

Open/Closed PhD or How and for Whom Does One Write?¹

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Abstract: The thesis and, implicitly, the doctoral research are components essential for the development of their respective field. This way, when one analyses the theatrical sphere, these two have to be treated, evidently, as cultural acts and, thus, generated by – and directed towards an “audience”, direct beneficiary of the research process’ results. This paper will analyse the differences between a PhD that focuses on a narrow community and niche (on a local or national level), in comparison to one centred around a wider geographical area (with a regional, international, or, why not?, global focus), from both the point of view of managing possible issues regarding linguistic and stylistic accessibility, and through the study of possible structure peculiarities. The form and content generate each other, but are, nevertheless, in a permanent contact with the environment of each individual research and with the details that distinguish the community it addresses and which, to a certain extent, “requested” the specific study. The open PhD is a means of internationalizing, due to the fact that it requires access to international databases and publications, plurilingualism, and inter- and transnational cultural exchanges, although, concomitantly, implying a more reduced contact with the possible local niches that do not represent points of interest or focus for the majority of the other countries included in the respective study. Here one needs to stress the importance of a closed PhD, not in the literal sense, but in reference to the size of the focus-group and its “closed circle” functionality, vital for understanding the characteristics of certain subjects centred around the interests of reduced communities.

Keywords: doctoral thesis, internationalizing, cultural act, audience, research.

Introduction

The concept of “cultural act” branches far beyond the palpable limits of a cultural product, although most processes require a quantifiable result, in order to appeal to the requirements imposed either by the institution “hosting” the delivery of said product, or by the grading standards to which the result is subjected. An example of such cultural act is the research process, visible, yet intangible by its nature. Research, however, does comply with the rules of the “quantifiable result”, through the materials published after the final stages.

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An initial form of such process is the doctoral research, an essential first step towards the professional fulfilment of a member of the academic sector. Albeit limited, the outreach of a doctoral research is represented by an “audience”, the readers of the thesis (i.e. final product of the process). Benefiting from this “encounter” both directly and indirectly, the previously mentioned audiences branch in these respective categories, in turn generating the dichotomy presented in this paper.

The indirect beneficiaries take advantage of the impact of a research process onto the “greater scheme of things” - the implementation of the (possibly) proposed solutions, the furthering of the discoveries, or the auxiliary research generated by the initial results. This leads to an open type of work, in one's specific case, an open PhD. If the in-depth analysis was, however, commissioned by a specific group of individuals or references a narrower niche, the beneficiaries are inherently direct ones.

This paper will detail the peculiarities of both previously mentioned types of doctoral research, following an analysis pattern focused on the form and contents of both individual types, followed by a comparative description of the style and languages used in each of the cases. One does not aim to create a rank of the two or state one's superiority over the other, but rather provide the reader with an objective overview of their particularities and uses in certain situations. Nevertheless, one will not refrain from highlighting the contextual value of the former, given universities' need for expanding their international networks.

Open/ Closed PhD

Before one commences the analysis of open and closed PhDs, it is vital to note that these two derive from the concept of “cultural act”, which, as priorly stated, exists in a multitude of “states of aggregation”. Firstly, there is the *kinetic* or *performative* one, mostly in the shapes of theatre, dance or music performances, but also represented by *para-theatrical/-musical* manifestations, such as the conglomerate of events a festival is composed of, or book launches for each artistic sphere. The latter is a category marked by profound theatricality (in the literal sense), but implies kinesis, physical movement of people. Not only contemporary culture is represented here, heritage-related events following the same criteria are also part of the kinetic cultural acts' group.

Although closer to a cultural “product” than to an “act”, the *static* class, generally comprising sculpture, painting (visual arts in the broader sense), also includes publications, printed copies of written works, photography albums, or even manuals, “theory&praxis” books. Acting as the link between *kinetic* acts and the last group, publications introduce the third class of cultural acts, *process-based*, such as archiving, conservation, and research.

This category exists and functions without a final product, its focus point being outside the quantifiable realm. Even so, the impact it has on society

eventually becomes visible, either through results from the first two classes, or through expansion within its own group. According to Gibson et al. (2015)², there could be economic benefits for society arising from such endeavours, in turn leading to new directions for investments and, therefore, logically, improvements and more (new) results. Political impact also counts as an effect of process-based cultural acts, both *ad litteram*, as well as in what concerns policies (may them be cultural or not only).

The cultural act highlights “the real, the urgent, the exciting.”³, doctoral research aiding with the development of certain professional niches by working towards expanding this “exciting” unknown or revealing new perspectives on previously-analysed subjects. Narrowing the statement down to just the field of theatre and performing arts, one must note that there are no major differences in regards to the (underlying) capacities of the research process in what concerns its impact on the field of study.

Deriving from a professional necessity, doctorates in theatre and performing arts (to be named TPA further on) originate in two radically different contexts - by personal or by guild’s demand. The former aims to fulfil one’s own curiosity or to test personal beliefs in regards to the professional area, while the other roots in a more exterior pressure, either the lack of materials regarding a specific topic (such as local monographies) or plea from a group of individuals, an example of which would be researching local historiographies, as a response to a community’s call. Certainly, these two have clear equivalencies with the first part of this paper, the open, respectively closed PhDs.

Given the field’s reduced size, TPA research connects theoreticians and practitioners directly, allowing spaces for dialogue⁴ to flourish. One of these practices consists in giving the feedback for the doctoral theses (mainly during their defence). The debates generated in this context not only help the student observe the impact of their research or the aspects incompletely detailed throughout their PhD years, but also mark the starting points for further research endeavours, though the ideas discussed in plenum during the said feedback session. The impetuously necessary improvement, generative condition of any doctoral research, makes its presence felt, thus emphasizing once more the value of these contributions to their respective niche.

Pragmatically, the value of a PhD is attributed to the impact of their final product, therefore one must point out the fact that, in the case of every such

² Chris Gibson, Chantel Carr, and Andrew Warren (2015). *Making Things. Beyond the binary of manufacturing and creativity*, in Kate Oakley, Justin O’Connor (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries* (1st ed.), Routledge, p. 91.

³ Justin O’Connor (2013). *The Cultural and Creative Industries*, in “The Ashgate Research Companion to Planning and Culture”, individual article page 1.

⁴Aitor Gómez, Lidia Puigvert, and Ramón Flecha (2011). *Critical Communicative Methodology: Informing Real Social Transformation Through Research*, in “Qualitative Inquiry”, volume 17, issue 3, pp. 239-240.

endeavour, the results take the shape of a published thesis, accompanied by the findings of the research. Regardless of whether they address a major-scale issue or are focused solely on a local “problem”, they stir discussions, open new perspectives, and (ideally) either solve, or, at least, explain the cause that laid the foundation of the work.

Returning to the main point of this paper, one will, from here onwards, detail the peculiarities of each of the types of PhD, commencing with the so-called “closed” one.

Constantly bearing in mind the visualisation of the concept of “focus group”, the closed PhD addresses the smallest “circle”, perceived as such from mathematical or geographical perspectives. This “closed-circle” approach generates, in turn, specificities related not only to the topics analysed, but also to the language used, the size of the community which it addresses marking the limitations of this type of research.

In terms of “causes” of such PhDs, they can root, as mentioned prior, in the necessity to address the lack of materials on a certain subject, or could be the direct result of a community supporting (financially, morally) a more in-depth analysis of a topic. If the former falls in the category of a more intuitive feeling of the necessity of a research, the latter also aids with the preservation of the local heritage, “foster[ing] individual and group identity”⁵ by expanding the knowledge on certain communities, activities, currents or personalities with a local or national impact. As a result, numerous such endeavours further, with modern means, pre-existent researches, not with the purpose of nullifying the initial findings, but rather with the intention of offering a new (more) modern perspective on aspects of patrimonial importance. Given the previously-described “shape” of the closed PhD, one must mention the fact that numerous such attempts receive state funding, not only from the community they address, but also from larger governmental bodies, in order to (once again pragmatically) enhance the attractiveness of such research processes and, in turn, increase the quantity of materials available on subjects related to local history and/or the quality of certain parts of the country’s/community’s heritage’s preservation.

The closed-circle functionality of the research’s background (so-called “shape”) generates, in this case, aspects related to the final product’s contents that come across as specificities of this type of PhD. Addressing a small(er) community, the topic is clearly geographically locatable, and, thus, generates a “snowball effect”, gathering the style of the writing, and even the vocabulary used, in the category of “local”. Albeit operative in a smaller, more limited environment, closed PhDs do not focus only on physical spaces, but also on social ones, examples of such research being, in the TPA field, the theatre or

⁵ Hamid Mowlana (2024). *Intercultural Communication and Interactions. A history and critique*, in Shi-xu (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Discourse Studies* (1st ed.), Routledge, p. 70.

meta-theatrical performances of certain ethnically minoritarian groups, enhancing their community spirit through art praxis. Furthermore, on an international scale, PhDs can adhere to the “closed” denomination by collating information in multiple countries (or even worldwide) on the cultural behaviour of a certain social class – their preferences, cultural habits, aesthetics, colour palettes etc. Even given this broader perspective, the closed PhD still addresses a single community and, therefore, if they manage to avoid the necessity of translation, still face the possibility of operating with jargon, limiting the reach of their researches’ findings to the ones willing to take the extra step into unfamiliar linguistic territory.

Operating with such research products as an “outsider” is, most definitely, a culturally-enriching experience, developing, at first, one’s vocabulary in order to understand the community’s jargon, and, eventually, broadening one’s understanding of the cultural diversity of either a fixed geographical space, or a set period of time. Regardless of whether they take the shape of monographies or not, closed PhDs also aid with the reconstruction of heritage lost due to colonization or ethnical/racial/social cleansing practices, giving the researchers the possibility to eventually “open” the closed PhD.

Communities, however, are not, even within the limits of the TPA niche, defined solely by textual cues and, given the recent technological improvements, one can include not only visual, but also audio input in a PhD. Unlike the verbal/written aspects, these, as both a positive and negative result of globalisation, are more familiar to the “outsider” and, in spite of clearly belonging to a specific community, can be culturally translated. The risk here is that of “translation” through appropriation (the negative result mentioned previously), which inherently cancels the good intention of the research. These para-verbal means of communication deepen and strengthen the natives’ bond with their own heritage, therefore, if the attempt at researching comes from outside the community, the researcher must first understand the distinctive aspects of the “circle” before entering it.

Who do we write for when it comes to a closed PhD? As detailed in the above paragraphs, clearly not only for the community spotlighted by the research, although it does represent the main focal point. The target audience is, thus, alongside the constituent parts of said community, the people interested (from both professional and personal perspectives) in the topic, individuals willing (and also capable) to learn and un-learn decisive aspects and communicational patterns, part of the local history analysed in the research.

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies the “open” PhD, strangely much more pragmatic in “causes” than its closed-circle counterpart, partially because of the institutions need for broadening their connections and, therefore, pushing for more internationally-oriented research topics. Due to synthesizing a greater quantity of information, open PhDs have a higher risk of delivering an only

fractional result or, even more unfortunate, of mismanaging cultural mediation between the environments included in the study⁶ by improperly balancing between the ranking/power of said cultural spaces - inherently subjective classification, based on the importance of certain (e.g.) countries in direct relation to the research. This type of research thus implies the need for a more acute cultural sensitivity, especially due to its broader reach and, in turn, its (more) general interest in comparison to the “closed” one.

Contextually, a PhD can count as “open” research as long as it analyses at least two focus groups, in the case of TPA niches – theatrical or cultural spaces. The background setting the foundation for this type of research is, usually, tributary to international students⁷, whose interests can be focused on their home country but researched abroad, or whose vision on local aspects from their country of studies are filtered by their new, distinctive approach, international by nature. This permanent connection of environments through the person and personality of the student emphasizes a perspective on the concept of research that cannot be attempted with a “closed” PhD, i.e. a parallelism between cultural spaces in the forms of comparative and also complementary analysis, a development of the concept of globalization towards an affirmative, mutually-enhancing interconnection of multiple countries.

There are, nonetheless, drawbacks to this inclination of the researchers towards inter- and transnational cultural exchanges, and they generally take the shape of the “local-global relationship[s] in whose binarism a greater hierarchical value of the global over the local has been observed”⁸, creating the false impression of inherent higher quality of the research focused on greater scales.

In terms of contents, one of the disclosing signs of an open PhD is represented by its language, not necessarily the one of the research, but of the final product, this automatically implying a greater quantity of analysed materials being read in languages of international circulation, in addition to the linguistic opening owed to the students’ native languages and the materials they can explore with the help of this. The plurilingualism is closely paired with making use of the international databases and publications for the niches in question, broadening researches’ horizons even more.

As a consequence of relying on multiple languages for research and making use of a widely spoken one for presenting the results of the

⁶ Rona Tamiko Halualani (2024). *Situating and Unwinding “Intercultural Struggles” In Critical Intercultural Communication Studies*, in Shi-xu (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Discourse Studies* (1st ed.), Routledge, pp. 101-109.

⁷ Martyn Polkinghorne, Julia Taylor, Fiona Knight, and Natalie Stewart (2023). *Doctoral Supervision: A Best Practice Review*, in “Encyclopedia”, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 48-49.

⁸ Walkyria Monte Mór (2024). *Beyond The “One-Key-To-The-Universe View” Expanding Critical Perspectives in Cultural Discourse Studies*, in Shi-xu (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Discourse Studies* (1st ed.), Routledge, p. 455.

documentation process, the jargonization of the vocabulary of the thesis is far reduced compared to the one of the closed PhD, in the attempt to eliminate the need for contextualization when addressing the outcome of the research. Similarly, when it comes to visual and/or audio insertions, they do follow the path of their linguistic counterparts, but are, unfortunately, limited to examples that can be rapidly placed in analogies to familiar images/sounds, so the prospective reader has access to the entirety of the conveyed information without having to perform research activities that are not necessarily related to the one currently being read.

Apart from form and content, PhDs could be “open”, in fact, from other perspectives, such as from the one of the framework – allowing practice-based doctoral research meant allowing for new approaches and testing methods, irrespective of language or (even!) topic, and, according to Kiley (2020), increased the number of applicants⁹ and, therefore, broadened the palette of perspectives resulting from a school’s doctoral candidates.

Conclusions

As the culture of research is founded on formal and informal working groups¹⁰, the differences between a “closed” and an “open” PhD range far beyond their generative, starting point, and branch into the use of language, vocabulary and jargon, images, and sound insertions. Another key difference between the two is represented by the workspace – unrelated to the previously-mentioned details. The “closed” research has lower chances of allowing the doctoral student to operate in a remote setting, their dependence on the environment and sometimes even site-specific (field)work obliging them to an “on-site” approach, in flagrant opposition to the (mainly) “remote” research conducted during the “open” PhD years, which can even imply travel, institution-subsidised or not, yet strongly connected to the object of study and, most importantly, to the (cultural) spaces in question.

Maintaining an ethical approach to one’s research when scrutinizing different cultures or backgrounds unfamiliar to one’s own is, nonetheless, a vital aspect connecting the two and, implicitly becomes a “red thread” linking any type of doctoral research, may it be in the TPA or related fields or on subjects unrelated to the Arts. This major similarity can, eventually, account for a fusion of the two types, generally from “closed” to “open”, either due to the nature of the subject, or through the expansion of the research and its need to be covered on a both micro and a macro scale.

⁹ Margaret Kiley, *Australia*, in Stan Taylor, Margaret Kiley, Karri A. Holley (Ed.) (2020). *The Making of Doctoral Supervisors: International Case Studies of Practice* (1st ed.), Routledge, p. 1.

¹⁰ Polkinghorne *et al.*, *Ibidem*, p. 50.

Regardless of the format, each research and supervision process requires strategy¹¹ and action, defining a behavioural ecology of the academic research system¹² and, essentially, specificities of this type of work, the research in Theatre and Performing Arts.

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¹¹ Christine Bruce, Ian Stoodley (2013). *Experiencing Higher Degree Research Supervision as Teaching*, in “Studies in Higher Education”, volume 38, issue 2, p. 25 (explained clearly in Table 4).

¹² Michael E. W. Varnum, and Igor Grossmann (2017). *Cultural Change: The How and the Why*, in “Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science”, vol. 12, issue 6, individual article p. 8.