out of experience and simultaneously giving shape to experience (Ochs and Capps, 1996). Our analysis of the students' narratives permitted insight into how emergent identities of researcher/creator were in process of construction. Narratives or accounts also combine the social with the personal (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), for as Sparkes (1999) has noted, personal stories are intimately linked to the cultural and subcultural resources actors possess. In the case of the students studied, the cultural resources or 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1988) they brought derived predominantly from their biographies as creators.

The theoretical underpinnings of the research lie in symbolic interactionist conceptions of identity found in the work of Mead (1934), Blumer (1969) and Goffman (1959). These writers conceptualise the individual self not as a passive vessel but as an active and self-reflective entity. As such, individuals have the capacity to perceive the self as an object from the standpoint of another: that is, to be both subject and object. This is achieved through internal dialogue (thinking), as well as by internalising wider social attitudes that constitute the 'generalized other'. From this perspective, individuals possess an awareness of their selves in action. Identity is developed by interactional work between self and others, in an inter-subjective, dynamic, and ongoing social process (Mead, 1934: 8). Whilst Mead (p. 269) pointed out the importance and

centrality of this relationship as a generic social process, he also acknowledged context-specific variations, in which individuals are located in particular social groups. The identity work portrayed here is specific to the social worlds of artists/designers and, subsequently, of research students engaged in practice-based doctorates in the 'field' (Bourdieu, 1988) of art and design. As a consequence of being immersed in those worlds, students possess a 'felt identity', which, as Goffman (1963: 106) notes, 'is first of all a subjective, reflexive matter that necessarily must be felt by the individual whose identity is at issue'.

Felt identity, grounded in self-feelings (McCall and Simmons, 1978) is a largely taken-for-granted phenomenon until people experience a problem or disjuncture which makes impossible or calls into question their routine activities and character (Goffman, 1963; Mead, 1964). In the case of the students studied, we shall see that their felt identity as artist/designer was challenged by the new, unfamiliar role requirements of doctoral student, and in particular by having to undertake 'objective', analytic documentation of their creative work.

## **MAKING AND ANALYSIS**

In examining and portraying students' adaptation to practice-based research degrees we will focus upon particular elements of their



experience, as successful negotiation of these appears to be essential to the progress of the PhD. With only a couple of exceptions (those who had previously obtained a Master's degree including substantial components of art history or theory), the majority of interviewees had a background purely in art *practice*. Their educational biographies were overwhelmingly anchored in making, in creating objects or developing processes, within the subject areas of art and design. Consequently, the amount of written work undertaken had been minimal, and the kind of extended, analytic thinking, conceptualising and writing characteristic of formal research projects was totally alien. In brief, most students commenced their PhD with little or no understanding of the craft (Mills, 1975) of research, its formal protocols, procedures, and philosophical underpinnings. By contrast, they understood in a multiplicity of ways, and with some depth and sophistication, their own craft of making. In the doctorate, the primary objective for these students was to enhance and develop their making, with regard to its direction and quality, whilst simultaneously subjecting it to rigorous analysis in order to answer research questions. This meant that the students had to take on the role of researcher, along with the associated skills and activities, and eventually, a degree of 'commitment' (Becker, 1977) to the new role had to be incorporated into the extant identity of artist/designer, and amalgamated with the skills and practices of that role.

Two principal problems appear particularly salient to students as they take on the researcher role and seek to wed research and making. The first is considerable but not insurmountable; it concerns an understanding and appreciation of research methodology, gaining familiarity with a diverse body of knowledge and the craft practices that flow from it. In comparison with social science students, for example, art and design students are generally introduced to this intellectual and practical terrain at a much later stage in their educational careers. Consequently, it requires hard and sustained work throughout the PhD process. Much of this learning is technical and might involve, for example, the use of software packages to assist with archival categorization and/or analysis. Other elements of it are more interactional, such as developing interview skills. Equally fundamental to the development of the researcher role, however, is the second problem: the need for students to come to terms with the *experiential* elements of analytic writing. This practice is at the very core of doctoral research work for, without the skills of analysis and of analytic writing, data cannot be understood fully or findings communicated effectively. As Richardson has noted, such writing is not merely an adjunct to the research process:

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of “telling” about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end

of a research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing” – a method of discovery and analysis. (Richardson, 1994: 516-7)

A main problem the students described to us was that this literary practice was, initially at least, very different from the experience of making, and that the disparity created obstacles which they found difficult to surmount. The following discussion therefore examines some of the ways in which these students experienced the two very different modes of making and analysis, and the resultant tensions.

## **EXPERIENCING MAKING**

‘Making’, whether producing artefacts in the form of ceramics, glass, print or furniture, was an activity that the students felt to be central to their identity. In the words of one interviewee: ‘I am what I make’. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that they largely defined themselves by their making; the ‘making self’ and the identity of a creative person were co-terminous (Jenkins, 1996: 29). Without exception, interviewees described a creative biography, or a ‘career’ in Evetts’ (1992) terms, extending back to childhood, of subjective and practical involvement with creative activity. Twenty of those interviewed had considerable experience of earning their living *via* their creative endeavours. One result of this long-term involvement and commitment

was the development of considerable expertise, a haptic facility (see Rose, 1999) which enabled the students to manipulate materials and to construct objects. Alongside this essentially hands-based acumen existed a particular way of seeing (Goodwin, 1994), developed to a high degree of sophistication and attuned *inter alia* to such features as the synthesis of colours, the spatial relationship between objects, the complexities of light. Their making, whilst undoubtedly a process open to external influences such as schools of thought and practice, and major figures, was viewed by the students primarily as a privatised process, centred upon the relationship between the individual and the materials with which s/he engaged. Analytic powers were applied to specific creative problems, and haptic and visual skills were exercised in the pursuit of solutions.

Students described to us how the whole process of making commenced with an important period of preparation, which included the bringing together of the necessary physical materials and establishment of conditions required to accomplish making. For example, individuals would start to prepare their workshop or studio. This was a particularly key phase for those using technical equipment, as in printmaking or ceramics. During the preparatory period they also engaged in reflection upon ideas and images they felt might inspire the act of making. This stage of the process, was not, however, regarded as unproblematic or

straightforward, for interviewees' narratives described difficult periods of intense struggle:

I do get dead periods when I'm constructing things... What I mean is I'm engaged with trying to bring all these different kinds of material together, but I can't see the form I want, I can't see the way forward. It can get very intense in that space when I'm dealing with that kind of problem. It's a bit like being in a maze and trying to get out.

Out of this process of wrestling with the materials, images, influences and ideas, creative headway was generated. Once the artefacts and/or processes (such as ceramic firing) began to respond to the influx of energies, a shift in students' perception was noticeable, as the language of their narratives changed from 'working on' to 'working with' the chosen materials. Students described their total focus upon and immersion in the resources (materials and processes), an intense responsiveness to the qualities of the materials, even a fusing with them. One student portrayed evocatively the process of sculpting:

I think I achieve it by throwing myself into the material and just trying to do what I feel is right for the material, what I feel the material wants me to do with it – stretching and pleating and gathering and how many layers I feel I can place upon a thing, how

rich I want the object to be... It's gaining sensations from the material for what feels right, what combinations seem to suggest themselves... When I am right into working with material that's all there is... What I mean is I am not divided from it, I am in the material so to speak, what I am separate from is everything else, that's why I can end up with a day's sandwiches uneaten at nine o'clock at night!

The highly positive experience of inhabiting these creatively productive periods was termed by individuals as being 'on a run', or 'on a roll', depictions which approximate Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of 'flow': a state in which there is a seamless absorption of the individual into the tasks at hand.

The process of making, with its various constituent phases of preparation, struggle and creativity, was familiar terrain to students, in terms of both its experiential and material dimensions. They anticipated and expected these phases, and enjoyed an intimate familiarity with the capacities and properties of the materials with which they worked. As a consequence, making was a process with which they were at ease, even during periods of difficulty and struggle. Importantly, this process was also construed as central to the affirmation of their creative identity. In essence, for them making was an embodied practice or habit, their

*habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990: 55). The students possessed a set of practical dispositions, perceptions and motivations, rooted in their particular creative activity, and used these as a resource to tackle and solve creative problems. The process of making involves what Bourdieu might term a 'feel for the game', which allows the individual to adopt the right strategies and make the correct decisions in order to create. The feel for the game in this case is not just cognitive but also visual and haptic:

When I'm making certain decisions in the work it's to do with the whole familiarity with a certain sort of medium, with an understanding of its potential, and through a lot of experience of how things might work... There are different sorts of ways in which I feel my way, I feel them just through habit, just through having worked with this kind of material [clay] for long periods of time.

## **EXPERIENCING THE ANALYTIC MODE**

Analysis, and in particular the analytic writing necessary for the construction of a PhD thesis, involved starkly contrasting experiences from the familiar, relatively comfortable terrain of making. The students tended to use the term 'writing' as short-hand for the analytic component of their doctoral study. As we saw, most of the students interviewed had little knowledge of or skill in academic writing. Given this unfamiliarity,

the requirement of both University regulatory committees and of PhD supervisors to write in this fashion represented something of a shock. Furthermore, the students found themselves confronted by the need to produce writing of high calibre, within the relatively tight timeframe of the PhD programme. Expertise in this area appeared a distant objective for many, difficult to attain, and unsurprisingly this was somewhat bleakly contrasted with their high level of skill in making. Students found themselves in the rather uncomfortable position of novice; a difficult psychological and biographical adjustment, especially for those who had, for example, already given prestigious shows of their creative work or had an established reputation within the wider artistic community.

Analytic writing was not just an unfamiliar activity but one which reminded students keenly of their lack of acumen and status in a particular area – academic analysis. Many found the prospect anxiety-provoking, and, as emerged from the students' narratives, the experience of writing was equated with 'struggle', often on a long-term basis. Admittedly, this kind of struggle is symptomatic of research students in general, as they attempt to meet the doctoral criteria of autonomy and originality in their work. In the case of those interviewed, however, the struggle was exacerbated by their unfamiliarity with the written medium, and the experiential contrast between the modes of analytic writing and making.



When probed at interview, students perceived themselves as possessing particular characteristics and qualities, which constituted the principal components of their creativity. These characteristics included being *emotional, intuitive, spontaneous, and open* (in the sense of being receptive to innovation in making), all of which were felt to influence the ways in which they actually undertook their making. This constellation of attributes was judged to interact with the physical materials in the production of objects and/or new processes, all this being influenced additionally by the person's psychological state:

So I was working with these layers of wood – quite feathered wood, and these crushed egg-shells... it seemed to me that these eggshells were something that very much spoke about returning to the home environment, they also spoke about my feelings of vulnerability and precariousness, the walking on egg-shells, sort of idea... and it did seem to sum up my psychological feelings at the time.

When questioned about the actual process of their work, students used terms such as 'circular' and 'spiral' to describe the interaction between their repository of feelings (Denzin, 1984) and the materials, and which was manifested in the *form* of the work. 'Form' was used in a broad sense, and also extended to those projects which were essentially

process-based, for example the production of innovative kinds of paper. In addition, the creative process was considered by students to be essentially non-linear. Although they did acknowledge a certain patterned sequencing of events (e.g. a series of tests to evaluate temperature changes in a kiln), students were keen to portray the most important creative decisions as being made intuitively rather than programmatically, linearly, or mechanically.

In holding to a particular creative identity, students encountered a high degree of disjuncture when attempting written academic analysis. Interestingly, doctoral research in general tended to be presented to them, by supervisors and in research methods training courses, as a highly *rational* process which involved, among other things, construction of abstract conceptual categories in order to generate theory. Emphasis was placed upon the systematic collection of evidence and the communication of results and outcomes in precisely formulated arguments and a logical progression of ideas. Under the regulatory framework of all the universities studied, it was mandatory that this analysis be conducted in literary mode. The usual requirement was that thesis should be presented as a linear progression; something again viewed as problematic and constraining by students because they deemed it antithetical to the expressive forms they sought, and to the

reflexive sense of self developed over many years. This uncomfortable disjuncture is encapsulated in the words of one of them:

The problem is I don't think in the way I should do to write about my making... I don't create in straight lines, like A leads to B and that leads to C! Images and thoughts come from all over the place and they collide and then some impulse rises up and grows itself on the canvas. Writing about it in an academic fashion means I have to think in a particular way, and it feels very forced... What I mean is that when I try and do it, it's not me, it feels a long way from me in the sense that I'm writing at arms length from myself.

This disjuncture created a form of 'role distance' (Goffman, 1959), in which individuals took on the role of research student (meanwhile sustaining full commitment to their creative work) but were averse to engaging to any great degree with the written, analytic component of the doctoral work. In effect, for considerable periods of time they adopted a degree of detachment from it. Such detachment was fostered by both the form of expression (being new and difficult to master), and the mode required for communicating it: analytic thought and expression, expected to be precise, abstract, rational, 'objective', and hence distanced from the experience of making itself. Academic writing, with its own particular codified form, was felt to be a world away from the students' haptic and

visual engagement with materials, and also from the spectrum of emotions which fuelled their creativity. So, devoting themselves to the practice of analytic writing was construed as problematic, not just in terms of learning and practising a new form of expression but also, and more fundamentally, with regard to their psychological adjustment to a new state of thinking and experiencing.

## **THE PROCESS OF CHANGE**

Confronted with the need to change and adapt, not just cognitively but also experientially and emotionally, students tended to respond in a variety of ways. The most negative, at least in terms of progressing the research, was to adopt an essentially retreatist position, and evade the research component of their doctoral study as much as possible. With the exception of the handful of students who were experienced in analytic writing, the majority of the interviewees passed through a phase or phases during which they immersed themselves in their making, either to the total exclusion of analysis, documentation and theorising, or undertaking it in a merely token fashion designed primarily to appease their research degree supervisors. This immersion in the making made students feel confident, secure and at ease; as one explained: 'When I am making, I am at home'. Since this activity generated fulfilment, it was certainly not viewed by the students as a defeat or a retreat. And indeed,

when the making was progressing well, there was considerable incentive for students to pursue the creative flow without what they perceived as the 'distraction' of writing. Various 'techniques of neutralisation' (Sykes and Matza, 1957) came into operation in order to rationalise the lack of engagement with the written component of the work.

Data analysis revealed that these periods of retreat occurred most frequently in the first couple of years of study, as students struggled to adapt to analysis and writing and to become comfortable with the associated state of being. Even when a condition of relative ease had been achieved, it was evident that few interviewees were able to combine making and analysis within the same period, particularly given the divergent experiential states required. The typical pattern that emerged was one in which students would undergo a transition from full-time making to full-time writing, then return to full-time making, and so on. If the research was being conducted in a quasi-natural science mode, where the written form required was not so literary in nature, the time differential between adoption of the different modes of experience tended to be reduced, so that students were able to move more rapidly back and forth between making and writing. Even in such circumstances, however, students emphasized the temporal and experiential disjuncture:

I've been doing lots of tests of how I make the paper... So I record what I do and also photograph what I do at every stage, which is incredibly laborious, and I find I have to always do it twice... I do it initially as I would as an artist, so I make it because I need that flow. Then I do it again and I record it which is always frustrating, but it's the only way to do it because I find it almost impossible to do both at the same time, because I can't get a flow going when I'm recording the steps I have taken.

From the students' perspective, the flow of their making, the creative momentum, was initially impeded, even threatened by engagement with the analytical dimensions of their research. This problem was compounded by deep fears that documentation of their creative work would ultimately inhibit that very creativity, and that their powers of aesthetic expression would be greatly reduced by new found 'objectivity'. At a fundamental level lurked the fear that the analytic mode of being might actually destroy the creative mode. As can be imagined, in terms of identity salience (Stryker, 1980), this was experienced as a serious threat. In order to handle this fear and to attain a state of relative ease with the analytic mode, students had to move through various phases of adjustment.

## **RENEWAL VIA WRITING AND BEING**

Resolving the threat posed by analytic writing, and achieving some sort of balance with the creative component of the doctoral study, required students to re-interpret to some extent their experience of the written element. It became evident that students tended to move towards engagement with the analytic, usually propelled by: a) feelings of guilt (having evaded it for long periods); b) arriving at a point where, somewhat belatedly, they came to redefine the writing as a challenge; or c) pressure from supervisors; or indeed a combination of these factors.

The analytic component required students to 'stand back' from their making, to achieve a relative distancing from their subjective attachment to the creative work. This entailed a more 'objective', dispassionate scrutiny and evaluation of their creative output, employing various traditional academic resources, such as theories and concepts, historical context, and so on. Given the importance of this analytical dimension to the progress of the PhD, it is not surprising perhaps that students indicated that once having entered an 'analytic phase' they then found it difficult to abandon it temporarily. The return to the making mode was often experienced as problematic, so that many articulated fears concerning the predominance of the analytic mode, using such phrases as: 'It has become too big in my mind', or 'It takes up too much space in my head'. The very fears held *a priori* about the threat to, or

contamination of, their aesthetic output by the analytic dimension appeared to be materialising. The following comment was indicative of many:

The problem with thinking in an academic way is that it slows things down... It got in the way of where I wanted to take my work, for a long time it did that... I couldn't hear what the materials were saying to me!

This was perturbing and frustrating for students, who were at this juncture often anxious about and over-concerned with the theoretical, conceptual and methodological elements. To their consternation, it seemed that the cognitive activity required to analyse their making was being imported into the domain of making *per se*, generating confusion and inhibiting creative momentum. From their descriptions, it appeared, however, that students *needed* to undergo this period of anxiety and creative stasis, so as to arrive eventually at a workable equilibrium between their analytic and aesthetic activities. This involved a realisation that no matter how important to the PhD the analytic dimension might be, it was nevertheless relatively insignificant without high-quality making, which had to be awarded top priority. One student explained this realisation:



What happened was I got angry with myself at letting the academic thought get in the way when I was working [making], so I decided to just trust the materials like I had always done... After that the whole thing got a lot more relaxed, and I started producing some good glass. In a way it was an exercise in putting the academic in its place!

Once students have arrived at this relatively relaxed state, a sense of balance begins to prevail, where the two strands of the doctoral project co-exist in a much more comfortable fashion, so that the making is no longer threatened or overwhelmed by analytical concerns. This is not to say, of course, that the analytic ceased to influence the making, but rather it did so in a less intrusive way than previously. Once individuals manage to 'put the analysis in its place' they can revert to their earlier, pre-doctoral registration, mode of experience when making. Theoretical and conceptual ideas are redefined as a resource, to inspire rather than threaten their creative work. Such positive change often gave students greater surety and confidence in their creative work, sometimes expressed in vivid imagery:

Now I am more sure of myself, I feel my work has got more weight now... It's to do with a greater understanding of what I am doing, and where my work is situated. All that feeds into what I make, it gives it

more power... In a way, understanding more means the light is stronger on the canvas, the images are lit up more.

Students begin, with some enthusiasm, to acknowledge that developing powers of cognitive analysis can help to generate momentum in their making. Instead of slowing down or even blocking their creativity, it has the potential to accelerate it. In acquiring new modes of rigorous, academic thinking, students can feel a sense of great empowerment. Many indicated that although the written analysis did require a detachment from the feeling and emotion of making, the outcome of such distancing was subsequently a resource for those emotions, in turn generating greater creativity. It appears that contemporaneous with the detachment was actually forged a *connectedness* between students' making and their cognitive analysis; a highly positive advance along the doctoral journey.

In addition to dealing with the cognitive dimension of analysis, students also initially encountered problems with recording that analysis in academic terminology. As noted above, this is not an unfamiliar problem with graduate students generally (Rudestam and Newton, 1992). For the art and design students interviewed, however, there appeared to be an additional difficulty, rooted in their disciplinary socialisation, which had provided a particular cultural lens (Goodwin, 1994) through which to

view the world. The students were very concerned with the 'form' or shape of what they were creating. Confronted by the new practice of academic writing, they at first viewed it, in somewhat jaundiced fashion, as a peculiarly constrained bureaucratised form, highly inexpressive, with minimal space in which to construct 'form' in any sense they understood. Expressions such as 'dead' or 'flat' were commonly used to describe the structure and codified language of a doctoral thesis.

As noted, for extended periods of their study, students found themselves confronted by difficult problems. First, the form of academic writing was at great variance with the 'freer' forms of creative expression to which they were accustomed. Second, due to their lack of familiarity with this mode, initially they felt they lacked the skill to construct the necessary written forms and the experience to envisage forms more conducive to the way in which they might wish their creative work to be depicted. Long periods of struggle ensued as very gradually they developed a facility for analytic, academic, and written discourse. For those who succeeded in this new task, greater confidence developed, together with an emergent capacity to innovate and create forms of writing more appropriate to answering their own research questions. One outcome of this biographical process was a re-categorisation of analytic writing as an expressive practice in its own right, and perhaps more importantly, a perception of the writing self as an expressive self. Some

interviewees indicated that this process coincided with discovering postmodernist discourses on writing (Tierney, 1998) with their emphasis on a multiplicity of ways of constructing and presenting text. A fundamental issue for the majority of the art and design students interviewed was the wish to create analytic portrayals of their practice in a form which they felt to be true to their own expressive nature. From their standpoint, it was considered crucial that the writing not merely explain the making but also reflect its expressiveness in an aesthetic and empathetic manner:

Previously, it [writing] was rubbish I was turning out. I could not get any shape to telling how my work [practice] had developed... Yes, I've got better with the technique of writing, but I also realized that there were other ways of telling my story which I hope will be acceptable as my thesis. I don't feel I'm boasting when I say it's more elegant. I look at it now and I find it so much more easy on the eye.

For those who successfully adapt, the state of being which is required to produce the written analysis gradually becomes transformed from an experience initially alienating and discordant, to one viewed as highly positive. It was found both to empower the making, and also to permit the addressing of research questions in a form which reflected not

just the intellectual but also the aesthetic dimension of the doctoral project. This would concur with Richardson's view(1994: 516): 'By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic, and our relationship to it'. Once they have established this kind of positive relationship between the analytic writing and the making, students perceive greater similarity and harmony between the two elements:

Academic writing is a bit like painting... You have got all these ideas which you have to arrange in orderly fashion. I like pulling out all the stuff that is not relevant, making it tighter, more taut, just like you resolve those issues when painting.

## **CONCLUSION**

At present, practice-based art and design research degrees are considered to be at a relatively early stage of development in the UK; a state of affairs which, it should be recalled, applied to all disciplines at one time or another (Simpson, 1983). Consequently, to some extent, the students interviewed can be described as 'pioneers' of this kind of research degree. It should be remembered that the experiences depicted in this paper were articulated by students whose biographies had been mainly devoid of direct involvement in academic research work. In addition, they were tentatively beginning to engage with a disciplinary

research culture which itself is relatively embryonic. The students were thus operating without the benefit of earlier generations of practice-based theses, and largely without specific research methods training courses, or research guides and aids designed for practice-based research degrees. With some notable exceptions (see for example, Newbury, 1996), such resources are still scarce in the UK at the time of writing. An additional factor which pertains is the relatively small pool of supervisory experience in dealing with the specific combination of creativity and analysis within art and design doctorates (Hockey and Allen Collinson, 2000). Furthermore, as Candlin (2000b) has noted, although this form of research degree is offered by some 40 academic departments across the UK, there remains much general institutional unease and lack of knowledge regarding the form and purpose of a practice-based doctorate in art and design, and also regarding the appropriate methods of assessment used to evaluate such doctorates.

It is within this somewhat difficult and challenging context that students find themselves struggling to adapt to the process of combining making with analysis and writing and undergoing the sometimes painful biographical transformation from artist/designer to artist/designer-researcher. With the steady expansion of this form of research degree, it is envisaged that general support for students should develop, as should institutional acceptance of the canons, precedents, and processes of this

form of doctorate (Candlin, 2000b). Regardless of these projected improvements, however, practice-based research study in art and design is likely to require students to manage not only the technical and cognitive dimensions of research, but also to apply rigorous analysis to their own expressive making, which itself must be innovative in order to meet the criteria for the UK PhD. Considerable 'identity work' (Prus, 1996: 152) is required as students engage in 'identity struggles' (Howard, 2000) in order to construct new conceptions of self which combine the emotional and the cognitive (Erickson, 1995). This paper has sought to portray some of the experiences, difficulties, struggles and transformations of a group of art and design students as they engaged with a particularly complex form of doctoral study. For those interviewees who managed to combine the modes of making and analysis, and successfully negotiated the identity struggles and eventual transition to artist/designer-researcher, one very positive outcome highlighted was the generation of momentum in both their making and their research, and an enhancement of the creative process itself.

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