



What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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Research, Practice and Activism: Doctoral research as a space for doing social impact jobs that don't exist yet.

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the experience of a mid-career designer undertaking doctoral research to develop social design practice. By discussing three reflective accounts of working with community organisations as a doctoral student, the paper presents four ways that the doctoral research process is structuring these relationships. The reflections are situated within definitions of research, practice and activism that critically reflect on academic roles in the neo-liberal university, understanding social impact as embedded across professional, academic and social life. The reflections offer an account of how doctoral research provides space to develop new practices for achieving social impact through design, in collaboration with community organisations, and ways that the doctoral research process is shaping these working relationships. Where the professional pathways for such practice are currently unclear, in this instance the experience of doing doctoral research is contributing to the development of both personal and organisational capacity to define new roles.

Keywords: Social Design, Practice-led, Doctoral research, Community, Activism

1. Introduction

I currently describe my practise as 'social design' – using design methods to work on social and environmental projects with communities. I design tools for community engagement with a focus on tools that utilise collaborative making. The roots of this practice are in wanting to do a job that didn't exist when I graduated from my degree in design in the early 2000s. Calls for designers to address complex social and environmental issues appeared in design literature, for example Manzini and Jegou (2004), Thackara (2005) and Chapman and Gant (2007), but the opportunities to do this work in practice were difficult to find. Inspired by these ideas of what my career in design could be, I

looked to design research as a vehicle for developing a personal creative practise and contributing to the establishment of social design as a professional field. As the 'call for participation' for EAD2023 states there is still work to do – “the value of design research is not often understood by organisations that could benefit from it”.

This paper offers three short reflective accounts of professional relationships with community organisations as part of my current doctoral research project. Through reflecting on these experiences this paper proposes four ways that the doctoral research process is structuring the relationships with these community organisations. The paper concludes by discussing this specific experience of doctoral research as a potential model for other non-traditional doctoral candidates to explore design research as a space for developing new professional practices.

2. Approach and theoretical context

2.1 Approach

The approach of this paper is to document reflective accounts of relationships with community organisations in a practice-led design research doctoral project.

This research is part of a doctoral research project at a UK based university. The title of the research project is 'Place in social design: Surfacing and working with characteristics of place in social design'. The aim of the research is to develop a 'place-based approach' to social design practice. This is structured through two phases of practice-led research. Phase 1 uses Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) to combine learning from a set of interviews with other social designers with insights from literature and practical experiences to propose a 'place-based' approach to social design. Phase 2 develops this approach through 'practice explorations' implementing the 'place-based' approach in 2 projects that are recorded through reflective practice. Social design is defined as “participatory approaches to researching, generating and realising new ways to make change happen towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial objectives” (Armstrong et al. 2014:15). As such, achieving social impact is a core purpose of the practice and research.

2.2 Social Impact, research, practice and activism

To provide a theoretical context for these reflective accounts, this section provides a definition of social impact and its significance in the current UK higher education context. Following on from this, social impact as it is understood in the university determines the role of university researchers as activists and acknowledges blurred boundaries between work and social life. This in turn shapes definitions of research and practice and the distinction, or difficulties in distinguishing between, research and practice. These entangled identities and definitions are illustrated in the reflective accounts of working with community organisations.

The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) defines social impact as “the net effect of an activity on a community and the well-being of individuals and families” (CSI n.d.). The United Nations (UN) 2015 Sustainable Development Goals set out 17 strategic goals to end extreme poverty, reduce inequality and protect the planet. These internationally recognised goals set out a framework for the remit of social impact work including goals for health and well-being, sustainability, education, innovation, and responsible production and consumption, amongst others.

Social impact has increased in significance for universities since the late 1990s due to the introduction of impact as a measure of research quality. In the UK this was introduced through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) system of measuring university research where research

impact is described as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (REF 2011). Smith et al. (2020) place the rise of research impact into a longer history of the relationship between the university and government. They describe concerns about the lack of research evidence contributing to policy, and political demands for demonstration of value for money of public investment in university research. Whilst the ambitions of the research impact agenda are difficult to argue with – of course university researchers should be making a positive impact within society – the mechanisms through which the impact agenda manifests in UK universities is criticised for threatening the criticality and independence of university research (Watermeyer 2016) and the autonomy of university researchers (Harris, 2005).

Both the aspirations for social impact and the protectiveness of autonomy speak to older debates about the purpose of universities and the roots of what research and practice are. One way that this debate has been explored is through the idea of the academic as activist. Martin (2009) describes academic activism as issuing from the ‘often reductive contrast between theory and practice, thinking and doing’. Important in this paper is understanding academic activism as a framing for the fluid, interconnectedness of research and practice through the professional and social life of the researcher, something that Harris (2005) explicitly links to neo-liberal modes of governance. Maxey (1999) questions the usefulness of the boundaries of academia and activism and proposes that “engaging critically and reflexively with our research, and all aspects of our lives” (p.206) has the potential to empower us all to do what we can from where we are. This idea resonates with the approach to practice-led research in this project.

A fluid approach to research embedded in professional and social life presents a challenge in relation to demarcating the boundaries of the doctoral research project. As a starting point the following analysis of relationships between practice and research in design research literature has clarified the role of practice in the production of the thesis. Literature drawn upon includes design research methodologies and examples of design research projects, including but not limited to: Candy (2006), Frayling (1993), Godin and Zaheni (2014), Koskinen et al. (2011), Laurel (2004), Smith and Dean (2009).

Table 1. Definitions of practice and research relationships in design research literature.

Term	Definition
Practice-based research	New knowledge is created through design practice and research methods, and understanding can only be obtained by engaging with both the creative practice and language-based research outcomes.
Practice-led research	New knowledge is created through design practice as part of research methods, and understanding can be obtained by engaging with the language-based research outcomes only, but accounts of practice are included as an integral part of the research methods.
Research through design	Design practice is the vehicle for undertaking research, new knowledge is created through a design project / projects. Understanding of the research can be gained through engagement with the creative practice outcomes and / the language-based outcomes.

These definitions frame the conceptual boundaries of the research in this doctoral project in the context of embeddedness of the doctoral research in an ongoing social design practice and research career. However, reflections generated through this paper have raised a question of whether these definitions continue to reinforce the distinction between practice and research, rather than fully capture the nuance of the actual research relationships. Routledge (1996) explores the potential of a third space 'between and within' activism and academia to create something else, and perhaps the doctoral research space for designers could be a third space for working between and within research and practice.

3. Reflective accounts of working with community organisations as a doctoral student

Within this context of identifying as an activist academic, and articulating implications of this for blurring of boundaries between work and social life, and between research and practice, the following accounts document my working relationships with three community organisations as part of my doctoral research. These will be analysed in the discussion section that follows.

These three organisations have been selected as current collaborations that are part of my doctoral research. Each account includes a short description of the organisation followed by a reflective account of how I am working with the organisation as a design researcher.

3.1 Space2

Organisation website: <https://space2.org.uk/>

Space2 is an arts and social change charity based in Leeds, UK. Space2 describe themselves as 'working creatively with communities to develop a thriving, hopeful and sustainable future together'. They co-produce creative projects to deliver a range of social and health related outcomes.

My first contact with Space2 was around 2010 when I was introduced to them via a design research colleague (who was also a volunteer trustee) because they were interested in working with an academic to do evaluation work. The conversation developed and in 2012 I worked in partnership with them on a Research Council funded project based on their community food growing projects (Author ref). I had also worked with another volunteer trustee through a separate design research project (Author ref), and in 2015 I was invited to become a trustee myself and have been a member of the Board since then.

Space2 delivers a portfolio of community work and has a longstanding interest in design and research, including recognising on their website a commitment to working with universities on research projects. I am one of several university researchers that has an ongoing relationship with the charity, including the design research colleague who introduced me to Space2. Space2 is not explicitly included as a formal part of my doctoral research, but the subject of the research is very close to the work that Space2 does. I have had conversations with the trustees and management of the charity throughout working on my doctoral project. Future work through Space2 is a potential forum for the application of my doctoral research outcomes.

Reflection:

My relationship with Space2 has been shaped by the interest of the CEOs (and therefore the charity) in university research, and in participating in university research, and my interest in their creative practice. In past trustee meetings my expertise in university research has been part of strategic conversations about the organisation. Design research skills have been applied in facilitating creative visioning workshops and activities. I have shared academic research with the charity staff, and

instigated connections between the charity and other academics. As a trustee I have also contributed a wide range of other work, most recently drafting a new Equality and Diversity policy for the charity. The relationship with this organisation feels like an ongoing two-way exchange where both the charity and I have mutual interests and a commitment to making a social impact in the communities we are working with. Whilst my work with this charity is not specifically part of my doctoral research, the experiences I have had while working with them has strongly informed the development of my research focus.

3.2 South Bank Studios

Organisation website: <https://www.southbankstudios.co.uk/>

South Bank Studios is a group of artists studios set up in 2018 in a Methodist church building in York, UK. The studio was set up to help to support the maintenance of a large community building that houses a church and several community spaces. As with many churches in the UK, the congregation is ageing and reducing in numbers, and therefore struggling to maintain the costs of running the building. The studios have been set up in a bid to avoid needing to sell the building, or part of the building, due to unmanageable running and maintenance costs.

I joined the artists community in 2019 when I started to rent a small studio space. My primary interest in joining the studios was a practical one – to access a dedicated creative workspace, but through the conversations about the ambitions of the studios to support development of a creative community I quickly became involved more in the community development work. I am not a church member but I felt an affinity with the church community because of a family history of Methodism – particularly through my paternal grandparents who were heavily involved in the Methodist church and my grandmother started an annual art exhibition at her Methodist church that ran for over 50 years. Both my 'family' church where my grandparents were members, and the church in the village that I grew up in have been sold, de-consecrated and taken out of community use. This has heightened my awareness of the threat of losing such buildings from community use, and I recognise that once lost we will never regain such a significant community space.

Reflection:

My work at South Bank Studios is very much embedded in my wider professional life as my studio space is there. It has become both a physical and institutional home. I have become involved in a wide variety of activities there including organising volunteers for the community garden and being a treasurer for the studios community group. South Bank Studios is the site of one of the 'practice explorations' in my doctoral research, as well as being one of the networks through which I have recruited research participants for the Phase 1 research interviews. Because of my ongoing relationship with the studios that extends far beyond the research project I have been careful in thinking about the ethics and practicalities of defining which parts of my work there are part of the doctoral project and which are not. I use my research journal to record my experiences in the studios but have a constant inner debate about what is and isn't included in the research. The social impact of this work is constantly evolving as conversations develop and I find new ways to contribute to the studios themselves and to other projects and groups associated with the studios and buildings. It feels intuitive and organic, and I am deeply invested in working with this community regardless of the connection to my research project.

3.3 Chilli Studios

Organisation website: <https://www.chillistudios.co.uk/>

Chilli Studios is an arts and mental health charity based in Newcastle, UK. Set up in 2004, Chilli Studios supports people who are experiencing mental health problems, and those who experience other forms of social exclusion within their communities, through the provision of creative workshops and artists studios.

Chilli Studios are a charity that I have encountered through personal networks and that I recognised as a potential research partner because of their proximity to the university where I am undertaking my doctoral research. I approached the charity in 2021 and am working with them to support a project as part of the 'practice explorations' part of my doctoral research.

Reflection:

My relationship with Chilli Studios is newer than relationships with other organisations, and is solely focussed on working with them as part of my doctoral research project, and only in Phase 2 – as a 'practice exploration'. I have had multiple conversations with one of the staff members at the charity, and have been to visit the studios to meet other staff and studio members. In these conversations I have been very aware that all of the interactions I am having are shaping the potential research project. I am also aware that the timescales of my doctoral project are determining my availability to the charity in a way that I have not experienced in the ongoing relationships with organisations. This is a conscious decision as part of the research methodology to be able to reflect on the experiences of a project where I am more thoroughly embedded in the organisation (in South Bank Studios) and a more distanced relationship where I am just working on one project (with Chilli Studios). I have concerns that the communication has been too sparse or too slow with this charity, and I worry that the connection feels more fragile. In the past I have worked in a similar way with other organisations but on funded research projects. One experience comes to mind where the initial research relationship was established with a member of staff who had moved on to a different job. When we went to discuss the research project and make arrangements to do the planned activities with the new member of staff, we found out later that at that point the community partner had planned to withdraw from the project, until they realised that there was funding attached to it and that they would be paid for their involvement. In a doctoral research project what I can offer is in-kind support in the form of my work for the charity, and a small amount of expenses money to pay for materials, but I'm very much dependent on the good will of the charity and on my ability to persuade them that it's worth their time to allow me in to work with their participants. On the other hand I do feel like I have much more autonomy and freedom to develop a project with them that has not been pre-defined in a research funding bid. It does need to meet the requirements for my research project, but there is also some flexibility for the project to evolve in ways that are not always feasible in funded research projects or projects funded by grant applications where the project has been pre-determined in a grant application.

4. Discussion and conclusion

4.1 Discussion: how the doctoral research process is structuring relationships with community organisations

Reflecting upon these relationships with community organisations, this section proposes four ways that the doctoral research process is structuring these relationships, and the implications of this for developing new practices for achieving social impact through design research.

Firstly, the demands of doctoral research to define practice and research. My experience of the doctoral research process has been that the formal monitoring and examination of the PhD in

progress has emphasised the need to define the relationship between practice and research, for example through the Proposal and Progression documents and vivas. Design practice is both the subject of my research and part of the research methods. Conducting this research mid-career as part of ongoing professional interests and within existing professional networks requires a flexibility of research and practice processes which have been difficult to identify in literature that predominantly prioritises a clear demarcation between research and practice. However the doctoral process in design research seems to be flexible enough to adapt to innovation in both the content of research and in methods and approaches.

Secondly, the limited time and scope of doctoral research. As a three-year project doctoral research seems long in relation to many design projects, however the timescales of conducting research have felt limiting and impose a rhythm to communication and partnership working that feels very different to other experiences. In that I include both funded research projects working with communities, and community projects undertaken with no research element. This has been more noticeable in the relationship that is more closely linked to the doctoral research as the research timeline has had more of an impact than in ongoing professional relationships. The scope of the doctoral research also affects the development of projects. Doctoral research is very focussed, and at the same time has the flexibility for that focus to shift as the project develops. My experience of this has been that the research focus has felt peculiarly personal – the doctoral project is the first time that I have been the sole director of the research or project focus.

Thirdly, the structure of the university research ethics approval system has created its own boundaries between research that can't be undertaken before applying for ethical approval, and research that is needed to determine what that research will be. I have needed to consider what to apply for ethical approval for, and when. I have also had conversations with my supervisors about the level of specificity of the ethics approval documents – including enough information to have good ethical practice in place, but with enough openness for projects to evolve without needing lots of revisions to the proposal. As a doctoral candidate I feel relatively disempowered in negotiating the ethics system, and that it imposes artificial restrictions on the relationship building process with community organisations. My experience of ethics approval systems for funded research is that the funding proposal needs to be much more comprehensively planned and therefore the need for ethics approval is clear from the beginning. In a research plan that includes the development of projects with community partners through the process of research, the ethics approval process is trickier to navigate. Banks et al. (2013) address this in recognising the limitations of university ethics procedures in relation to community based participatory research and suggest that character- and relationship-based approaches to ethics are more appropriate in that context.

Finally, as a doctoral student I have felt a pressure to identify a specific documented research method in a way that has felt more restrictive than working in other research contexts. Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2021) provides a structure for bringing personal experience into the research data, which has felt flexible enough. However, there is scope within design research to develop these kinds of recognised research approaches that can accommodate the fluid relationships of practice and research.

4.2 Conclusions

Going back to my graduate ambitions of wanting to do a job that didn't exist, doctoral design research has been, for me, a space for bringing a practice into existence. Working with these community organisations on my doctoral research has increased both my own capacity and the capacity of organisations that I work with to understand social design and design research.

This approach to research requires a high level of personal curiosity and motivation to engage with a subject that operates over the boundaries of work, study, and social life. Evidence of this in the recruitment process for doctoral research is in the requirement for a personal statement as well as a research proposal to explain how the research focus fits with experience and interests of the researcher. Volunteering as a charity trustee or a community gardener might be considered part of my social rather than professional life, but definitely contributes both to my preparedness for doctoral research, and as vehicles for the social impact of my research.

Identifying doctoral research as a way for people to build on a portfolio of professional, intellectual and social interests could help to connect and amplify the social impact of people already operating in these spaces. This opens opportunities for universities to engage people in doctoral research from potentially non-traditional academic backgrounds. Working for social change organisations is very typical in my family, but I am the first to explore that through working in academia. I am the first generation in my family to access higher education and the only member of my family to have completed an undergraduate degree and graduate qualifications.

The danger of this entangled approach is the commodification of university community relationships and the exploitation of postgraduates to foster relationships for wider financial and strategic gain. In a recent meeting with a number of charity workers who have worked in partnership with universities it was made clear that the experience has been very mixed in terms of the perceived and tangible benefits to the community partners – some had felt very well compensated and that the work was shared and worthwhile, whereas others felt that had been over burdened with requests to work with universities will little benefit to the community organisations. In the middle of these mixed experiences are the researchers themselves. From experience of this in the UK context, the burden of maintaining these relationships often falls on junior and temporary staff whereas the leaders of the research projects reap the greatest rewards through research funding and publications. Extensive work has been done on ethical relationships between universities and community partners (Banks and Manners 2012), but more work is needed on the ethical issues raised by this kind of research for postgraduate students and early career researchers, as discussed by Enright and Facer (2017) and Graham et al. (2019). Despite these dangers, I am optimistic that doctoral research in design is a productive space for moving my own practice forward. Through this paper I offer this personal reflection in the hope that it may inspire other non-traditional potential doctoral students to recognise an opportunity to develop both creative practice and research culture.

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