

2025: Vol 6, Nr 1
doi: 10.24834/jotl.6.2.1496

WE'RE NOT ALL IN THE SAME BOAT: ON SUPERVISION IN THE FIELD OF CREATIVE WRITING

Martin Cathcart Frödén

School of Arts and Communication, K3: Faculty of Culture and Society, Culture unit, Malmö University,
Martin.cathcart-froden@mau.se

Abstract

This essay reflects on the ways that supervision in the field of Creative Writing comes with queries and situations that are at the moment perhaps unusual in other academic fields. Some of the aspects of supervision outlined here demand a multifaceted response from a supervisor, particularly in how the boundaries between private, personal, professional behaviour are negotiated and renegotiated on a continuous basis. The shifting sands of these relationships in text and in real life have to be seen as a reciprocal relationship where the student will want to set boundaries, the same as the supervisor. These are human interactions on many, often parallel, levels, best ameliorated by clear communication.

Keywords: Practice as research, artistic research, creative writing, supervision, role of supervisor, role of student, poetry, publication

Sammanfattning

Denna uppsats reflekterar över hur handledning inom området kreativt skrivande kan ställa frågor och innefatta situationer som för tillfället kanske är ovanliga inom andra akademiska områden. Vissa av de aspekter av handledning som beskrivs här kräver ett mångsidigt och komplicerat svar från en handledare, särskilt i hur gränserna mellan det privata, personliga, professionella förhandlas och omförhandlas på en kontinuerlig basis. Dessa relationers skiftande i text och i verkligheten kommer också att behöva ses som ett ömsesidigt förhållande där studenten kommer att vilja sätta gränser, på samma sätt som handledaren. Framför

Cathcart Frödén, Martin

allt annat är dessa mänskliga interaktioner som innebär en dialog på många, ofta parallella, nivåer, vilka alla bäst närs av tydlig kommunikation.

Nyckelord: Practice as research, konstnärlig forskning, kreativt skrivande, handledning, roll som handledare, roll som doktorand, poesi, publicering

Introduction

In this essay some issues of supervision in Creative Writing are outlined, firstly by a personal set of reflections, included to make the point clear, and secondly by a wider discussion. This essay as a whole is also informed by my experiences from Masters level supervision situations from two academic institutions in two different European countries, in this case Linnéuniversitetet, Sweden and the University of Glasgow, Scotland, as well as on-going work in my current role at Malmö University.

This essay contributes to the wider discussion of PhD education where Practice as Research (PaR) is used as a methodology within the field of Creative Writing. PaR is a comparably new way to approach the field, and the boundaries of PaR and Creative Writing are still to be set. These are perhaps impossible to set. However, this is not necessarily a problem, but rather contributes to an elastic and exciting field.

This essay should be seen as an exploration of the current state of PaR, and Creative Writing, and as a reflection on the boundaries between social and professional modes, and how these factors affect me in the role as supervisor.

Personal experience

.....

Grain orientation

The inherited skiff
Every year it warps a little more

I know he'll tell me this again
He's been drinking since long before we arrived

What he draws from his still
Will one day be mine

And now my ears are ringing from his ethanol
The stories about me as a child

Told to mouth-open new girlfriend
And we've only been here an hour or so

What he draws from his memory
Will one day be mine

And early in the morning
Among nettles and brambles

I will talk about this boat
And how it warps a little every year

.....

This might be an unusual way to start an essay. With this approach, I wanted to upset or trouble the way we speak about the private and the personal in a professional setting. Not because I am naturally inclined towards (over-)sharing, but because I know that these are the sort of interactions, and quandaries I face in my role as a supervisor, and this is the sort of material that I am interacting over. The work sample above is thus a way to clearly illustrate the sort of submissions that I as a supervisor am asked to work with.

What the grey zone between “private” and “personal” looks like is something that every individual, and in this essay, the supervisor and the student, will have to decide on themselves individually and in conversation over a project. However, it is important from the outset to take this zone into consideration. In my own writing, I feel that the private is material best not shared, and the personal is material that makes Creative Writing such a vibrant arena. It is something I encourage in writing. One term that is often used in my field is “significant detail.” When this personal, significant, touch is lacking in the material submitted it becomes flat and general. When it borders on too private, then the reading experience and the supervision work have a tendency to feel uncomfortable. Also, a very private text is difficult to offer feedback on, and this feedback can also be perceived as “sharper” and more “hurtful,” which is another aspect to consider in Creative Writing feedback work.

In supervising Creative Writing students using a PaR approach, a supervisor is likely to encounter writing based on personal experiences and relationships. What the PhD student is usually working towards is a portfolio of smaller pieces, perhaps prose, perhaps poems, perhaps a hybrid collection – alongside an exegesis and a theoretical discussion, depending on the project. The portfolio as a whole might be made up of a series of samples like the one above. When writing in prose the end product is often a monograph, but with separate parts of the art and the theory, again, depending on the project.

The creation of the material might stretch over five years, but the material will often be extracted from the full lifetime of the student/researcher. They will often unearth issues that I will be unable to cater to in my role as a supervisor. In casual conversation with my own PhD supervisor, we could agree that this is also an important aspect to recognize early in the supervision work. This is for the sake of the supervisor, but also for the student and their well-being. Having functioning support networks is a large part of a writing life and one that a supervisor cannot replace.

Christie and Garrote Jurado (2013) write “It is debatable whether or not it is a supervisor’s duty to provide emotional support. The relationship can become so personal that sometimes it is the student who provides such support.” Their research is from an engineering context, but they note: “[...] it would

be of interest to compare our results with another study that focused on supervision in the humanities,” and I can only agree with this.

I am not fully prepared, and definitely not formally trained to deal with material relating to for example rehab, relationships, death in the family, childhood trauma and more. My job will then be to signpost towards student health services and other organisations who are better equipped to deal with mental health issues, and counselling.

In a supervision context my efforts will of course include a mixture of timbres, including face-to-face discussions digital or not, and in texts with varying degrees of background information as the material comes to me. This is also a way to recognize and reflect on the fact of audience interaction, and supervisee interaction, with an awareness that I the supervisor am in a reciprocal relationship with the student, where they will hold a lot of knowledge that I don’t, and might never, possess. Again, this a wonderful side effect of an open field, and something to celebrate rather than shy away from.

It is likely also that I will encounter students who might be senior both in age and in writing experience. Using the self as an example – deciding on what to share, and what is helpful, what is showing off, what is self-deprecating – will, for both of us, become a way to navigate the feedback process.

So, I ask a reader to see the poem above as an example of what my past, current, and future work as a supervisor will entail. Not in the writing of the material in this case, but in the receiving and, in a sense, grading of it. To illustrate my point and to be sure that I am able to speak to both sides (sending and receiving), I here offer a self-analysis in three levels. In it, I move from the general via the private to the personal, and it is up to the reader to pick the level of comfort or interest. I have no intention of making a reader uncomfortable, nor am I particularly interested in laying my feelings bare, but the poem serves as an example of the fluid boundaries between areas of private, personal, and professional, as well as various levels of comfort which made it seem like a suitable example.

Onwards, and upwards then. Let’s talk poetry.

Negotiating proximity and distance

For the sake of clarity, I am both the creator and critic of the poem above. Pick your own level of comfort below, and don’t feel you have to read all three. This might also be a first, where you are actively encouraged to skip text in an essay. Choose your adventure:

1. This is a poem about a person who goes to see their father and his old boat. No rhymes.
2. This is a poem about me, in a made-up situation, where I tried to investigate the role of the aging boat, the aging man, the future in long and short terms, the situation where a stranger is invited into the family, and in this future the partner cannot help but think of the implications of a future with the young man who will one day be (like) the old man. This while playing on the use of alcohol, here stemming from a line, now deleted, which tells the reader that this is a crayfish party in August and everyone will have something to drink with their food.

3. This is a poem about me and my father. The situation is made up. My father's complicated relationship with alcohol, stemming from various things like his own father's relationship with drink, is not. My father is of a generation where feelings are best not discussed, though often hinted at, but only during manual labour – like fixing a boat – and where being self-made and independent is crucial to one's self-esteem.
4. The poem further deals with aging, mine and his, and my wife's, here in the guise of the new partner, which she is not anymore, but once was, and her eyes on him, and me, and my father's way of telling people more than they need to hear, and more than they want to hear, This involuntary audience often includes her and me and my siblings and others.
5. This is of course an infested situation, and not something I am entirely comfortable talking about, least of all with my father. My way of dealing with issues, small and large, is to write about them in fictitious settings, and this is one such example. (This is also the case of the lion's share of supervisees, I venture.)
6. The linework is meant to represent the planks as they move down from the gunwale to the keel and then back up again on the other side. Growing up me and my family spent time at sea, which is a happy time looking back at it. Possibly a happier time than the current state of the relationship I have with my father.

Here I will move away from the purely personal towards the more professional. As a possible point of interest, I was shortlisted for the Poet of the Year Competition hosted by the 2023 Canterbury Literary festival, on the back of this poem, which also means that it is included in an anthology (Canterbury Festival, 2023). Whether this makes the poem better, worse, or doesn't change it, is up to the reader.

Whether to include this last bit of information was something I swithered over, as it is an aspect that involves investigating the comfort levels for a reader (is the writer showing off?) and the writer (is this relevant for the discussion?) but should here also be seen as an echo of my own supervision interactions past, present, future, where students' previous publication history will colour the way new material is assessed, and where the aim is not always publication in a journal etc, but elsewhere and thus the goal posts perhaps different.

Publishing outside academia is also a major part of the discussions that will be had with a PhD student as PaR almost by default straddles the imagined divide between inside the walls and outside the walls of the academy.

The Canterbury publication where the poem will appear is neither ranked in an academic sense, nor will it appear in DiVA in any meaningful way. But being published in non-academic circles is important in Creative Writing. This non-academic achievement is viewed positively within academia, particularly in terms of research impact, and career progression.

These are but a few examples of the sort of issues that are legitimately part of the supervision process in the field of Creative writing. A process where it is central to make sure that the boundaries between subject matter and researcher, as well as between the personal and the private, etc, are continuously examined and renegotiated, again to make sure that the collaboration is as fruitful as possible between student and supervisor.

Practice as Research

To return slightly, or to move up one level perhaps, from the personal to the professional, I offer an overarching discussion, also as a way to situate Practice as Research within the humanities. PaR here is defined as academic research where creative practice is central to the methodology and often also to the research output (Barrett and Bolt, 2010). Such research projects centre practice as “a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (Nelson, 2022, p.9). As such, process is central to PaR, and such projects often take a non-linear and multi-modal line of inquiry.

PaR is a new and burgeoning approach, seen against a background of more established methodologies and when it comes to PhDs being awarded. How the terrain will look in the future is up to current practitioners. These practitioners might be found within the academy and might hold a vast array of academic positions and work in varied artistic fields. In addition, there are practitioners who move across the imagined boundaries of the academy and society. There are also practitioners who couldn't care less about the academy, but who nevertheless influence the way that art and research is done within the academy

What is central however when it comes to PaR in Creative Writing is that by default the PhD project is a personal project, in the texts submitted. The project will be a unique piece of work undertaken by every PhD student, which doesn't have to mean that it will be a private project, but it will differ greatly from the way that research is done in the sciences, at least in this aspect. The project will have been devised by the student, and the student will be the expert on the subject, regardless of whether this is for example a memoir, historical fiction, popular science, poetry, hybrid forms, etc. This carries with it a large part of vulnerability, in the sense of sharing one's creative ideas, which might feel daunting and exposing. As Henriksen et al remark, “Though the writing process can at times be exciting and thrilling, and at other times perhaps a little tedious and mundane, for some it also presents (more than) occasional encounters with one's own insecurities, shame and doubt.” (2021, p.561)

The supervisor is likely to have more expertise and perhaps experience in regard to the general process of writing, especially within an academic context. However, regardless of whether the subject of the research is distanced from the student in terms of private/personal/professional, there will still be overlaps between these imagined categories. The PaR project will have to balance the academic rigour required for a doctorate degree with the perhaps softer values that each student wishes to include (or exclude) in their project, and some of this balancing act will be evident in the supervision undertaken. On a deeper level, this intersection between academic and creative writing practices can also be seen as a site of epistemological inquiry, where positionality, lived experiences, and situated knowledges come to the fore in knowledge creation.

Brodin et al., (2021) note that in the humanities the general objective of education is to produce a generalist; that the purpose of the studies is personal maturity; that the doctoral thesis is a lifetime achievement; and that the driving force is the scholarly process. They contrast this with approaches more commonly found in STEM subjects, which are often more narrowly focused on specific tasks or problems, and are frequently carried out in research teams. This contrast provides valuable insights and a representation of the humanities which rings true to me and has been helpful in wider discussions with colleagues.

In general terms, I offer this discussion to show the importance of flexibility and showing each (PaR) PhD student the respect and attention they deserve. Some of this should also be viewed in the context of cross-disciplinary research, which is where I undertook my doctoral research (in my case spanning Creative Writing, Architecture and Criminology) and where I still am and prefer to be based, and where a lot of my students come from. An interdisciplinary form of research also enables the student to be the point of interest, the point of intersection, again questioning the hierarchy of knowledge and the relationship between student and supervisor.

Pedagogical quandaries

I propose that one of the differences between supervision in the contexts of PaR and for example, STEM is that in the field of Creative Writing, a student might be writing honestly and frankly about their personal issues, real or fictional, and it is for me to critique them both as pure text, removing myself from the personal/private, as well as in a sense providing the correct level of care. My job then is to anticipate to some degree the arrival of these situations or scenarios, and to ameliorate any ups and downs with good communication, making sure this is handled well in a trusted environment. Such encounters should be fruitful for the student and their dissertation, in that precise order, also to be able to build a good researcher and not 'just' a good piece of writing.

This will also involve being a guide for the student as they navigate the academic system. In my role I am the contact node for lots of "levels" of knowledge, all ensuring that the student develops. This includes supporting the student to hone their writing craft and to navigate administrative and bureaucratic requirements, as well as nurturing personal growth and career progression. The "craft" aspect of supervision in creative writing includes form, content, and process. Process, in particular, is an element that a student can take with them into their future, beyond the end point of the PhD journey.

In light of this, I would like to briefly talk about how important and difficult it is as a supervisor to also be vulnerable, and how this is not usually encouraged in academia. I believe that Creative Writing as a subject should be taught not only as a theoretical discipline, but that my own writing process, with the roller coaster it entails, should be something that is not a secret to the student. There are also political implications of interrogating academic, and other, structures and hierarchies, where vulnerability can be seen as a tool to fight the pressures to seek and protect status. This is perhaps a discussion that is difficult to have within a general discourse where we all strive to move up in our respective roles. In my role we often enter into discussions where a certain skeptical approach to the prevailing dominance of market capitalism is healthy, and this will also play a part in a wider discussion with supervisees in terms of publishing, and job opportunities, as well as in the act of performing 'art' in the wider sense.

Mika Hannula uses the concepts of “share, care and dare” (Hannula quoted in Gedin, 2015), where Brodin et al. (2021) comment, “The [group] seminar then involves putting one’s own research process into words and sharing them, caring about one’s own and other’s experiences, and daring to expose oneself in unknown territory, with all the risks that involve; for example when the collective does not understand an idea put forward.” This doesn’t have to exclude the supervisor in the room.

In supervision, and where appropriate, I am thus happy to share how difficult writing (of all kinds) can be, and how exhilarating it can also be, not always necessarily as an expert but as a fellow traveller on a writing journey.

This oftentimes includes a perspective that is the opposite of a me/them perspective that speaks about students as learners and supervisors as experts. This also means that I have to think about what hierarchies and preconceived assumptions look like in courses and at the university in general, and the PhD project in particular.

Concluding remarks

In this highly personal, fairly private, and somewhat professional essay I have endeavoured to outline PaR methodology, and how it may play out in a Creative Writing PhD. I have also tried to outline some of the responsibilities and joys of the supervisor within this area via concrete examples, both in text and from real life human interaction situations. I have tried to problematise and shine a light on what the role of supervisor, both in relation to a PhD project, as well as to the student themselves, might entail, also seen in terms of systemic hierarchies and “power.” I have also tried to map the opportunities, pitfalls, and possible flashpoints and fireworks to plan for, look out for, and celebrate, as well as shared some of myself.

References

- Barrett, E., Bolt, B., ed. (2010). *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. Paperback ed, London: Tauris.
- Brodin, E. (2021) *Doctoral Supervision: In Theory and Practice*, ed; Eva Brodin, Jitka Lindén, Anders Sonesson, and Åsa Lindberg-Sand, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Canterbury Festival. (2023). *Poet of the Year Anthology*. Canterbury
- Christie, M., Garrote Jurado, R. (2013) Using Communicative Action Theory to Analyse Relationships Between Supervisors and PhD Students in a Technical University in Sweden. *Högre Utbildning* 3, no. 3
- Gedin, A. (2015). *Tumregler, fruktbarhet och lojalitetskonflikter*. In H. Frisk, K. Johansson & Å Lindberg-Sand (eds.) *Acts of creation: Thoughts on artistic research supervision*. Höör: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag, Sympoison
- Henriksen, L., Kjær, K. M., Blønd, M., Cohn, M., Cakici, B., Douglas-Jones, R., Ferreira, P., Feshak, V., Gahoonia, S. K., & Sandbukt, S. (2021). Writing bodies and bodies of text: Thinking vulnerability through monsters. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12782>
- Nelson, R. (2022). *Practice as research in the arts (and beyond): Principles, processes, contexts, achievements*. Springer Nature.