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Theory-Based or Practice-Based Research – What’s the Difference?
Carsten Friberg

1. My intention with the title is not to deny there is a difference between working from a theoretical perspective or to do practise-based research. My idea is rather to say I view the difference to be much less problematic than is often the impression one gets from the debates about practise-based research¹. Or to express it emphatically: In principle there is no difference in what qualifies the different forms of research as research, they only differ in their subject of research.

In the following I will focus on what I prefer to call the virtues of doing research. By virtues I understand some rules one must respect; rules that are shared by all the members of the research community despite the differences in the specific fields of research. This may sound similar to what is called methodologies but an important difference must be emphasized. Virtues are a set of norms shared by a community, in this case the research community; they establish what is expected to be the right conduct within this community. Methods are either more narrowly defined set of rules applied to specific cases or a reflection on the direction one has followed through the field of research and what reason one has had for the direction taken.

For a beginning I should briefly state what I mean by theory-based research. I believe it to be an unfortunate name only chosen for practical reasons. It covers all forms of research that are not practise-based. Such a broad category hardly makes much sense and is only chosen because, within practise-based research, there often is an idea of the research done to be defined in opposition to theory-based work.

I believe this to be a false approach. It defines practise-based research in opposition to an idea of existing forms of research within academia – an idea which is mostly an invention based on prejudices about what traditional research is. The opposition is meant for creating a space for doing practise-based research without the limits felt to be imposed on one from the traditional research. This is though, more of a free invention than it is really the case thus not helpful for characterizing the practice-based research².

The legitimacy of traditional research is not constituted by the literary character of the work as little as by the amount of theoretical literature, models and speculations. It is the quality of how the research is carried out that is crucial. It is in this sense I wish to ask ›what is the difference‹ because

¹ I will use practise-based research as the name for an approach to research also known as practise-led research, artistic research, research through or by design. The different names put emphasis on different aspects, but they are, to my opinion, just different names for the same set of questions – though this may be disputable.
² Elsewhere I have discussed this (Friberg 2010).
I do not see much difference in what qualifies the different forms of research as research, only in the actual style of performing the research and of course, in the content. What I here, as a long introduction, perhaps make sound like a liberal approach to research I now have to qualify. First, I will narrow it by focusing on the Ph.D. as a special case of doing research; secondly, I will qualify what I mean about the virtues of doing research and by that, hopefully, open up the case again.

2. Within the field of research the Ph.D. is a certain academic genre. What one is expected to demonstrate through the Ph.D. is the ability to do research. One is supposed to demonstrate the acquisition of and ability to master the virtues that qualifies to the membership of the research community.

A first impulse is here to say this puts some restrictions on which form the work can have as well as to how it is performed in order to demonstrate that one masters the virtues. A response to this impulse is to confirm the restrictions. One has to make explicit the techniques performed in research. It is not enough to be aware of what one does if it is not made explicit for the evaluating committee that should not be left in doubt to whether the performed actions are deliberately done or a result of some fortunate but accidental choices.

I think it will be difficult to accept a Ph.D. that cannot explicitly state a research question, a motivation for it – both for why the candidate takes and interest in it and also for why anyone occupied with similar matters should find it of interest –, a relation to relevant context thus also demonstrating knowledge of state of the art of the research, an argumentation for the assumptions, the relations between the elements, the progression in thoughts etc.

This does not say anything about the format of these elements, nor can it be a guideline for making the Ph.D. stating that one should begin with a research question and arrange everything strictly for at the end to arrive at a conclusion to the stated question(s). The process is no linear journey from the beginning to the end. The question, or more often questions, asked at the beginning may undergo several revisions during the work; they will most likely be restated, challenged, changed, opened up, narrowed, dismissed etc. several times. The legitimacy of the Ph.D. is not depending on one single and well defined research question but on how questions are handled. One could even ask if we sometimes should begin with an answer and then work towards the best question. This is not to suggest a simple opposition to traditional research, but, because of the character of questioning, to see it as a complementary, or we could perhaps call it dialectic opposition (Dombois 2006: 28).

When someone is granted the possibility to make a Ph.D. it is because others have confidence in the candidate’s ability to fulfil it; and this is not simply established through the clearness and originality of the research question but through many different aspects of the application. It is often also read between the lines. The evaluation of the Ph.D. however, is very much depending on
whether one can give an account of the different steps in the dissertation. Still many things will be read between the lines, for instance how the order of the different elements is arranged; but the lines need to be there.

The restrictions to the possible formats of the Ph.D. are related to this: to the ability of the evaluating committee to follow (and approve) the steps taken. No form of research is here characterized by a simple straightforward and linear process – in that case the work could simply be entrusted a profession of academic civil service. Research is to »search or investigate exhaustively« (Merriam-Webster's 1993: 995) in which observations, experiments, critical scrutinizing and questioning take place. We cannot expect to know the answer beforehand – our knowledge cannot be said to be exhaustively in many, if any, field – nor can we expect to know the way to go when we set out on the journey of research as things appear along the way, things we need to take into consideration and perhaps follow in new directions. This is not different whether we talk about the investigation of sources for a specific historic event, the possible function of an enzyme or any kind of artistic, architectural or designerly research.

The evaluation of the Ph.D. is based very much on the story told about the journey of the research. The story should be an invitation from the candidate to be looked over the shoulders during the work, when account is given of the choices made, directions taken, things omitted and included etc. This is perhaps, where research differs mostly from a creative or artistic process where one cannot be expected to put forward openly everything done. However, a small modification to the ideal of openness will be needed. There will usually be a difference between the ideals of research and the reality of performed actions; even in research reality does not comply with the expectations of ideals. And even in research the story about the work done will contain a certain amount of post rationalizing. Not everything should be told. The Ph.D. is also about communicating a certain affair to an audience with specific expectations, and it is wisely to take bearings after these. It is not everything done that has been to the benefit of the work, and though errors can be an important part of a research process it sometimes serves us better to keep a low profile on some of the errors we make.

Talking about the technique and the importance of the communication to the evaluating committee is to draw on an old and established conceptual scheme. Technique – or techne in its Greek origin, which is often translated to art or skill – is knowledge about how to translate an idea to a specific product. To possess a technique is to know how something is produced; it is knowledge demonstrated through the production, through the producing action. The craftsman knows how to produce, for instance, a chair by doing it, not by talking about the construction of chairs or writing an essay about chairs. But important is also to say, with Plato, that the user is the judge about the product, and about the quality of the technique (Rep. 601c). Producing a chair is one thing, producing a good chair another. We can thus add to the characterization above that
technique is to know and be able to translate an idea into a specific product that fulfils its purpose in a specific context.

Anyone familiar with Plato also knows he had a debate with the sophists, the spin doctors and media advisors of the Greek city state. An important criticism is that the art they exercise is not a true techne; it is only a habitue because it does not provide or transmit real insight and knowledge but only generates pleasure (Gorg. 462c). We can draw a parallel saying that the production of a Ph.D. requires the technique of doing research which should not be confused with what only has a similarity like performing something one expects to be research because it looks similar to what can be found in the traditional academic fields: References to theoretical literature, some philosophical names, a section about theory and method explaining the standard text book introduction to well known positions, or perhaps making the statement about doing research by design or something similar.

The habitue of the sophists is one that produces pleasure, meaning it does not produce the intended knowledge among the audience. The political argumentation, for instance, does not provide the audience with true arguments, it only pleases the audience because they are having their prejudices and preconceived opinions confirmed which is not what a true political debate is about. Similar, the student who lacks the technique can hope to please those with a problematic or false idea of research, but not the research community and its censors. As Plato reminds us, the users are the authority to whether the product is well made or not; and talking about the PhD the evaluating committee is a user, and a user that is, hopefully, not taken in by an academic sophistic performance.

This said, as my response to the first impulse of restricting the Ph.D., I also believe there are many ways to perform research that can and must be acknowledged.

One obvious issue to rise in relation to this concerns the evaluating committee. They will have expectations on behalf of the research community, but they will also have expectations related to their background which constitutes a specific community one must perform the research in relation to. The different fields of research have different ways of performing their work and must expect material relevant in their context. Diagrams and models of different kinds are not only illustrations and overviews but also integrated elements in displaying something and arguing for it (cf. Gilbert 1998). And this is not restricted to an artistic context. A delightful and elucidating example from chemistry touches upon how »...the chemists’ necessity to move simultaneously in macroscopic and microscopic worlds forces chemists to use a mixture of symbolic and iconic representation of compounds/molecules« (Hoffmann 2002: 43).

3 Hoffmann’s article is a plaidoyer for a better style in academic writing. »I love this complex molecular science. I know that its richness was created by human beings. So I’m unhappy to see their humanity suppressed in the way they express themselves in print. ... One danger, specific to the scientific article, is that by dehumanizing our mode of communication, by removing emotion, motivation, the occasionally
In the context of architecture one would expect, then, to find drawings and models as an integrated part of the Ph.D. Not simply to illustrate and show something, but also to reason with. The drawing process is also very often an intellectual operation, an act of understanding, so there is in principle no difference between the architectural drawing, the drawings for engineering, chemistry, physics or any other discipline. One has to move through the process to understand – to read the diagrams, drawings and texts. Of course, not everybody can understand the drawing, not simply by looking at it; it may require knowledge of the process in the drawing to understand. But this is no different from seeing the formulas in biochemistry or mathematics.

One can be met with the expectation from the layman that drawing is something anyone can do – of course not anyone as good as others – thus it is not considered to be a language of its own like the mathematical or chemical formula. But this is a false assumption, just like the complaint of Hegel that anybody believe they can do philosophy without learning it because they possess the standard of doing so in their natural reason; but they do not believe, given leather and needle and using their fingers, that they can produce a shoe though they likewise possess the standard for making shoe in their foot (Hegel 1807/1988: 49).

Though I began with saying the Ph.D. is a certain academic genre that the candidate has to subject to I also hope now to have opened up for the diversity of formats. The context determines what is appropriate for a Ph.D. in architecture and design as well as the possibility of evaluating the work because it performs the technique that is to be expected. This addresses general matters like stating what is the case, why it is of interest, how it is related to relevant discussions, how it should be treated, but it also concerns what will be the appropriate formats of dissemination as well as what will be recognized as the best form of demonstrating and arguing. Where the chemist will expect formulas and drawings the architect and designer may just as well expect drawings and models.

3. The intention with the latter comment was to open up for the possible different formats of the Ph.D. in architecture and design. I wish to elaborate on this and also come back to my assumption about the lack of difference between practice-based and theory-based research. If a certain technique is required and this technique has to be practiced, I believe we must also say the work is carried out in a certain spirit. I also believe this is what is really crucial for evaluating the work done. The difficult part is not to learn the different rules that regulate the Ph.D.; the craft of doing research can to a large degree be enlisted and at least be the content of courses for a doctoral education. The difficult part is to exercise them and to choose rightly among the different possible and perhaps necessary rules in a specific situation.
My reason for taking this perspective is to oppose the false assumption that the matter is settled by declaring one's membership to a specific theory or one's affection for a method. Very little is said by the declaration of doing research through or by design – not to mention the lack of consensus to categorization of the different approaches to research and the use of almost every preposition between research and design\(^4\). What is crucial is to give a more detailed account of what the work done consists of and how it is performed in one's own research.

The performance is crucial as I believe research to be much more about an attitude and a way of approaching a specific activity rather than about submitting oneself to following specific rules. Now, there is nothing wrong about rules and methods, what I above called a way of approaching is actually what methods means and below I will talk about rules of conduct. My reservation is to the belief in rules and methods that sometimes steals the picture and become a simple naming of the methods at the price of reflections on what is done.

Following a rule is only half the story; the other half is when to apply it. When to apply a specific rule is something for which there for obvious reasons do not exist yet another rule. One has to depend on experiences, sensibility for the specific situation and sound reasoning – what we call judgement. Our faculty of judgement is based on having experiences; while we cannot know when to apply a rule to a specific situation by consulting a manual for using rules we have to reflect on it meaning we look into our experiences to see if we can find situations similar to the one, we are facing. What has a similarity may probably be the best choice in the present situation, for a start at least.

Again, it is not the concrete rule one has used that qualifies the research done in the Ph.D., but the actual choices made. When playing a game we know the many rules constituting the game but not how to play it – the king has a higher value than the knight, but the situation may not be the right one to play the king as an example.

The faculty of judgement, sometimes also called the practical reason, draws attention to the performance of the action. We can again rely on a long tradition using the concepts in a specific way. While technique is practical as well it differs from judgement in being performed for an end external to the action: the product. The practical reason is concerned with the action itself: what matters is whether the action is good or bad (Aristotle Eth. Nic. VI, 4-5). This makes it clear that by talking about virtues I wish to emphasize the importance of the way the work is done and not the specific parts of it. We can – and will – discuss the parts, how they are treated, their relevance and

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\(^4\) An important reference is here Frayling 1993 who introduces the three forms of research by the names research into/through/for art and design (1993: 5). The article is often thought to be obscure on these three categories which may be due to the fact that Frayling’s main focus is to address the stereotypes of what research is. Highly recommended is Archer 1995 who discuss the categorization now by the names research about/for the purposes of/through practice and not exclusively similar to Frayling. Also Borgdorff 2006 should be mentioned for his debate on research on/for/in the arts.
potentiality for the context, the use of theories and references etc.; but again it is not what makes the Ph.D. a good Ph.D. in the sense that it qualifies to become a member of the research community. It is why and how they are made the parts constituting the Ph.D., i.e. it is the candidate's ability to perform the work. The acceptance is not a matter of a mysterious consecration, one of the most fundamental rules for research is the transparency. This is a matter of explaining; of making the steps, reasons, material, sources of knowledge and inspiration explicit. It is also to be able to disseminate in a proper, argumentative and explicit way to the relevant group of people whom one wish to convince about the importance and relevance of the research. And to choose the proper means of dissemination that lives up to the required transparency as well as to be in the right format and material for the Ph.D. This is, again, not a matter of theory or practice; it is not a matter of making investigations in or experiments with literary interpretations, molecules, social group’s patterns of behaviour or qualities of building materials, planning and organising modern housing and landscapes, investigating computer aided drawing, etc.

Does this bring us any closer to a discussion about the format of a Ph.D. – whether it has to be written or it could be drawn, build etc.?

I think it does. Insofar the foundation for sound research has to do with virtues I see no problem in a Ph.D. performing these virtues in different medias and formats. As long as the communication of the idea and the reasoning is acknowledged by the community it is addressed at to be unambiguous (to the degree possible) and in principle open for anyone who will make the effort to learn the language in use nothing, as far as I can see, should obstruct the choice of formats different – and also very different – from the traditional written one. But, this said it is far from an easy task to do. Not only because of the political and strategic difficulties from a research community that sometimes may be very conservative, and may not include too many people who can actual handle a different language than their own; but also because the expectancy to be a virtues person is in research not any easier than in daily life.

References:

Aristotle
Eth. Nic. = Nicomachean Ethics
Plato
Rep. = Republic
Gorg. = Gorgias