

Research Performance as Apprenticeship and Performative Research Musings from a Supervisor

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I am an academic who is specialized in theatre, research-creation and contemporary circus, but I am first and foremost interested in the thrill of enabling and being part of creative, mildly chaotic environments, ones which replicate those of my turbulent twenties, when I founded a theatre company and a theatrical space, where I wrote, directed, managed theatre, and engaged with passionate play-makers and became a reluctant leader if only because I was filling a void and no one else wanted the responsibility of running the company.¹

Eventually, upon leaving my theatre company and the performance space months before its official opening, I vowed never to write another grant in my life. I would devote myself entirely to the life of the mind and to avoid situations in which I might be overextended, stressed out, pulled in too many directions. *Famous last words...*

I am now a professor and manage many research grants; I travel constantly; navigate through susceptibilities in large interdisciplinary research groups; and feel pretty much the same as I did in the world of professional theatre. Except that I am now responsible for students, their intellectual and moral formation, in sum, their preparedness for a variety of possible professions. While I benefit greatly from their insights, their passion, and fresh perspectives, I must also bear in mind that they have chosen to work with me; in certain cases, they have travelled half way across the world in the hope that a flame will alight, that I will help them find their place in their chosen field. This is a huge responsibility, one that can't be taken lightly, nor can it override all other obligations, and these, for professors, include research, teaching, and service.²

In this paper, through a series of short ruminations on keywords, I will seek to identify the pedagogical and professional responsibility of the supervisor towards his students. How do we define his ethical and pedagogical engagement with students who, often, are not training in a well-defined academic field per se, but rather engaging with a multiplicity of ideas and with the very discourse of interdisciplinarity? In addition to more traditional disciplinary training in literature and playwriting, I supervise a number of students at Concordia's interdisciplinary graduate programs.³ These programs, including the Humanities PhD, attract open-minded,

1 I founded Théâtre la Catapulte in Ottawa, Canada, in 1992 and remained as its Artistic and General Manager until mid-1998. I was also a co-founder of La nouvelle scène, a theatrical space co-owned by four Ottawa-based companies. During the 1990s, I also worked with other theatre companies and for the National Film Board of Canada.

2 The fact that I was traveling with three of my PhD students to Brno for this conference (three students with whom I was working closely on research projects) very much influenced the topic and self-reflexivity of this paper. Simultaneous readings into North American university culture and graduate supervision issues and practices (Gardner and Mendoza 2010; Shore 2014; Kelsky 2015) undoubtedly informed some of my thinking.

3 Since 2005, I have supervised students in the Department of English in both the Creative Writing and academic streams, in the Department of French Studies in both the Literature and Translation Studies streams, in

diverse, original thinkers whose trajectories are anything but linear. Our Humanities students are expected to work within three clearly defined academic disciplines, with three disciplinary supervisors who each set their comprehensive exams, but who also work alongside as a supervisory committee. Because of my specialisation in the performing arts (theatre, contemporary circus), I tend to work with students who otherwise would be doing Master's degrees and PhDs in Theatre or Performance programs. Yet they have chosen to work with students from different academic fields, to study with professors teaching unrelated methodologies, adding much uncertainty, cultivating a healthy methodological doubt. The result is that I am compelled to find opportunities for these students to engage with performing arts research and research-creation as a constant reminder of our shared disciplinary grammar and references. Fortunately, academic research in Canada emphasizes graduate training and consequently offers funding for students to work as Research Assistants on major grants.⁴

Working within this context, I have sought to involve many of my students in ongoing research projects, from theatre history to the creative process in contemporary circus, from an art-for-social-change circus project in South America to a resonant research-creation response to a nineteenth-century Scottish gothic play.⁵ Each of these projects has been an opportunity to offer intellectual, creative, and professional training to many students, over a long period of time (usually 1 to 3 years), while sustaining them with financial support as Research Assistants.

How, then, does one study the ethos and ethics of graduate training in polyphonic contexts, where interdisciplinarity is both a given and a complex labyrinth to negotiate? What authorship and authority can be expected of students in training positions? What can be denied, especially with mature students often returning to school after active careers in theatre? How to avoid recreating patterns of *real-world* production in an academic setting (without the appropriate self-reflection)? How to emphasize process and measurable or consignable results

Concordia's INDI-Interdisciplinary Master's and PhD programs, as well as in the Humanities PhD program. Each program has its own curriculum and exigencies and attracts a variety of students from distinct backgrounds. I have the good fortune of bringing these students together on research projects and rely on their different perspectives and fresh outlooks on familiar objects of study suddenly made unfamiliar.

- 4 University research funding in Canada follows an arm's-length system in which proposals are evaluated by peers along disciplinary or stated interdisciplinary lines. Federally, Canada has three agencies responsible for academic research, the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Grants range between 25 000 and 2.5 million Canadian dollars, depending on the scope and program of research. While there are some short-term development grants, one generally applies for a 3- to 5-year program of research.
- 5 Examples of recent and ongoing funded research where I was able to involve student and post-doctoral researchers include: 1) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada: Partnership Development Grant, "Initiating children to circus arts practice and its effects on physical literacy, creativity and resilience" (funding: 2015–2018). Insight Program, "Régimes socio-esthétiques du théâtre au Québec (1945–2015): synthèse historique" (2014–2018). Partnership Grant, "Art for social change: an integrated research program in teaching, evaluating and capacity-building" (2013–2017). Connection Conference and Workshop Grant, "The State of Circus Research in Québec Workshop session on the Models and Conditions of Possibility" (2012–2013). 2) From the Canadian Institutes of Health Research: "Social Circus and Health Equity: An Interdisciplinary, intercultural, international collaboration" (funding: 2014–2017). 3) From Québec's *Fonds de recherches Société et culture*: research-creation grant, "Poétique du cirque contemporain (dramaturgies et grammaires d'une écriture en mouvement)" (funding: 2015–2018). New professors' establishment grant, "La Conquête Américaine du Cirque du Soleil: comprendre le contexte des spectacles permanents d'un genre éphémère" (2011–2014). Research-creation team grant, "Hypertext and Performance: A Resonant Response to Joanna Baillie's *Witchcraft*" (2009–2012). Every grant application has emphasized student training and has allotted a substantial part of the budget to this end.

in (in)disciplines accustomed to harvesting risk? What models of action-research are most useful to such students and how does all this action-research later translate into the students' dissertations?

Given the nature and plurality of ongoing research projects, I am principal researcher or co-investigator on many concurrent research projects, so it is difficult to establish a single narrative. I am just now, after a decade of such supervision, getting insights into some of the patterns emerging from such a research context. In the meantime, I will go forth with a term-based exploration of some of the challenges and veritable pleasures offered to colleagues and researchers alike in this context while attempting to address many of the questions posed above.

Action-research and Research-Creation

The very notion of research-creation may seem strange and redundant, depending on the context of its reception. The Canadian university milieu is actually a hotbed of *action-research*, in other words, research informed by experience, or experiential learning, unfolding not only through artistic apprenticeship, and not by theorizing works, but rather by theorizing creative approaches (Quéinnec 2014: 25–83). In the province of Quebec, research funds are specifically allotted for research-creation through the Research-Creation Support Program. The way the program is formulated allows for many types of researcher-creators to apply:

The *Fonds Société et culture* defines research/creation as research activities or approaches that foster the creation or interpretation/performance of literary or artistic works of all types. For the purposes of this program, interpretation is creation and is not meant to be understood as an intellectual process to analyse the work of a creator.

Research-creation in art and literature is based on a *sustained creative practice* – the reflective process that is central to the development and production of previously unpublished works and the dissemination of these works in various forms. Research-creation must contribute to the development of a field through the renewal of knowledge and expertise and aesthetic, technical, instrumental and other types of innovations (FRQSC web site, 2015).⁶

The exercise of a *sustained creative process*, as defined by Québec's Fonds Société et culture, is underscored in such a way as to prevent dilettantism on the part of those who might not propose a rigorous approach to practicing, and reflecting on, their art. The emphasis is more on "renewal of knowledge and expertise" than production of works of art that could otherwise be created outside of the university context.

At the Canadian (federal) level, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council does not currently have a dedicated program supporting research-creation, but recognizes research-creation as eligible subject matter for applying to its regular programs for research grants. As with their counterparts at Québec's Fonds Société et culture, the accent is on "the development of knowledge and innovation", a preoccupation with approach as a *carrier* and *producer* of meaning, results, and the potential for future usability by other artists rather than the ones making the application.

Research funds are usually allocated after competitions that are heavily promoted by universities to encourage researchers, as much for prestige as for the funds that would make

⁶ Translated from French and emphasised by the author.

hiring students for research projects possible while supporting research infrastructures such as studio or lab spaces and high tech equipment. A significant portion of these subsidies are earmarked for training students hired as research assistants, reprising the ancient practice of apprenticeship, but most are directed toward a common research objective.

Lab culture

For some years, there has been a major shift in the value accorded to individual research projects toward a clear preference for interdisciplinary team projects – even interuniversity ones. This model comes from pure and applied science and the social sciences, where laboratory work is essential for gathering data, analysing it, and distributing it following specialized research practices. In this environment, the bookish solitary humanities researcher is falling out of favour. However, the performing arts are benefitting enormously from a paradigmatic shift toward embracing collective work, the sharing of results and the added value of pooling of our respective resources. Research-creation is similar to research in the “pure and applied” sciences except that we trade the laboratory for the studio and are more concerned with *process* than the eventual culmination of the creative act.

Research-creation, action-research, and the shift to team-based process (rather than results-driven research) has opened the door to arts researchers discovering and making full use of the research assistant as actual collaborators in emerging research.⁷

Assistantship

What is a Research Assistant (or RA) in this academic context? While there are no precise job descriptions to cover the extent of assistantship possibilities, we can safely offer that RAs are students hired by faculty to assist in conducting research programs based on a series of criteria or deliverables established by the research team. This can range, as it has with my own RAs, from identifying every single article in every language on social circus, establishing tags and identifiers for quick retrieval and analysis, to actually co-directing a play with me; from working in a dramaturgical team on a workshop production, to committing to a three-week workshop on the dramaturgy of the body and becoming part of the process through physical exercises or as a workshop assistant.⁸ This can range from working on bibliographies and preparing the index of a scholarly book, to researching every single theatrical production in a given year in order to get a clear understanding of a given theatre scene for major articles or, in the case I’m thinking about, a collective history of Québec theatre. The labour of the RA, especially when focused, honed, and offered conditions to thrive and contribute beyond mere tasks, contributes incredibly to the professor’s and research team’s productivity. In a “publish or perish” environment, RAs can either help exponentially or, in complex problematic cases, substantially hinder the professor’s and research lab’s output. I’ll come back to the

7 Examples of this emergence of a lab culture can be found at my home institution, Concordia University, with Milieux, formerly known as the Hexagram Institute for research-creation in media and technology, as well as labs such as Obx Lab, matralab, Digital Topographies Lab, Resonance Lab, NT2, and a host of other research-creation driven labs which offer a studio environment combined with scientific inquiry.

8 In writing about research-creation in the university setting, I addressed issues of agency and assistantship in the following articles: Leroux 2012: 97–99; Leroux 2013: 69–83; Leroux 2014: 41–45; and Leroux interviewed by Cruz Casas 2014: 269–73.

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One can offer an RAship which covers the student's period of study at our university (and sometimes beyond graduation, as I have done with particularly useful and irreplaceable assistants), or one can offer an RAship for punctual help on a task-driven basis or sometimes even as a trial run. However, the qualities graduate students put forth as budding scholars with original voices and a specialized understanding of their topics are not always the qualities one seeks in efficient assistants.

Certain colleagues and universities use RAships as recruitment or retention tools. I see them first and foremost as opportunities for experiential learning and apprenticeship, and at the supervisor-student level, as an opportunity to develop a working relationship that can only enhance the thesis or dissertation-writing process. A dissertation, in Canadian universities, is rarely written in a purely solitary mode. The supervisor reads chapters, many drafts, the supervisor comments and amends, makes suggestions, learns from the student, and, in return, is expected to read ahead and anticipate the student's inevitable stumbling blocks. The supervisor is both a mentor and a close reader of the student's work. When the student is also an RA to the supervisor, it becomes easier to develop a long-term working relationship, a short-hand way of approaching objects of study and of discussing them.

Apprenticeship

Research Assistants are not simply workers; they are also apprentices. What does an RA learn from this apprenticeship? Research methods; ideally a variety of methodologies. I have worked with discourse analysis, dramaturgical close-reading, health equity social impact measurements, tools for artistic agency and social empowerment, the integration of technology and performance in exploring "liveness" and paradoxical "warmth" through video projection, as well as research-creation (or practice-based research). Ideally, one tries to place the right student in the right position. However, sometimes, for a variety of reasons, ego, ambition, stress, immaturity, relational complexities, students must be relieved of their research tasks and reminded of the importance of focusing on their thesis or dissertation.

In the context of team-based science-inspired research models that are funded by Canadian scholarly agencies, our projects tend to consist of large teams pooling and sharing their resources. Implicitly, one's apprentice, one's RA, inevitably becomes a reflection of one's research ethos and the seriousness with which that particular project is taken. For instance, lackadaisical work from an RA presented to colleagues can be seen as an affront to the collectivity and the researcher becomes responsible for the RA's sub-par performance, but especially, these future colleagues and employers take note of the student's flaws as well as his or her capabilities. The stakes are higher for RAs in this context of team research. Perhaps at times too high, when they are unprepared or unaware of the ethos and ethics of research work.

An apprentice observes, assimilates, interiorizes the profession's expectations, its modus operandi. An apprentice learns the language and codes of the profession and this apprenticeship is often a testing ground for students (and supervisors) to assess readiness and aptitude for the profession's exigencies. In a sense, the professor and employer becomes responsible for this apprentice's and future colleague's positioning in the field. Sometimes, as I've seen,

it's better to pull an assistant from a fraught situation and offer some concentrated time on their thesis or oral exams, rather than to expose them to alienating professional situations.

Authority

No single professor is an authority in everything. Yet, we are often called upon to supervise students well outside of our natural frames of reference. How then to ensure that we fill the expectation of authority? Through knowledge, yes, but mostly through knowledge-creation and retention stemming from networking and information analysis. Placing oneself at the centre of a dynamic research environment will inevitably confer authority, as long as publications follow and appropriate citations are made of one's work, and one seeks a renewed pertinence. This authority is often correlated with access to key players in research with high contingency and difficult access. This authority can also lead to attracting students who will perpetuate your strengths and hopefully correct your flaws. Authority is both earned and learned. It is also something that constantly needs to be refreshed.

Access

Over the past seven years, I have developed a close, some might say symbiotic, relationship with the Montreal contemporary circus scene, working on research very close to the industry, often commenting on it in traditional media outlets, also contributing insights through ad hoc consulting. This has brought an additional complexity, that of access. The very access I did not have years ago, when I first started as an outsider, has now been granted to my students by virtue of their working with me. This relationship isn't always simple, as the objects of study, the circus companies, Cirque du Soleil, 7 doigts de la main, Cirque Eloize, and the National Circus School of Montreal resist passive observation and have become rather canny with articulating their own research needs and exigencies. In other words, research cannot only benefit the researcher but must somehow cycle back to the studied parties as well. My students can obtain access, but through an RAship often in which they are working on a set of unrelated research questions and methodologies. But they gain access, and trust, and eventually are trusted and considered. Again, this access remains conditional upon a carefully groomed relationship in which the RA often becomes an unwilling participant, thrust into situations beyond their comprehension, or very much within it, and this relationship sprouts unexpected dialogues between future employers and current assistants.⁹

9 For instance, when working on a three-year *writing the circus body* project focusing on contemporary circus dramaturgy at the National Circus School in Montreal, I led a three-week intensive workshop with the artistic director of the school and asked one of my mature RAs, a Master's student with extensive previous experience in circus performance and direction but little leverage within the school to co-lead the workshop and to take on one of the three teams. She was extraordinarily well-prepared, competent and very much the most-loved of the three workshop leaders, but the pressure on her was just as extraordinary. One misstep and she could have jeopardized any hope of future employment after graduation, or so she felt. The confidence I showed her also carried a burden of shared responsibility.

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Agency

Our system prides itself on enabling students to gain autonomy, a healthy sense of professional self-worth, and an expertise distinguishing them from others. Yet it runs, in great part, on a funding structure encouraging universities to work across boundaries and fields. We hire students at the very moment they are specializing, and yet they are often required to do unspecialized work as RAs. The scientific model would dictate that there be a correlation between the employed work and a student's thesis or dissertation topic, but this cannot occur when they are reduced to mere labour. Interestingly, this "mere" labour allows the students gainful employment, access to the workings of their eventual profession, and research methods. One can wonder if we are replicating a model of team dependency and inflated research costs adjusted to the networking and technical needs we created over the past decade. Also, what agency do we offer our students who somehow do not fit or were not granted access? What about the students of unfunded professors? Are they excluded from further research opportunities? This agency should stem from the skills they will acquire as RAs or, quite simply, in the autonomy they are granted with their own research, however far it strays from our own.

Authorship

Who *owns* the research? In hard sciences, social sciences or management contexts, academic articles are rarely signed by a single author as the research involved could never have been accomplished alone. It is also a model in which emerging researchers mark their territories and establish their scholarly credentials. In the case of humanities research involving a great number of scholars and RAs, we usually seek thematic or formal frames such as anthologies or special issues of academic journals to highlight everyone's unique contribution to the field.¹⁰ While social and health sciences list the authors in pecking order, ensuring everyone on the grant is properly represented, without regard to actual contribution, our collectively-driven theatre and performance studies field paradoxically relies on the unifying voice of single and exceptional authorship, *with the help of many*.

Co-authored articles, it seems, must be the result of a fundamental exchange, a dialectic of perspectives on a given object of study made whole by virtue of continuous dialogue. In the Humanities and Fine Arts, we tend to approach co-authorship very cautiously, but interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research obliges us to step out of our own fields of expertise and to develop critical approaches which must be credible and well-informed in each of the fields with which we wish to engage. Co-authorship, in this context, becomes a legitimate intellectual and academic pursuit, one based on dialogue rather than simply pooling expertise and listing the names of grant-holders.

¹⁰ For example, when Hervé Guay and I co-edited, *Le jeu des positions* (2014), a collection examining the discourse of Québec theatre, we sought to include contributions from at least three generations of researchers in order to establish a dialogue and to help younger scholars establish themselves. The "Hypertext and Performance: Resonant Response to *Witchcraft*" research-creation project allowed for such contributions both artistic and academic through specific commissions for students to create their own "resonant responses" to the source work. The principle has essentially been to ensure that the students' labour, while feeding a larger project, be also recognized as their own, where warranted (*Witchcraft*, 2012).

Community

Each student I have supervised, every student I have hired as a research assistant, has given me more than they can imagine, not only labour, expediency and time, but also insight into how they learn and conduct research, additional knowledge and the pleasure of sharing it with them and seeing how they also put it to good use. In certain cases, they brought expertise and objects of study that stoked my own research, a research I see firstly as communal and collective in contribution, scope, and usage. I hope to have also offered a hub, a nexus, a sense of intellectual community and belonging to research programs that go beyond articles or theses, but that offer a long-term engagement and career-defining returns for all concerned. They are now a part of a community.

How, then, does one negotiate interdisciplinarity and polyphony in supervising graduate students and research assistants? By making them stakeholders, by reminding them of their responsibility to themselves, to the team – and to the field. By creating a focused commons devoted to research, sharing and, especially, the possibility of taking risks, of making mistakes in a safe environment. In retrospect, I realize that I have managed to recreate the chaotic, yet results-based environment of theatre in the academy: where performance research actually becomes *performative research*, with a large cast and crew. It is often messy, sometimes nerve-racking, but always driven by a desire to explore and share with colleagues and students the pleasure of performing research.

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Dr. Leroux first worked as a playwright and theatre director, and later became a scholar whose academic research focuses on cultural discourse, research-creation, Québec theatre, and contemporary circus. He has won national awards for his theatre scholarship in French (Prix Jean Cléo Godin, 2009) and in English (Richard Plant Award, 2012), as well as receiving Concordia’s Emerging Scholar Award in 2010 and the Dean’s Mid-Career Award for Scholarship in 2016. He recently coedited, with Hervé Guay, *Jeux de positions: le discours du théâtre québécois actuel* (2014, Nota Bene) and *Cirque Global: Québec’s Expanding Circus Boundaries* (2016, McGill-Queen’s University Press).