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Art and knowledge systems: Teaching research methods

Abstract:

This article examines some limitations to existing models of practice-led research through a discussion of the development of a research methods subject in a postgraduate course in community-based arts practice. It argues that, despite being strongly shaped by institutional conditions and a tendency to frame practice in relation to a singular artist, the space opened up by debates over practice-led research can be occupied by forms of practice that are critically engaged with the politics of knowledge and the possibilities of community-based art making and creativity.

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Introduction

This article examines a way of understanding and teaching research methods in the broad context of a university faculty of visual and performing arts. While the particular framework was developed in relation to a specific postgraduate course in community-based arts practice, it is considered here in relation to a set of larger debates about the merits and limitations of the tradition of practice-led research.

Internationally, the emergence of theories that saw art-making and creative activity as part of wider constellation of research activity was tied to ongoing structural reforms in higher education, including moves to standardize degrees in Europe under the Bologna Process, and events in particular national contexts, such as a series of exercises to measure research quality in the UK dating back to the era of Margaret Thatcher (Bence & Oppenheim 2005). In Australia, the term 'practice-led research' emerged in the mid-1990s, in the context of a series of institutional mergers between art colleges and universities. As such, practice-led research is best understood as the product of a set of policy problems generated by the mergers, first in relation to research funding and eventually, to pedagogy. With state funding of higher education in decline through the 1990s, competition was fierce in areas such as research funding, where universities could actually increase their revenue (Marginson & Considine 2000). Thus, pressure on newly merged faculties to contribute to research income via grants, publications and research degree completions generated a series of pragmatic, rather than philosophical, questions: how would research in the various artistic disciplines be defined? What could be considered a publication? How would research training be taught and assessed?

Derived from these questions were a series of pressing managerial issues, with immediate implications for the employment conditions of staff and institutional relationships with other faculties and disciplines. For instance, how would publications in the creative arts be weighted against more traditional forms such as scholarly books or peer-reviewed journals articles? The initial answer was each art publication would be considered one fifth of a traditional one, a ratio that presumably sought to balance the necessary inclusion of the creative arts without disrupting the existing balance of funding at the expense of other disciplines. It's possible to read in these two opposed numbers – 5:1 – both the presumed relative value of the arts to traditional research forms, or the presumed lesser time and effort it takes to construct an exhibition of photographs or a dance work, compared to publishing a peer-reviewed journal article.

A more positive reading is that, for other disciplines and for policy makers, the arts are seen as an arena of such sheer fecundity and endless iconoclasm: if they were awarded parity with traditional forms of research, the national research system would be flooded with a torrent of art, breaching the walls of the existing framework. This view is reflected in the central question of the *Artistic research* collection (Balkema & Slager 2004): 'How is artistic research connected with ... scientific research, taking into account that the artistic domain so far has tended to continually exceed the parameters of knowledge management?' (9). In this reading, the ratio of 5:1 reflects the view that the arts, rather than a peripheral aspect of research, were an untapped

pool of creativity that could now be diverted into a research national culture.

A second pressing managerial issue was staff productivity within the new regime of research-intensive activity. Staff in art schools often have high teaching loads linked to studio-based teaching, fractional appointments and high levels of autonomy in their personal creative activity. For these staff to be disciplined into a productive staffing profile, a clear definition of 'research activity' was required, one that could function across artistic disciplines and also differentiate between general creative activity and practice-as-research. Again, the various policies developed in response to this managerial challenge have been shaped largely by institutional exigencies rather than philosophical frameworks. Policies that define research activity must also mesh with other work policies such as workload formulas and guidelines that grant access to travel funding, taking them even further away from a prior philosophical basis. Research active definitions are also shaped by an institution's place within a diversifying higher education sector, where interests seemed increasingly split between established universities (known in Australia as the Group of Eight) that aimed to be research intensive and faculties that had merged or developed within universities with histories as technical colleges (represented by the Australian Technology Network).

More productive for the development of a theoretical basis for practice-led research, was the area of doctoral research and, more broadly, postgraduate pedagogy. The inauguration of practice-led PhDs drove the publication of new frameworks for articulating the process of creative research (Barrett & Bolt 2007; Balkema & Slager 2004). Authors such as Brad Haseman (2006) stressed an alternative paradigm approach, in which every aspect of the research process, from its epistemological basis and definitions of data to the sequence of its conduct, could be reconceptualised to suit the creative process. However, doctoral students in particular faced an ongoing tension between the usefulness of these paradigms and a traditional doctoral system, in which universities and examiners held more rigid expectations about how research is articulated (Dally *et al* 2004).

Even while accounts of practice-led research were arguing for the unique approaches of various disciplines – the specialist knowledge of arts practitioners, the importance of the process of making and the necessary autonomy at the heart of creative practice (Barrett & Bolt 2007; Gibson 2010) – these questions and the subsequent policies around practice-led research were reshaping visual and performing arts in higher education. In short, practice-led research was about compromise: accepting the broader idea that the visual and performing arts were now embedded within a higher education system with a strong research agenda and were now trying to carve out conceptual space and actual resources within highly changeable university environments.

For many, the debates around practice-led research were fundamentally unsatisfying, resulting in neither convincing accounts of art making nor any substantial institutional reforms. This dissatisfaction with practice-led research has not been the focus of recent commentary and publishing, which is largely concerned with producing definitions and clear accounts of the creative process and discussing the benefits of a

marriage between the two modes of 'intuition and disquisition' (Gibson 2010: 11). As Ross Gibson argues, 'artist-researchers have the chance to woo two modes of knowing: the implicit and the explicit. They have the chance to entwine the insider's embodied know-how with the outsider's analytical precepts' (11).

Some criticisms of practice-led research are rooted in a critique of the broader research agenda and in a generational shift in the expected qualifications of arts educators. Gareth Samson, former head of the VCA Art School commented: 'I am having a bit of a sideswipe at some of those art educators who feel that they need a PhD to justify their existence. PhD? What's a PhD? Three letters and so many people worship it. What's that got to do with painting good pictures? Something has gone really strange with art education and painting' (Crawford 2003).

More recent criticisms of practice-led research have focused on the requirements of students to produce an exegesis, alongside their creative practice. While many such as Gibson (2010) argue that the marriage of art and writing is both pragmatically necessary and ultimate rewarding, others find 'a strong resistance to the requirement for an exegetical articulation among some creative practitioners' (Mafe & Brown 2006). For Mafe and Brown,

> traditionally, the core of practice, especially creative practice, has been seen as mysterious and impervious to scrutiny. The secrets or mysteries of creativity are deemed to be impenetrable to any kind of explication; indefinable and ultimately inexpressible even to the creative practitioner themselves. (2006: 2)

Making reference to the discursive qualities of art, rather than its romantic mysteriousness, Danny Butt argues that the exegetical requirements detract from both the making and consumption of art, and serve little purpose for the artist outside of the academy:

> If a concept can be captured clearly in academic writing as a question, what would be the point of making art with it? The exegesis seems to become a particularly useless form both in the university and in the art world, existing only to allow a bureaucratic calculation of the student's acceptability for an awarded degree. (2011b)

In reviewing the practice-led literature, Robert Nelson finds the accounts of art-making to be missing some vital elements, presenting creativity as a process that strangely is 'psychologically sanitized' (2009: 5):

> Texts and university courses at the top-end encourage artists, writers or composers to think of their work in wholesome terms like information gathering and synthesis, which in many ways are warm and sweet but the exercise quite betrays the deeper motives … (2009: 25)

For Nelson, impulses such as jealousy and the 'dignified selfishness of artistic motivation' (2009: 25) are a kind of method in themselves, though ones that remain unacknowledged by the standard accounts of practice-led research. In this context, with its emphasis on 'bureaucratic calculation' and psychological sanitization, practice-led research is seen as symptomatic of the conditions of the neo-liberal university. Here, critiques of practice-led research shift into broader arguments about the self-forming functions identified by Foucault in relation to neo-liberalism (Butt

2011a) meshing with other forms of exclusion enshrined in the institutional arrangements of the education system (Kenning 2012). However, as I argue below, there are other positions from which to be dissatisfied with the current theorizing and implementation of practice-led research.

Despite the limitations of the available accounts of practice-led research, these debates did have the effect of holding open – rather than solving – a series of questions about the nature of art and research, out of which alternative conceptions could emerge. In brief, three aspects of these debates provided the ground for further thinking, and the development of the research methods course outlined below.

The first aspect was the ways in which these debates highlighted the political nature of the definitions and funding of research with institutions. The politics of knowledge and its institutional effects, from definitions to funding to career advancement, were now more transparent to academics, to artists and to postgraduate students, whose opportunities were also shaped to a lesser extent by the same context. In a university sector increasingly differentiating between research intensive and teaching universities, the ability not just to navigate research in all forms – from surveys and reports to films and exhibitions – but to also be engaged in its making was seen as an increasingly important skill. Also at stake was access to the scholarships and fee remissions available to research students over coursework students, as well as access to employment in the ranks of research assistants and senior research associates (research managers) servicing the research activities of academics.

Secondly, the adoption of the open definition of research developed by the OECD, under which research refers to 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications', allowed significant space for all art forms (OECD 2002). Indeed, the inclusion of the term 'creative' in the very definition of research pointed to how art-making could be simultaneously both central and peripheral to the research enterprise. While institutionally there were significant challenges to including art as research in ways that were satisfying to practitioners, at the level of definitions it was impossible to exclude creative activity with such an open definition in operation. This remained the case, even while the open nature of the OECD definition was curtailed by the introduction in Australia of National Research Priorities, through which a significant proportion of research funding was channelled into areas deemed of national interest.

Thirdly, within the creative arts, disciplines were granted a degree of autonomy in developing research criteria and methods, albeit in complicated ways. One of the key challenges for the development of policy in the interface between art-making and research remains the technical differences between art forms, as well as the tendency for much contemporary practice to involve either hybrid forms or a combination of art forms. Over the last decade, where the notion of clearly defined artistic disciplines has been under pressure and many visual and performing arts faculties have developed more flexible training pathways, the notion of disciplines defined by media (e.g. visual art, film, dance) was reasserted by the definitional processes of research measurement outlined above. This idea of artistic disciplinarity was also tempered by

a drive for inter-disciplinary collaboration, which meant that disciplines that stressed their complete autonomy were also discredited. In this context, there were opportunities for a new teaching program in community-based arts, which was immediately engaged with the politics of knowledge, which included all art forms and also emphasized collaboration and partnerships beyond the sphere of the arts.

Community cultural development (CCD)

The CCD research methods subject has been taught over the past six years, with a range of additions and refinements since its inception in 2005, particularly as emerging literature on arts-based research became available. In order to outline the ways in which the subject became an alternative to the existing traditions of practice-led research, it is necessary to provide some brief background to the subject and the discipline of CCD.

The term 'community cultural development' has been used in Australia since the 1970s to refer to forms of creative practice in which artists collaborate with communities whose members take key roles in realising a creative project. The field of CCD is a diverse one, reflecting a wide range of art forms (from digital storytelling and community theatre to hip hop and street art), communities and forms of engagement (Goldbard 2006). The field can be understood as a series of historical phases, with roots in local community activities and the cultural programs of labour unions and the community arts movement that began in the late 1960s. From the 1970s, community cultural development became a key part of government programs, including as a component of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding agency (Hawkins 1994). The current phase of CCD is marked by a mainstreaming of community engagement across art forms, including specific interest in community-based practice and notions of participation and social engagement in other fields such as contemporary art, urban design and new media. In 2005, the then Victorian College of the Arts (now part of the Faculty of Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at the University of Melbourne) launched the first university-run postgraduate courses in CCD. This professionalisation of CCD reflects both the broad interest in community-based art and the increasing complexity of many CCD projects.

Despite the diversity of approaches to CCD, it is possible to identify some key features. These include a commitment to community self-determination in cultural production, a focus on local assets and local knowledge and a use of approaches that build capacity for future art making. In CCD, art making or creative activities are seen as an important mechanism for collective meaning-making and an occasion for dialogue. Artists are seen as having a key role as active instigators or invited facilitators, often using skills different from those acquired in mainstream arts training. Alongside the tradition of championing local cultural production, the field of CCD also has strong connections to pragmatic reform at all levels of government, through advocacy and policy change. These broad principles were used as the basis for a research methods subject in a postgraduate course in CCD, taking heed of the

broader context of art making and university research, in which practice-led research was emerging as the dominant mode.

Teaching research methods

This section gives a brief overview of the subject, including its conceptual structure and three blocks of material. Given CCD's interest in both art making and community self-determination, the subject located itself at the intersection of two research traditions: the emerging work on arts-based research (of which practice-led research was a part) and traditions of community-based research, based in disciplines such as sociology, ethnography, education, public health, community development and social work.

The idea that there is a link between these two distinct traditions is central to CCD practice: that is, there can be a productive connection between aesthetic and political participation. Various reformulations of the imbrication of art and politics have been revived in recent debates, from Nicholas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' to the work of Jacques Rancière and what a 2009 essay collection terms 'communities of sense' (Hinderliter *et al* 2009). To this broad conceptual framework were added two thematic spines: the way in which contemporary knowledge production is problematised by both alternative knowledge systems (e.g. forms of indigenous knowledge) and democratised by digital technologies (e.g. collaborative knowledge systems such as Wikipedia). Just as these two thematics are posing serious challenges for contemporary scholarship and the university, so too do they offer opportunities for CCD practice.

The subject begins by immediately problematising the process of knowledge production, pointing out how knowledge is the outcome of a series of institutions and processes serving particular interests. Three aspects of the politics of knowledge are explored in detail. The first is the relation between forms of expert and local knowledge, alongside what Michel Foucault terms in *Two lectures* as the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledge', that is, strategies for the emergence of things either hidden or 'naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (Foucault 1980: 82). Though Foucault does not mention art or aesthetics in this context, the idea of what he also terms 'disqualified knowledges' or 'local, popular knowledges' is important for both CCD practice and the emergence of arts-based research within the university (Foucault 1980: 82).

The notion of the process of art as the emergence of these kinds of peripheral knowledge, outside of the cognitive, is clearly evident in accounts of the process of the artist researcher. For example, Gibson notes how 'some newly known proposition which can be drawn out from fleeting hunches … can be explicated privately to oneself first and then can be communicated to the scholarly world, the outside world' (2010: 5). Elsewhere, he notes:

> the know-how that arises in the studio is immersive and nervous, more implicit than explicit. But for all that, the studio-savvy is no less a form of knowledge than some other, more critically distanced mode of knowing. Anyone who has spent time

> muddling in a studio knows the value of this embodied savviness, this sense of delicate conviction in their bones. (2010: 6)

For Gibson, the knowledge that comes of art-making is also marginal in a political sense, because the arts are given no 'privileged exemptions' in the worlds of government policy-making and the jostling of 'multi-disciplinary committees' (6). Thus, the notion of art as a form of subjugated knowledge collapses two forms of marginality – art as marginal within the university (in which scientific knowledge dominates) and relatedly, how art allows access to and representation of aspects of human experience through forms of knowledge not available to other disciplines or methods.

Of course, the positioning of art as a form of subjugated knowledge is complicated, given that the category of art and particular forms of aesthetic refinement have been, in many contexts, among the most privileged forms of knowledge (Bennett 2000). Nevertheless, it is also possible to see the democratic potential in recognizing the sensate knowledge connected to particular aesthetic training or behaviour, such as a personal or community facility with sounds, images or performing bodies. Following one dimension of Rancière's notion of the 'distribution of the sensible', what is at stake is how both the potential for and the authorizing of art and creative activity are distributed unevenly across social terrains (Rancière 2004). That is, how is the category of creativity organized? What kinds of activities are deemed 'creative' and then meet the threshold for the category 'art'? As is evident in the emergence of practice-led research, and as Foucault notes, these illegitimate forms of knowledge cannot be simply resurrected within existing institutions or discursive regimes – their illegitimacy is systematic and may also be constitutive of the systems from which they are invisible.

Secondly, the emerging traditions of indigenous research have demonstrated how the production of knowledge has functioned in relation to colonial history and its drives to categorise and conquer, as evidenced by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonising methodologies* (1999)*, which draws on Foucault and a range of postcolonial thinkers. Like Tuhiwai Smith, Australian indigenous thinkers such as Karen Martin have also developed distinctive indigenous research methods and engaged with the question of how indigenous research might be conducted outside of a colonial frame (Martin 2007).

Thirdly, the subject engages with a range of research traditions, including action research, narrative-based techniques, digital research and specialist evaluation techniques, such as the Most Significant Change (MSC) method (Davies & Dart 2005). Many of these traditions were shaped by attempts to formalize research methods in the context of debates between qualitative and quantitative researchers in the 1970s and 1980s and a move in community-based disciplines to democratize access to research methods. In particular, Yolande Wadsworth's *DIY social research* was influential in articulating the process of action research in a way that made it accessible to community members, opening up space for local expertise to be acknowledged and making available roles of co-researcher, peer researchers and forms of research collaboration (Wadsworth 1997). The MSC technique was

developed in the context of international development evaluation, and sets out a flexible framework that allows community feedback to be incorporated into a broader evaluation. Along with collective art making, these traditions offer ways of thinking about modes of knowledge creation in which community voices can register or through which communities can become producers of knowledge for their own purposes.

The subject also covered practice-led research, but within this array of methods more aligned with community research, practice-led research appears as a highly specialist approach which tends to fetishise the aesthetic choices of a singular artist figure in an experimental space such as the studio, with few external constraints. Take Gibson's account of practice-led research. He acknowledges that art making is challenged by the contemporary age and the increasing flux and complexity of cultural forms (2010: 7). He also notes that the process of 'muddling in the studio' can now mean 'an online facility, a network or even a laptop computer' (6). Yet what is striking about this narrative of creation is how the figure of the solitary artist 'muddling in the studio' remains unchanged, even as the global cultural context and the shape of the studio environment are shifting dramatically. Forms of collective, collaborative or social practice, even those authorized within the art world, are not evident (Bishop 2012). In part, this is because in this account the linguistic, explanatory and ultimately social aspects of practice-led research are located within its exegetical dimension. 'Fleeting hunches' and private explication happen in the studio, followed later by the social act of communicating with 'the outside world' (Gibson 2010: 5). This leaves the solitary act of 'muddling in the studio' intact, providing a defence of existing models of studio practice and providing reassurance for educators and researchers working in those modes. Studio practice remains central to many artists and most forms of arts training. However, in tying practice-led research to a particular model of practice, Gibson's account forecloses other modes of creative knowledge production.

In many ways, the model of studio-based arts practice described by Gibson is the exact opposite of CCD practice, which often involves democratised approaches in groups derived through conversation and negotiation with many external constraints and limited time and material resources, with the artist's own preferences often deliberately set aside. That is, the idea of practice-led research that seems to fetishise the skills of the artist/creator seems at odds both with the democratic philosophy of CCD and, in practical terms, with the kinds of skills and creative process appropriate to community-driven projects. As critics such as Hal Foster and Victor Burgin have noted, the move to frame the artist as a kind of researcher often rests not simply on their aesthetic skills, but also on their putative ethical preeminence. Burgin draws parallels between the current interest in the ethical perspective of the artist and the place of history painting in nineteenth-century European art, which accorded a similar privilege to the artist's political vision (Burgin 2011). In a similar vein, Hal Foster in 'The artist as ethnographer?' (1996) argues that the interests of cultural institutions in forging social relevance often drive the production and reception of contemporary socially-engaged artwork. In the context of CCD and compared to the other traditions examined, the idea of practice-led research appears less flexible and less useful than the other approaches.

In asking students to combine these traditions in an assemblage appropriate for their particular art form/s, communities and working methods, the term 'research architecture' was used to refer to a general structure or skeleton devised to support projects. The term implies that, like physical architecture, research frameworks can take many shapes and can be imaginative creations (with speculative architecture, like speculative research designs, also seen as valuable). Whether conceived as akin to ice caves, skyscrapers, yurts or bunkers, an architecture must have some sense of internal cohesion or structural integrity. So even when a research design involves an assemblage of elements, it should also have some coherent logic, like the kind of systematic basis referred to in the OECD definition.

Finally, the subject also sought to school students in forms of scholarly practice, mixing a range of philosophical frameworks for thinking about the challenges of negotiating existing knowledge systems, and also practical skills required by the institution, in relation to scholarly conventions and research practices, including a broad introduction of terminology from the sciences and social sciences. The introduction to terms such as data, hypothesis, triangulation and causation is always accompanied with opportunities to critique and translate these ideas into other contexts. The subject was also designed to overcome the common disconnect in tertiary education between the conceptual content of subjects delivered by academics and training in essay-writing, scholarly conventions of referencing, the production of literature reviews and technical research skills such as database searches, often delivered as remedial classes by librarians or academic skills specialists. Instead, the kinds of capacity-building and integrative strategies of CCD were engaged and modelled in the classroom itself.

How does this experiment in pedagogy assist in reflecting on the limits and future of traditions of practice-led research? The CCD research methods subject sought to use the space opened up by a higher education system in flux and a series of unresolved debates about how the category of art would function within the broader knowledge system of research, as an opportunity for new kinds of scholarly practice. Yet, even as the models of research favored by CCD diverged from versions of practice-led research which defined practice in narrowly aesthetic terms, the notion of a more engaged arts – and research – practice, one more closely aligned to CCD, was visible in emerging areas in established disciplines, such as the recent interest in social practice, participatory art and applied performance.

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