REFLECTION ON ORIGINALITY, RELEVANCE AND RIGOUR IN DESIGN-DRIVEN DOCTORAL TRAINING

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This reflection text intends to share the evaluation framework from my own supervisory and evaluation activities, including the CA2RE/CA2RE+ reviewing. It is about reflection as a part of the evaluation process. It builds on the work on many generations of researchers (see the list of references in T. Zupančič, 2020). What are the starting points and the questions I use for myself and the people I'm dealing with in the doctoral training?

There are some general criteria for research quality. Perhaps the wording is different and coloured differently in various cultural contexts and evaluation frameworks, but the essence is somewhere there, it needs to be:
- original,
- relevant, shareable,
- rigorous (investigative, focused, contextualized, logical, argumented).

In the doctoral training (especially at the University of Ljubljana), I usually ask the main evaluation question from these three (sets of) criteria. I address these criteria a bit differently in the initial stage, at the mid-term review and the final stage of the doctoral research.

Initial stage:
- Does the initial research idea (motivation) carry the potential for relevant and rigorous research, leading to original knowledge contributions in relevant cultural/research contexts?

Mid-term review:
- Is the research disposition relevant and rigorous enough to enable original knowledge contributions in relevant cultural/research contexts?

Final stage:
- Does the dissertation rigorously contribute original and relevant knowledge to relevant cultural/research contexts?

At the mid-term review, the candidates from the University in Ljubljana need to create a 5-page proposal with a clear description of how they see their path and the end of their research training. And we need to state that we see the potential that they can achieve originality their proposed way. That their research is well-rooted and well-directed. There we evaluate the proposals cross-disciplinary. I can get examples from the economy, law, cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, civil engineering, regional planning... The proposals from architecture are reviewed by a civil engineer, by musicologist, somebody from cultural investigations. Recently we decided to try to look beyond the horizon, for me that would mean chemistry, medicine, etc. Social medicine still works, in (to me) more distant fields I usually stay fully on the surface. However, in some cases, the candidates can offer me some hints that I believe I can understand something so that I can agree with others who believe that research is original, relevant and rigorous. In chemistry, visual abstracts are a great tradition and even designers could learn from that ability to summarize the research context in diagramming. I must admit that the mid-term question, stated above, has been defined through those exercises. And I contributed to the discussion about the essential elements of the 5-page proposal: not only the hypothesis or a set of research questions but also a set of aims is now acceptable depending on the research approach.

In design-driven research, design plays an essential role in research strategies and the sensitivity of contribution to cultural development is essential in the:

problem background definition,
- problems/aim(s) identified and evidenced through design/artistic theories and practices,

approach/method choice and development,
- future orientation, open-ended-ness, risk-taking, convergent thinking, artistic sensitivity; analytical/interpretational methods, design experimentation in the studio or field-actions,

relevance discussion,
- social contextualisation: socio-spatial responsive design of objects, processes, systems; depending on knowledge transferability.

Research, where the problem background and the field-work case study is the designer's/artist's practice, is usually called practice-based research. Where/when the focus is on design field-work and relevance, practice-led research is perhaps a better already established 'label'. Research, addressing design issues, relevant for design, is design research. The emphasis is on research on design (design-based research) or for design (design-led research). Research through design experimentation is usually called research by design.

In design-driven research, a very high level of research hybridity in architecture/arts is acknowledged. Instead of focusing on the approach and methods, it follows design (understanding and acting) as the driving force of research. It enables questioning the dynamic and hybrid role of design (or any other artistic endeavour) in research strategies.

Design is not only the leader of research (design-led research), it is the motivator, the energy, the researcher's faith, and on the other side, playground of curiosities. It embraces design or practice-based, by design, design or practice-led research, including theoretical meta-level interpretations, as long as they are future-oriented, open-ended, risk-taking, based on convergent thinking and deriving from artistic sensitivity. In other words: it is not so much about setting the boundaries as defining the core. Using design for critical reflection can incorporate a variety of methods, and yet design taken as a driver is what separates this research form other investigations. Thinking about the initial stage research, mid-term review and the final stage, I can specify the following set of evaluation questions for design-driven doctoral training.

Initial stage:
-   What is the role of design in this research idea/aim (motivation)?
-   How do you contextualize your work in similar contemporary research?
-   How do you see your research/design trajectory?
-   What are your potential next steps and where they can lead you?
-   Do you need experiments to work with your ideas? If yes, why? As a speculation,

as reflection, for evaluation, as an interface or as an integrated inquiry? (M. Tamke et. all, 2017)

Mid-term review:
-   What is the role of design in your problem statement, approach/method, discussion of potential relevance?
-   When and how do you develop relevant research questions that cannot be answered otherwise than through design?
-   In the case of field-work experiments: how do you build the evidence of socio-spatial impact during and immediately after your experimentation?
-   In the case of lab-isolated experiments: what are the limitations of design simulations; how to overcome them to ensure the results are relevant for everyday or extreme socio-physical contexts?
-   How do you see your research trajectory growing?
-   How can you improve the shareability of your investigations?
-   How can you develop your research impact monitoring?

Final stage:
-   How do you interpret your research results building on the work of others?
-   How do you relate to your first phase research (answer your initial questions or develop new ones or reflect on your initial aim(s)?
-   How do you see your research trajectory growing?
-   How do you address and reach the audiences beyond your communities of research?
-   How do you learn from your research impact monitoring?

While at the doctoral level the questions about research impact monitoring are rarely applicable because the candidates are not fully aware of their impact while researching, and they see only long-term impacts, this aspect becomes more relevant at the post-doctoral level. From my point of view, it opens many new evaluation questions. How to develop a framework for socio-spatial impact evidencing is nowadays on the agenda of the ARENA, EAAE, ELIA and other discussions, for example the EAAE Research Academy Policy Paper development – see Research Impact Diagram, 2019).

References:

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