

From the ground up: encountering theory in the process of practice-led doctoral research

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Abstract

Drawing on the work of John Dewey (*Art as Experience*, 1934) and others this paper discusses the relationship between practice and theory in doctoral study as one that is grounded in and emergent from the experience of practice.

1. Objections and contributions

The theme of this conference – a provocative questioning of the role of theory in practice-led doctoral research – is relevant, timely and necessary. As the sector quite rightly continues to debate and explore different ways of undertaking doctoral research, a question persists about the 'balance of practice and theory'. I have often heard research students claim that they were doing a '50/50 thesis' (or some permutation of percentages) – as if these were quantifiable ingredients in making a cake. I have two objections to this: firstly, the artificial and somewhat destructive separation of 'doing' and 'thinking'; and secondly, the misconception about the word 'thesis' – its general abuse as a shorthand term for the 'big black book', rather than its real meaning as coherent argument. I will return to these issues later.

My contribution to this conference will be from a visual arts perspective, from the position of a 'maker', an educator, a researcher - a critical reflective practitioner. Although I believe that questions arising from practice can provide motivations for research; that practice provides part of

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the context for research; that practice (or aspects of) might furnish innovative and creative generative and analytical methods; that practice might indicate interesting and engaging ways of communicating and disseminating the research - I do not believe that practice *per se* is research. Only within the framework of a purposeful, sustained, focused and explicit inquiry – either at doctoral level or otherwise – can practice make its distinctive contribution to the research process. ‘Practice-led’ is a methodology not a type of research.

In this paper I do not propose solutions to the ‘problem’ of theory, but offer imaginative speculations on how as visual artists we might encounter theory and indeed through doctoral study contribute to its construction and critical interrogation.

1.1 Desire, love, compassion

First I want us to be mindful of what doctoral research is or should be. A PhD is a Doctor of Philosophy. When we embark on this path we commit to a philosophical inquiry. ‘Philosophy’ comes from the Greek ‘philos’ meaning ‘loving’, so a ‘philosophos’ is a ‘lover of wisdom’ (New Collins Dictionary, 1986). A love starts with a desire – in this case a desire to find out something, to contribute something new to our understanding. As the brilliant Brazilian educator Paulo Freire says in his book ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ (written in 1970): “The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love.” (1996: 70).

The dictionary also tells us that philosophy is “the rational investigation of being, knowledge and right conduct”. Being, knowing and doing. Ontology, epistemology, methodology – the philosophical and theoretical perspectives that underpin research (Love, 2000: 264).

We might then say that a PhD is a reasoned and passionate inquiry that can bring to bear compassionate and ethical methodologies. In the case of practice-led doctoral research, desire – for seeing things differently, for bringing about change, for creative transformation and invention - is characteristically rooted in practice.

1.2 Weaving and questioning

Within the academic framework of doctoral research the requirement to contextualise the topic of inquiry and develop a critical understanding of it is essential. Not least for being able to make a justifiable claim that you have made a contribution to knowledge – relative to the specific context of research and that you are able to make sense of it as a meaningful contribution.

Without a critical understanding of context – mapping the terrain of your inquiry – and positioning your research in relation to other relevant work your inquiry floats free, remains unconnected, is not grounded. The Latin 'contextus' means 'a putting together'; similarly, the Greek prefix 'com' means 'together' and 'textere' to 'weave' (New Collins Dictionary, 1986). So we might understand contextualizing as a weaving together and critical analysis of the relevant strands of established and current thinking and practice.

I make two interpretations of 'critical' here that are related. The first concerns the capacity to make analytical evaluations and reasoned judgements – to discern between the significant and the insubstantial. Critical analysis is a key characteristic of a 'single background theoretical perspective' within doctoral research (Love, 2000: 267). Furthermore, within academic inquiry critical thinking is the basis of theory, enabling knowledge to emerge (Friedman, 2005).

The second interpretation concerns the use of this critical capacity to challenge and change things – to be transformative (for example, a broad aim of 'critical theory' is to bring about social change). In discussing 'reflexive practices' Graeme Sullivan (2005) talks of 'working against' existing theories and practices to open up opportunities for seeing things in new ways and making new connections.

Both interpretations are linked through the activity of questioning: the continual scrutiny of knowledge and ways of knowing.

Thus in engaging in contextualized and critical inquiry we weave together judgments and make sense of the circumstances that surround our inquiries.

1.3 Gazing and speculating

Again let us not assume we know what ‘theory’ is. To return to the root of the word in Greek we find that ‘theōrein’ means ‘to gaze upon’ a sight, to spectate (from the Latin ‘specere’ – to look at). As onlookers we might experience a spectacle – but from a distance. We are removed. Two other words come to mind here: ‘specular’ – ‘relating to or having the properties of a mirror’ which raises the concept of reflection. Closely related is the word ‘speculate’ meaning ‘to conjecture without knowing the complete facts’. So theory is abstract knowledge or reasoning.

1.3.1. Filling gaps and opening up

Sullivan writing about inquiry in the visual arts alludes to the different roles of theory in different paradigms of inquiry.

“Within a traditional research regime, inquiry practices are mostly theory-driven so that studies are designed in accordance with existing knowledge and results are seen to help fill in the gaps. In (*theorizing in*) practice, the outcomes can be much more surprising and consequently challenge existing theories and take the field in new directions.” (Sullivan, 2005: 75, my italics, added for clarification)

In the Sciences theories are to be proved or disproved – verified or falsified (Popper, 1968). Social Science has given us new ways of developing and understanding theory. Robson summarises the difference between these two approaches:

“Theory and previous research ... puts scientific researchers into the position of knowing what they are looking for However, those following an interpretive approach begin much more generally. They explore, ...” (Robson, 1993: 19).

He suggests that a major difference in this approach is that “theories and concepts tend to arise from the enquiry. ... Initial theory formulation ... goes on at an early stage, and is successively elaborated and checked as the process continues” (1993:19). For example, ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) takes an explicitly phenomenological stance, in which all

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prior theories are suspended, allowing the discovery of new patterns to emerge from the field data.

Friedman (2005) provides an exhaustive discussion of theory construction in design research. He tells us that theories are part of the 'stock of knowledge' that enable designers to "link what we know to what we do" (ibid. p7), to understand how and why things work through analysis and explanation. Without explicit articulation there can be no theorizing, no theory construction. He also argues that the failure of design research to develop grounded theory out of practice is due to some designers' mistaking practice for research, thereby proposing that practice itself – without "articulation and inductive inquiry" - is a form of theory construction (ibid. p14).

In a more radical take, Sullivan proposes a role for the 'artist-as-theorist' and the activity of 'theorizing in practice' (2005: 75). "For art practices to be considered research, artists-theorists need to engage directly with theoretical concerns that can be investigated in studio contexts as well as through other mediated forms and methods" (p98). He suggests three related dimensions of theory: Create-Critique, Making-Meaning, Enact-Explain (visualized on pp 98-99), which indicate how art practice connects to theory in other disciplines and domains of inquiry¹.

Finally, some artists-theorists like Stewart (2003: unpagged web document) have proposed practitioner research as a 'living form of theory':

"Reflexive practice occurs when we consider particular aspects of general theories in the contexts of our personal theories. So we become theory generators as well as theory users. The essence of reflexive practice is the integration of elements or principles of both kinds of theories. This gap between theory and practice describes inconsistencies between artists' professional actions and their personal theories. The focus and intention of reflexive inquiry is to close these theory-practice gaps."

So we have a range of positions on theory – from filling gaps, to emergent understandings, to linking knowledge to action, to theorising in practice, to artistic inquiry as a form of 'living theory'.

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2. Threads and braids

We might replace the 'balance' of practice and theory with 'relationship'. In the scales metaphor, although balance has quite a dynamic edge to it – delicate equilibrium, or sudden change – it suggests a model of polarity – one side or another, up/down, one thing outweighing the other.

Relationship enables a range of different conceptualisations, different understandings perhaps through other metaphors. Building on our earlier 'weaving' of context, if we accept that a research proposition – an argument – is a thread of thinking, we can conceptualise an inquiry as a kind of 'braided' structure. We might talk then about the 'interweaving' of threads, mutually shaping and strengthening.

This does not deny the stimulating tensions between practice and theory – it still allows for the different energies and forces to interact, to push and pull. But at least with this conceptualisation practice and theory do not go off in completely different directions, causing disruptions and impossible choices within the research programme.

3. Encountering: engagement, evasion and running to and fro

I very much like the idea of 'encountering' theory. It suggests that, as a result of active exploration, we might come upon or discover unexpectedly relevant ideas. It is dynamic, moving. It suggests an event, possibly a serendipitous meeting, an experience that might surprise us or challenge us. On a darker note an encounter also suggests a meeting in battle or contest. This is an antagonistic and adversarial perception, but one that can be seen in Science where theories are refuted, overturned and replaced. Similarly it can mean that we come face to face with something with which we have to contend. We can evade or engage. Encounters can create tensions, and challenges can provoke creative responses.

Whatever the cast of it encountering is not passive. It suggests that we do not 'gaze on' what is already established as a given model or framework for inquiry. We do not usually start from a given theory that is 'out there' and

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build our research around it – we are not just passive consumers of theory, but active contributors to its construction.

If we take a ‘practice-led’ approach to research we acknowledge practice as a wellspring for inquiry. During the inquiry, practice encounters theory – or seeks it out - at appropriate points in the journey. We may consider using a river metaphor. The research proposition starts from a small source (of desire) and as it progresses encounters other sources that contribute at certain points to its flow and shape. These con-tributaries introduce new streams of thinking and practice into the argument, directing, re-shaping its course, expanding, increasing the speed of the flow, giving the thinking direction and context.

Going deeper into the metaphor we might talk of cross currents and undercurrents. The word ‘discourse’ in Latin means ‘running to and fro’ – discussion that is in flow and flux. Similarly ‘discursus’ means argument, and discursive relates to dialogue, conversation – an exchange that is lively and engaged, participatory and connecting.

Discourse is a generator of theory and theory can generate new discourses.

3.1 Undergoing

Encountering is experiential. The American Pragmatist philosopher and educator John Dewey in ‘Art and Experience’ (published in 1934) describes having an ‘esthetic’ experience as a process of ‘undergoing’.

“The esthetic or undergoing phase of experience is receptive. It involves surrender. ... Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. To steep ourselves in a subject-matter we have first to plunge into it. ... We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take in.*” (p55, original italics)

This willingness to give in to, to be immersed - to be in ‘interaction’ - is what gives experience its value and power. Yet, a single experience is insufficient. In ‘Experience and Education’ (published in 1938) Dewey professes that unless there is ‘continuity’ - a carrying over of learning from a previous situation into a new one - experience is ‘disorderly’. Where there

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is continuity the learning becomes 'an instrument of understanding' for dealing with new situations (1997: 44).

In 'How We Think' (published in 1910) Dewey also postulated that theory is 'practical' in the sense that speculative thinking is a way of setting free the mind, of enhancing it, and enabling a contribution to life.

"Power in action requires some largeness and imaginativeness of vision ... Interest in knowledge for the sake of knowledge, in thinking for the sake of the free play of thought, is necessary then to the *emancipation* of practical life – to make it rich and progressive." (1991: 139, original italics)

The dimensions of Dewey's thinking about experience – immersive interaction carrying over into reflection and speculation towards new understandings – reinforces the necessary relationship between practice and theory.

4. 'Critical companions' and 'theoretical pillars': examples of theory in doctoral research

I have suggested the metaphor of a braided structure as a way of thinking about integrating theory and practice. But how have doctoral students actually operated? The experiences of John Marshall and Heather Delday are now discussed.²

4.1 Theory as 'projecting' and 'upholding'

Marshall's research (to be completed in 2007) investigates hybrid art and design practices using computer-mediated technologies, asking questions about new kinds of objects and production paradigms, new critical vocabulary and language for these, and how new models of practice in trans-disciplinary contexts might be developed.

The research questions emerged from ten years of practice (making, curation and writing). Already having some grounding in critical theory at undergraduate and masters level, John considers theory and practice as 'intrinsically linked' and is against what he calls the 'doer/thinker

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dichotomy': "I've never been happy just making ... there is always a need within me to understand what it is I'm doing, why I'm doing it, and where that activity resides in the broader scheme of things."

Within his doctoral study he encounters theory in two key ways: one, from issues arising out of his creative practice; two, from 'voracious' reading which is a 'huge part' of his practice. He has identified that new hybrid practices by their very nature lack clear creative and critical contexts – they are post-disciplinary – and as such require new intellectual territory to be mapped. Rather than theory being contemplative and reflective John sees it as a way of 'projecting forward' enabling him to imagine and construct this new context for hybrid practices, within which he wants to 're-position himself' and be an active contributor. Through his curatorial practice he is helping to make connections across communities of practice (craft, art, architecture, design) and build the discourse that brings them into closer relationship. Project web sites (*Perimeters, Boundaries and Borders* – <http://www.fastuk.org.uk/pbb.htm>) and blogs (<http://designedobjects.blogspot.com/>) play an important role in this.

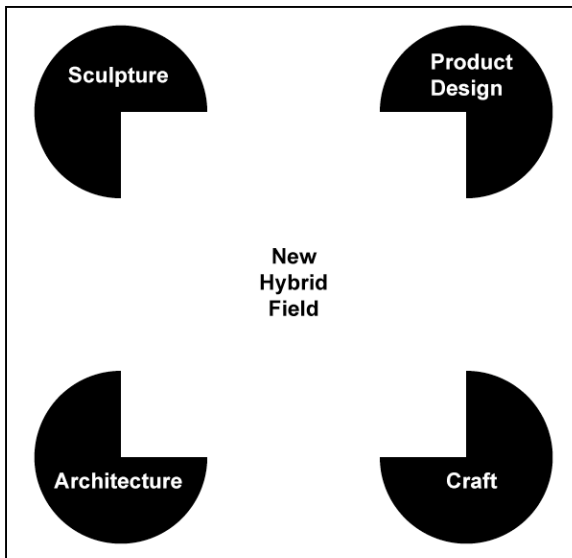


Figure 1 'The new hybrid field is defined in relation to and is dependent on the traditional disciplines - it supplements but does not supersede them.'
(Marshall, 2007)

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A self-confessed 'knowledge junkie' John thinks that reading stimulates visual thinking and making:

"When I'm working in the studio ... making something I'm making meaning and we can approach that meaning through words. A lot of the pieces that I've made have actually grown out of reading critical texts ... pictures ... appear in my mind as I'm reading."

He has what he calls 'John's Canon' that includes Martin Heidegger and Tony Dunne - 'theoretical pillars holding up the roof of my study'. The architectural metaphor is appropriate (given his doctoral focus), suggesting that theory 'upholds' practice, gives the foundation that supports inquiry.

"My practice emerges out of theory I suppose – while I'm making something I'm thinking about it, but while I'm not, I'm still thinking about it – a continuum of theorising or thinking about making that extends beyond the making."

John is attempting to theory build in a new field of practice: theory is shaping the construction of the research and its creative outputs, and the practice is generating discourse towards the development of new theory.

4.2 A theorist as a 'critical companion' on the journey of inquiry

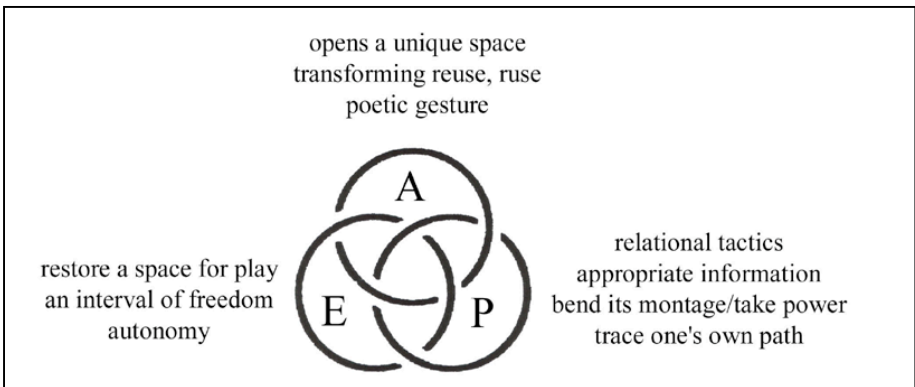
Delday's research (PhD awarded in 2006) explored the relationship between the artist and the everyday through the critical construct of 'close'; her argument being that working in the social realm demands a particular role for the artist so that co-creation of artistic experience is possible. She conceptualised her inquiry as a journey of exploration. Early on in the research (as part of a wide ranging literature review) she "stumbled across" the French cultural theorist and polymath Michel de Certeau.

His research and ideas in 'The Practices of Everyday Life' (1984, 1998) on the cultural logic and poetics within day to day living resonated with Heather's belief that art can be an integral part of people's lived experience. De Certeau tries to express our innate abilities of invention and resistance by developing theories, hypothesis and language. To do this he observes

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the minutiae of everyday activities such as shopping, walking, reading. His was not the “panoptic view” as Heather says, “looking down from the big theoretical towers”, rather an understanding from the ground – “real life, rubbing by, down below as pedestrians’. He draws from many different theoretical sources and his texts, she notes, can be poetically dense – “something of an odd ball in his field – itinerant, a collagist, incomplete”. As she read, she took De Certeau with her, into her projects with healthcare professionals, into discussions with other artists, into her writings. She kept him close by. He became her ‘critical’ and often difficult companion!

De Certeau’s ‘practical science of singularity’ has three priorities: orality (speaking practices), ordinary (making with, making do, bricolage), and operativity (creating a sense of self). Building on from this Heather developed a ‘tool’ – a matrix of three interdependent dimensions – the aesthetic, the ethical, the polemical - through which an artist might become sensitized to working with others in the everyday.



*Figure 2 A way of imagining practice
(Delday, 2006, adapted from de Certeau 1984, 1998)*

“He gave me this key” Heather says “ ... for making sense of art.” However, this only became real for her once a project participant spoke of the ‘freedom to play’ (the ethical), and when specific qualities within the three aspects were recognised by other artists in their practices. So a theoretical idea is given form and voice in practice. As Friedman remarks ‘Sound theory requires engagement with empirical reality’. (2005: 9)

Heather sums up her thoughts on theory:

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“To develop a critical practice through research the inquiry demands more than a reliance on critical theory. Arguably criticality is not above or beside practice but within it. Theory does not provide the truth of the work and the work does not illustrate theory. At best theory and practice give mutual inspiration.”
(Foreword, PhD thesis, 2006)

For Heather, theory – through her encounter with a ‘critical companion’ - dynamically shaped her journey of inquiry, and provided the basis for generating a meaningful tool for artists to better understand ‘close’ working with others.

4.3 Underlying and reflexive

I want to briefly return to ‘thesis’ as ‘argument’ – a proposition, an underlying idea - substantiated by evidence derived from the rigorous use of appropriate research methods. Research involving practice will usually have developed different kinds of evidence in different media. The logical consequence of this is that the thesis could comprise a number of components such as a body of practice (for example art/design works, performance), a text (contextualising the inquiry, describing methodology, analysing the outcomes, and discussing implications), and other supporting/complementary evidence. My colleague Anne Douglas expresses very well the reflexive relationship of the elements of a PhD submission:

“The role of written to practical work within practice-led research does not fall neatly into two categories ... the two represent different aspects of a complex evolving process which is reflexive: the critical element of the work can be contained as much within a piece of work as in a written text and certainly the other way round.” (Douglas, in: Swift, 1997: 20).

So criticality can be sited both in creative work and complementary texts, enabling a convincing argument to be made through the most appropriate media, and integrating reflexively practice and theory.

5. Different ways of knowing - different ways of theory building?

In the literature and discourse it is clear that no one disputes the value of theory and its place within practice-led doctoral research. The relationship between action and reflection, doing and thinking, making and writing is considered mutually shaping and generative. Polarising practice and theory is not helpful. The challenging issue is how these two activities – and it might be more productive to see them as active and changing - *theorising* and *practicing* - how they might appropriately *be* in reflexive interaction for the making of a passionate, reasoned and coherent inquiry.

Even though this goal might be commonly agreed each study will be different – each requires a ‘tailored approach’ – one size does not fit all. There needs to be respect for different approaches to research, different ways of developing new understandings, yet underpinned by the agreed notion of critical inquiry through which the outcomes of the research progress from unique cases/experiences to shareable principles/concepts.

There are many interesting ‘post-positivistic’ approaches that acknowledge different ways of knowing, and different kinds of knowledges. We can develop deep understandings through what Schön (1983) called ‘knowing in action’ – “the characteristic mode of ordinary practical knowledge”. This kind of everyday knowing comes from being open to deep experiences of the world. Using artistic approaches and methods gives us experiential ways of knowing. We engage in ‘material thinking’ (Carter, 2005), we make sense through making, We learn through the senses - through the ‘thinking eye’ as Paul Klee suggests - coming to know a stone more by feeling it than reading about it; we come to know music by playing it and hearing it; we come to know a landscape by travelling in it, touching the ground, smelling the air. These are sensuous knowledges³. Postmodern forms of inquiry have opened up spaces for research that is responsive to particular contexts and communities. For example, culturally specific knowing and indigenous knowledge - Kaupapa Maori – as discussed in ‘Decolonizing Methodologies’ (Tuiwah Smith, 2002); and more controversially – ‘connected knowing’ – an overtly feminist position (Belenky *et al*, 1997) that values dialogue, relationship and empathy as central features of ‘women’s ways of knowing’.

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Such approaches all have something different to contribute to the idea of theory building which is an imaginative yet disciplined process that needs to be grounded in the specific research context. Varian (in Friedman, 2005) describes theory building as “showing how things work”, revealing the “essence of what’s going on.” These different ways of knowing can contribute to grounded theorising as an imaginative yet disciplined process, by focusing on the specificity of the research context and ‘lived experience’, acknowledging the shifting nature of knowledge. Today’s fact is tomorrow’s absurdity – like the earth is flat.

5.1 Rudders and compasses

He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards a ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.

Leonardo da Vinci

What are the implications of my paper for doctoral practice-led research? If a PhD is a reasoned and passionate inquiry, that can bring to bear compassionate and ethical methodologies – what might this mean? From my own experience of research and supervision, and also informed by my discussions with Marshall and Delday, I offer the following considerations.

In framing doctoral study we might advise, as John Marshall does, ‘**know your practice**’. This presumes that doctoral students are already experienced practitioners with a good understanding of their **intellectual context**. This suggests that **theory should be rooted in the discipline** (both Friedman and Sullivan advocate this) – go to the existing key sources – artists’ writings and theoretical contributions, yet be open to ‘stumbling across’ **new sources beyond the discipline**, as in Heather’s case.

Through an interrogation of practice a sense of a **theoretical orientation** in for inquiry can be gained: at the levels of what can be known (ontology), your relationship to knowing and knowledge (epistemology), and therefore how to proceed (methodology). In artistic inquiry this is likely to be based in a **constructivist** belief that reality is a personal construction, as is knowledge; that the inquirer is immersed and involved; that methodology is emergent and responsive; and that **multiple perspectives** are brought to bear (Love, 2000: 265).

In undertaking the ‘active’, generative phase of inquiry we might advise that **specific projects** (designed to explicitly explore the research questions),

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allow **understandings** to **emerge ‘from the ground up’**. This generative phase includes **ongoing reflection in and on** practice through five key activities:

Regular **writing** (e.g. personal journals, project reports), and continuous **reading** both broadly (to provide background) and specifically – in depth – to build relationships, for example with ‘critical companions’, and ‘theoretical pillars’. This raises the question of what other kinds of grounded engagements with theory might be developed by the student. In reading you are exposed to different styles and language that help to develop your own ‘**creative and critical voice**’ in writing. The third activity is **networking** – directly connecting to the context and **being part of the developing discourse** – proposing new ideas, testing them out, finding a speaking voice. Fourthly, and perhaps the most underrated and difficult practice is that of **listening** – being attentive and respectful to others and their ideas. The formalisation of reflection and thinking is the fifth activity – regularly contributing to **debate and discussion in the field** through conference presentations, seminar events, expositions, journal papers, and so on, to challenge conventions and help **build new theory**. Leonardo’s idea that theory gives ‘devices’ for finding a route, avoiding drifting aimlessly, arriving at where you need to be, is useful in this generative phase of inquiry.

In completing doctoral study the **recounting of the inquiry** through the written text of the thesis enables tentative theoretical contributions to be clearly articulated. In the examination – the **viva voce** (literally ‘with living voice’) - the reflexive relationship between practice and theory can be discussed and actually demonstrated through, for example, an exposition of artworks, artefacts, and other evidence. Once validated the **post-doctoral** researcher has an obligation to communicate their new knowledge and understanding to the field thus contributing to its theorizing capacities by **being in theory**.

I would like to end with another quote from Paulo Freire that reinforces the complementarity of practice and theory, their capacity for bringing about change, and their essential humanity:

“... human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice” (1996: 106)

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Notes

¹ This merits much more discussion than is possible in this overview. I would urge that Sullivan's book is carefully read.

² I interviewed both (16 and 17 May 2007, captured by digital audio) using a schedule of questions that elicited their understanding about theory at Masters level, encounters with it through their doctoral studies, then finally asking what advice would they give to new students about encountering and negotiating theory in practice-led research.

³ A conferences series called *Sensuous Knowledge* is hosted by the National Academy of the Arts, Bergen, Norway. These important annual conferences develop discourse on artistic research. Visit http://www.khib.no/khib/ku_fou/konferanser_seminarer/sensuous_knowledge/sensuous_knowledge_2_aesthetic_practice_and_aesthetic_insight

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