



THE 'CREATIVE-MINDED SUPERVISOR'

GATEKEEPING AND BOUNDARY BREAKING WHEN SUPERVISING CREATIVE DOCTORATES

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Research into what examiners value in a PhD (Kiley & Mullins 2002) identified some characteristics which might surprise supervisors who seek to ensure that, as well as contributing to knowledge, their students undertake manageable research projects, use familiar (enough) methodologies and methods and conform (enough) to acceptable formats in the finished thesis. In their research, both risk-taking and creativity emerged as highly valued in successful PhD theses. Creativity and risk-taking might be expected essentials in a PhD which centres on an artistic production, and are very familiar to those taking experimental approaches or challenging fixed ideas. However, for those of us supervising a much broader range of research it could be challenging to find ways to work with students or negotiate routes that are risky and creative, also sound, safe, familiar, and likely to be successful. This raises an exciting set of opportunities, located in supervisors' roles, and in supervisor-student interactions, in context. Supervisors are gatekeepers, boundary brokers, and boundary breakers, particularly when working with creative doctorates. Creative postgraduate students engaged in creative doctorates, whether in the creative arts, or taking creative approaches to problems and questions in a range of disciplines, might take us out of our own comfort zones. Yet, we would like to argue that, as supervisors, we need to be – in the words of one of our respondents – 'creative-minded' enough (Wisker & Robinson 2014) to encourage and reward the creative approaches and work, while also ensuring that the breaking of boundaries in new knowledge also fulfils expectations of a rigorous research project and well-communicated thesis.

Our earlier research (Wisker & Robinson 2014) focused on the journey taken by doctoral students involved in a variety of 'creative doctorates', broadly defined as ranging from those producing work that is creative in nature, such as fine art

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or creative writing, to those in other disciplines exploring creative approaches, identities, products; for example, one whose approaches to higher education management concentrates on creativity within that context. We focused on students' experiences and issues of defining, developing and finally producing a creative doctorate accompanied by an exegesis or similar which communicated its intent and achievement beyond any artistic product. Looking at students' creative learning journeys raised issues of supervision and examination, so we began to consider the work of supervisors supervising creative doctorates. (The examination forms the substance of current research and will be explored in a future article.) We considered the experiences of both doctoral students and their supervisors, focusing on the 'creative doctorate' and concentrating on supervisory support and 'nudging' of creative doctorates. We began to highlight issues of the characteristics of supervisors who choose to supervise a creative doctorate, supporting the potentially edgy boundary-breaking work, and those who might find the process, the product and the relationship with established expectations somewhat challenging as well as exciting. This raised issues of perceived tensions in the academic identity and role of the supervisor, where they are acting as a gatekeeper of recognisable, acceptable quality (and even conformity) in the supervision of the doctoral process and product.

This chapter concentrates on further exploring the neglected issue of the 'creative-minded' supervisor, focusing on challenges faced by, and experiences of supervisors of creative doctorates, asking of supervisors what makes a creative-minded supervisor who enables risk-taking creative work, yet equally manages a process which helps secure a successful PhD, and does not leave the student out on a limb, to take all the risks. These supervisors face challenges engaging with creative doctoral learning journeys, and themselves walking on the 'white lines' (Wisker & Robinson 2014), in the middle between conformity and risk-taking, negotiating the risky yet safe enough spaces so the creative work may challenge preconceptions, and also succeed. We enquire how supervisors see their work, in relation to boundaries linking groundbreaking creative work, and its recognisability, acceptability and reward within the range of what is considered doctoral quality.

For many supervisors in our previous and current studies, this is seen to raise issues of their academic identity, and where appropriate their own identity as creative practitioners. It causes them to consider their positions within the field at doctoral and research level, since they are active as gatekeepers of quality and are able to nurture, nudge or limit the boundary-breaking nature of some of the creative work undertaken by some doctoral students. We use narrative interviewing, face to face and through email, with semi-structured open-ended questions, focusing

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on supervisors who have presented in the earlier work or have emerged as willing research participants, from more recent international workshops on supervision. Responses offer information and insights concerning emotional and intellectual issues for 'creative-minded' supervisors exploring tensions in the role and practice, related to boundary breaking and boundary maintenance, risk, challenge and compliance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perspectives on the supervisor-student research journey for creative-minded supervisors and students pursuing creative projects can be understood using work on academic identities and gatekeeping in relation to risk-taking and creativity in the context of expectations of the PhD in terms of doctorateness and communicating to a readership comprising other academics and examiners.

Supervisors perceive their roles as tied up with their academic identities (Henkel 2005; Enders 2005; Allen-Collinson 2004; Clegg 2008; Castelló , Kobayashi, McGinn, Pechar, Vekkaila & Wisker 2015), and issues of creativity, convention and communication emerge as paramount. In such work there is, among other things, a concern with role development, change, and also potential for confusion and enabling when transitioning between professional identities (Beck & Young 2005), particularly between research identities. 'Risk' careers have been identified as common among early career researchers (Castelló *et al* 2015). However, the risk careers of early career researchers, including PhD students undertaking creative work and those of their creative-minded or less creative-minded supervisors, have yet to come into focus. In their 2015 work, Castelló *et al* problematise a range of research careers across the disciplines in terms of conformity, role engagement and security when considering the absence of certain signals of career development. Riskiness of role and identity could also lead both supervisors and students to urge caution in terms of the more experiential and creative work perhaps, since research is a vulnerable career path, as indeed is its supervision. For students there is the threat of failure, should their work not be recognised as acceptable, suitable for a PhD pass, while for supervisors the threat is that of a poor track record of completions, and emotional issues around student loss and failure. Work by McAlpine and Åkerlind (2010) concerns career aims, prospects and realities for those pursuing doctorates, post-doctoral futures and the changing demands of academic roles. Their work does not focus on supervisors supervising creative doctorates; rather McAlpine (2012) looks at social science and science researchers, and tensions, opportunities, changes and contradictions such as boundary breaking or boundary broking are not the focus of this work, but the creative insecurity of the role emerges as a key

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issue, as does the damage of workload and pressure of expectations in a shrinking academic job market.

Tensions, challenges and opportunities for researchers working with creative issues, areas and practices are, to our knowledge, not the focus of current work on academic identities. However, creative researchers and their supervisors could be a special case in terms of process, academic identities and career futures. In a time of pressure and shrinking academic jobs, what are the considerations for a supervisor supervising creative projects and creative processes where these might be a little more problematic at key stages in the research journey, such as proposal, approval, transfer, and examination? How might the student's research journey be developed in relation to the supervisor's own academic professional role and journey? On the one hand, supervisors are expected to nurture original enough contributions to knowledge, and on the other, to ensure the work is produced in a timely fashion, in a shape which enables communication. Creativity and the stringencies of shape and timeliness could cause tensions both in the research journey and for the supervisor helping to manage that journey. Some students and supervisors could experience disjunction in identities and communication approaches in ensuring the work is compliant and conformist in relation to the process and shape of the PhD, yet enabling risk and creativity in the work to make it significant at PhD level, ensuring it crosses conceptual thresholds (Wisker & Robinson 2009), and achieves doctorateness. Conceptual threshold crossings are also an area of interest in our exploration of supervising creative PhDs, since supervisors discuss the need to develop and 'nudge' creative, critical and conceptual work in order for the student to realise (understand, bring into reality) and cross conceptual thresholds and make a contribution to knowledge.

The creative, personally engaged response and the PhD process and shape might be seen as 'contested territory' (Robinson 2011:154). In some instances, the engagement of the student in the creative work, both artistic and more broadly ranging, is highly personal, perhaps based on an examination of personal processes and products, taking self as a case study, or deliberately growing the research out of their experiences. For students undertaking such experiential or self-based work, creative identity might well be questioned during and because of the PhD process. Issues of co-development (Csikszentmihalyi 1999) and co-becoming (Pope 2005) could offer ways into considering relationships between the creative process and product, the student's own engagement with creativity and the need to ensure the research and its expression develop into a passable PhD, creative-minded. Focusing on a range of creative and critical doctoral work, Frick (2011) and Frick and Brodin

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(2012) considered relationships between practice-based creative work, the theory informing it and the expected characteristics of a doctorate.

We bring these concerns together in relation to pressures on supervisors to ensure that the thesis itself conforms sufficiently to enable a pass, and between risk-taking, creativity, and compliance with expected format, of which the supervisor is the main guardian. As Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2000:350) have noted: “[A]nxiety about the need to incorporate theory into the project sometimes disrupted students’ practice fundamentally, so that the students lost confidence in the practice and became theory directed. Supervisors would then attempt to reorient the students’ work.’ Issues arise where students are expected to engage analytically, and to articulate this in the recognisable form of the PhD thesis. Both Hockey and Allen-Collinson (Allen-Collinson 2004; Hockey 2007; Hockey & Allen-Collinson 2000) do not only consider the problems faced by students and supervisors in engaging with the issues of creative practice, creative products and students’ artistic and academic identities. They also consider strategies which supervisors use to work with doctoral students to manage such issues and potential conflicts effectively (Hockey 2007; Hockey & Allen-Collinson 2000).

The supervision process is central to Hill’s (2002) work on the creative PhD and its supervision. Hill initially considered tensions between creative expression and the acceptable format, but has been able to incorporate both into his own PhD, and latterly to take similar creative responses to the supervision process, advocating a mixture of creative and conventional practice and PhD format. Other work on creative supervision has been conducted (Whitelock, Faulkner & Miell 2008) arguing for “trust and the negotiation of meaning around a jointly chosen research project that ultimately leads to the creation and communication of new knowledge” (Whitelock *et al* 2008:2), which has to be seen as credible, making a sound contribution in its own field of practice, to “pass muster with experts in the field [...] and be included in the cultural domain to which it belongs” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996:27). Whitelock *et al* (2008:2) discuss “creative collaboration” and the accompanying emotional intensity of the relationship between student and supervisor, speaking to those engaged in a creative process towards creative products and accompanying thesis, each of which needs to be acceptable in the academic forms and rigour of a PhD. The emotional engagement of the collaborative work is seen itself as part of the energy and richness of supervisor-student interactions nurturing creative work and the creative-based thesis. As they argue, “Emotional intensity within creative collaborations has been shown to sustain the intrinsic motivation that drives imagination, thinking, risk-taking and the creation of shared meaning.” Their work builds on that of Moran (2008)

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and John-Steiner (2000). Such a perspective on interactions, emotional dimensions, risk-taking and creativity in the context of achieving an award which is internationally recognised – that is, has certain criteria and characteristics – places the supervisor in a mixed role of creative companion, co-traveller on the doctoral learning journey, and gatekeeper, a boundary broker. The development of more creative ways of working together has implications for supervision and its role as boundary brokering or boundary breaking.

Building on this earlier work, focused workshop discussions with a wide range of supervisors involved in supervising creative work and that which utilises creative processes, in universities in the Republic of Ireland, Sweden, South Africa, Israel and the UK (2014-15), have revealed a broad range of creative work, and of issues and practices concerning gate-keeping.

Earlier research on conducting and supervising creative-based doctorates focused on literature and art (Wisker & Robinson 2009), identifying critical, conceptual and creative work in a range of disciplines. We built on threshold concepts in the disciplines (Land, Cousin, Meyer & Davies 2005) developing theories of conceptual threshold crossings at stages in the research journey (Kiley & Wisker 2008; Wisker & Robinson 2009). The notion of creative work which makes a contribution to knowledge and is 'nudged' by the behaviours of creative-minded supervisors resonates with this earlier work. Supervisors working with creative students ensure creative experimentation does not undermine but rather strengthens their chances of success in often conventional university contexts.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The new research reported here builds on earlier work considering doctoral study in literature and art (Wisker & Robinson 2009), creative doctorates, and supervision (Wisker & Robinson 2014).

In rescrutinising the earlier research (Wisker & Robinson 2009, 2014) as a basis for this new work, we sought comments about supervisor characteristics which could be defined as 'creative-minded', gatekeeping, boundary broking and boundary breaking, academic identities and emotional issues regarding working with creative processes, products and students engaged in creative PhD projects. This involved, in all, six students identified as creative, and six supervisors who supervised creative projects. These comments influenced the questions we devised, but are not reported on here.

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Six supervisor participants were selected for the new research (results reported as A, B etc, names kept confidential), based on their self-identification as working with creative PhDs, and they were invited (i) from the earlier research, and (ii) from supervision workshops conducted in the UK, South Africa and Sweden. We conducted new face-to-face and email interviews with a total of six supervisors.

The participants spanned disciplines ranging from the fine arts, to creative writing, music, design, education and management. We asked questions specifically focused on the characteristics identified above, that is, being 'creative-minded', gatekeeping, boundary broking and boundary breaking, academic identities and emotional issues regarding working with creative processes, products and students engaged in creative PhD projects.

DATA ANALYSIS

The new interviews were read through carefully, focusing on the issues above. We considered how these behaviours and experiences were experienced, for example, as tensions or a continuum, and whether there were any comments about academic identity and role. We thematically analysed the data from the new project, searching for keywords and expressions with similar meanings related to 'identity', 'self', 'embodiment', 'creative/creativity', 'tensions', 'risks', 'breakthroughs' (in thinking, that is, conceptual threshold crossings, and in finding an appropriate form of expression), boundary, and gatekeeping. Other words which emerged in the new research with six supervisors were 'constraint', 'compliance', 'convention' and 'being pulled both ways'.

The semi-structured open-ended questions follow. As befits semi-structured open-ended questions, each also has an extension which helped enrich the responses:

1. Have you examined, supervised or undertaken what you would define as a creative PhD? (Extension: In our earlier work, both postgraduate students and supervisors indicated ways of supervising and of relating to knowledge, methodology and methods, writing or communicating etc which would be considered 'creative-minded' – do you have any thoughts or examples of that from your own practice? Or others' practice?)
2. What does the notion of a 'creative-minded supervisor' (for postgraduate research) mean to you? And would you define yourself as one? Why/why not? (Extension: Please share any thoughts or stories about the behaviours and challenges, issues and achievements of any creative-minded supervisory practice.)

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3. What (if any) issues, tensions and insights have emerged for you in relation to the link between the creativity and the PhD process/shape? What did you do, and why, to empower, enable and support, recognise, promote or restrict this PhD? (Extension: In our earlier work, supervisors mentioned the challenge of being 'creative-minded' when their roles are also as gatekeepers, boundary brokers (of knowledge, the discipline, of the format expected of a doctorate, etc). What kind of a challenge might this be? What issues and practices could it encourage? Lead to?)

DATA AND DISCUSSION

Issues and themes emerging from responses to the questions are discussed below. Only those who identified as supervising a creative PhD were then interviewed further, but we were also interested in any comments made about experience, form and tensions. Data are presented by themes which emerged, the first of which is transfer of experience from being a student to being a supervisor.

Transfer of experience

Transfer of experimentation and creative practice was noted between supervisors' own work and their students', so that their own experience of undertaking creative work gave insights into the potential tensions, issues and problems.

In discussing their varied engagement with the creative PhD, some commented on transfer between their own practice – first as a student and then a supervisor. This is particularly interesting where issues have emerged over constraints on developments and innovations in methodologies and methods of research, and their subsequent enabling of such relative innovations. For example, action research and storytelling were introduced, autoethnography was seen as creative because unusual in that time or context, and metaphor was found enabling. One respondent (A) helped develop our understanding of a range of creative PhD work:

In my own research practice I would list as examples of my creativity:

1. Undertaking an action research MSc (Hon) when action research was relatively new and still objected to by the positivists
2. Developing inquiry methodologies that relied on practitioners' stories when the idea of storytelling as inquiry had been mooted but few examples of it existed
3. Collaboratively developing strategies for practice-led inquiry when few guidelines were available in the research literature, and as a result developing the notion of 'provenance' as it relates to practice-led inquiry. (A)

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This supervisor offers examples of taking the first steps in his/her own research, while another lamented trying an unusual methodology, and a third extended the less usual research methods to a concern for supporting others, since the students were taking those steps into relatively new 'creative' territory:

Mine is woeful. I attempted using the Bricolage, a non-linear far-reaching methodology which sought to butterfly out before honing and refining. It threw me off course for almost three years. (B)

Another supervisor commented as follows:

[I work] with students wanting to incorporate some kind of creative practice into their work – novels, poetry, drama etc. – ... that explicitly links research with their creative process in order to enhance and inform the creative outputs, and the ideas are really exciting and diverse which means I have to be creative-minded to ensure they feel supported and advised and motivated! (C)

Respondents recognise and, where appropriate, support a variety of creative ways of undertaking research. One notes the use of metaphor as a student:

I have been engaging in metaphor, and the metaphorical use of drawn images to elicit new thinking. It offered an alternative way of journal writing or memo; enabled me to make connections. ... might be useful for those who are making a crossing from art-based thinking into socially scientific thinking. (B)

CREATIVE-MINDED SUPERVISORS AND THEIR PRACTICE

Respondents recognised the term 'creative-minded supervisor' as fitting their behaviours and identities and some felt that all supervisors have to be creative-minded to work with the students' very different projects and ways of undertaking research. They saw the term as suggesting creative responses to students' creative work, different forms of supervision, and a tension sometimes between risk-taking, creative work, and the expectations of the PhD thesis, for examination:

A creative-minded supervisor is one who is constantly exploring outside the (hegemony) box about research and also research supervision. They are in themselves creative about their approach to research and can thus nurture and support a research student who expresses a desire or agenda to do things differently from established discipline traditions. (A)

Yes I am creative-minded but I suppose I (naively?) imagine most supervisors to be creative-minded in some way. (B)

Here both B and C consider being 'creative-minded' as normal and essential in any supervisory work since they are responding to and 'nudging' the thinking and

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research practice of students into originality, via some risk-taking and criticality. Ways of supervising are also considered creative; for example, when breaking the one-to-one or one-to-a-team relationship. They dare

... to consider academic postgraduate practice making new 'shapes', perhaps being less linear in how they realise PG research work may be constructed. Also trying out new ways of supervision, maybe where a student's needs are not in the 'norm'. (C)

One makes a creative comparison with a poem in terms of the parallel between bringing the poetry into view from the imagination, engaging the scholarship and encouraging the student's progress. They note:

For me, the process could be likened to Hughes's 'Thought Fox' ...

First, I see a creative-minded supervisor as someone who strongly encourages the candidate's contribution within the field of 'independent thought' (as opposed to mimicking or echoing the supervisor) and that the candidate generates ideas autonomously. The ideas are perhaps a little raw, exploratory, 'in stump and hollow'... So, it is about the unfolding of the scholarship of the candidate in a generative space which allows the candidate to sing, dance, scream, bemoan, argue, delight in her/his journey... The supervisor does not shut down the contribution. (D)

The description of this interactive nurturing process says much about the supervisor's own emotional involvement and his/her academic identity as one who guides and celebrates, as does the next response:

A creative-minded supervisor means being a specialist in practice – 'praxis' – and able to direct a student in different ways of looking at specialist practice as well as being able to be efficient in the theories of PG research. (E)

ENVIRONMENT

A nurturing environment, academic identity, security and affirmation are important for 'creative-minded' supervisors engaged with creative work. One reflects from their own academic identity, their affirmed position concerning the work they can do with their students in a cohort:

[I]t is great to be supported and encouraged rather than marginalised. Through this transformation I have found new energies and excitement about my work and engagement as an academic as well as my largest cohort ever of doctoral students whose energy and innovation also encourages me. (A)

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The use of relatively unusual supervisory practices such as interactive sessions with others has helped creative students proceed within the bounds of expected work.

The more PG students interact with one another [the more it] is useful for them to form connections with each other, and to promote a shared learning policy which helps reflection. It's only through deep reflection on experimentation/testing that the research student will make sufficient progress to proceed effectively and be able to write about the practice in the specialist area. (E)

An environment of openness and sharing offers opportunities for co-creation of knowledge. Sometimes this supports experiments in the shape of the PhD.

BROKERING AND BOUNDARY BREAKING: THE SHAPE OF THE PHD

You say the 'format of a doctorate'; where I study that is not my experience, of course we are all working on our own journeys, but there is a spirit of collaboration, and a spirit of camaraderie as we are all trying to achieve our own goals uniquely and there are many solutions to one problem... (E)

Respondents talked of simultaneously ensuring the work was conforming to expectations of a PhD in terms of recognisable shape and contribution to knowledge, and finding and legitimating ways to express its version of creativity. There is an awareness that a creative product in itself is not sufficient for a PhD, which requires an exegesis to share its critical thinking and contribution with others. Here supervisors can simultaneously enable and gate-keep so that both process and product are creative, and can achieve the PhD.

In relation to both their own PhD journey (in Business) and that of their students, one notes a tension between doctorateness and creativity which they have to help manage:

Perhaps the greatest challenge in my own research and in supervising other students' research is helping them address issues of doctoralness and research rigour without sacrificing their creative agenda. The dissertation needs to commence with the inquirer/practitioner's own story. (A)

'Creative-minded' supervisor practices involved using creative practice such as cabaret, drawing, and sharing stories; however, there are tensions for the supervisor in terms of the necessary academic rigour or external judgment and the nurturing of students' creative work:

I have not yet realised the conventions, demands and rigour of those spaces enough. I think I am still a bit of an innocent in this regard.

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Recently, I had a scholar review the work of the students that I supervise to determine if their proposals could go to a colloquium and then onward to being approved. I found it very taxing – I saw the gate-keeping, but also an objective rigour, and the demands of academia and how I needed to learn more as a supervisor – that the stretch referred to above sometimes needs to be a more rigid and less tensile stretch. I need sometimes to be more on the side of the academics and not on the side of my students.... (D)

Some expressed as constraining, and some enabling (and some as a mixture, for their 'own good'), their awareness of the differing decisions and behaviour, the managing, or not, of a balance in the guidance and advice. Being affirmed in their own creative and creative-minded supervisory practice emerged as important, so that a safe space was created, perhaps, in which to nurture the work of PhD students. Several had examples of seeing the supervision process itself as risky and creative at the same time. One commented as follows:

[L]ots of pieces of exhibition or dance or performance are actually issues-based and the issues are argued and solved within the artefact or the performance itself. And this is something that doesn't seem to be understood or acknowledged yet by examiners – they still want a huge slice of traditional exegesis. (E)

And another:

Some students want to write a novel and get a PhD for it. And one day perhaps they will, but at the moment, it has to have a clear critical element ...not so long ago I was a doctoral student responding to the question from my supervisor, 'What's all this creative writing doing in your thesis? I assumed it would be an appendix?' I think being robust and rigorous but open to new innovations and ideas is at the heart of good supervision and this is creative regardless of discipline. (B)

For some highly creative, artistic students an exegesis was a struggle, and communication in the language of the more formal presentation of their work did not do it justice. Here the supervisor is boundary broker, and breaker. The creative-minded supervisor is both someone who uses creative approaches and one who in nurturing students' creative work, research methods, process and product still manages to tread that finely balanced line between ensuring compliance in order to produce a recognisable PhD with doctorateness, which can pass, can suit the (possibly more conventional) examiner and the university, while enabling, encouraging, nurturing and affirming the risky creative processes, practice and products of the PhD student.

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CONCLUSION

Examiners might be imagined to be the final conservative constraint for the creative student and their PhD. However, as Kiley and Mullins have noted (2002), risk-taking and creativity are expected forms of work in the ideal PhD, according to examiners. Some PhD work is explicitly creative – dramatic, artistic, poetic – and some creative in its process and questioning, asking original questions of complex areas in a creative manner, testing the edges of research methodologies, methods and the research process itself. Supervisors of creative doctoral students and creative doctorates, broadly conceived, recognise the need to be carefully compliant with the expected characteristics and format of a PhD which will be deemed a pass. They have to manage the tension in their own identities and behaviour, and be boundary brokers as well as boundary breakers; their roles part of co-becoming and co-development as co-travellers on the doctoral learning journey with the student. For supervisors, helping bring the risky creative work into being, and also ensuring that it conforms enough to pass, often presents as a tension, related to their own credibility and their own academic identity.

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