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Tightrope Writing: Creative Writing Programs in the RQF Environment

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For a number of years now I have been aware of the fine work that creative writers and those who run writing programs in universities have been doing around research, higher research degree candidature, effective supervision and, of course, in teasing out the relationship between creative work and its accompanying exegesis. You have been among the leaders in problematising and clarifying the relationship between your creative practice and research. While I do not come from the ranks of professional creative writers (my heartland discipline is drama and performance), it is clear to many of us in the other arts that you are serious-minded and sure-footed when it comes to auditing your field, mapping its growth and critiquing emerging positions. *TEXT* has been a major source of nourishment and inspiration for myself and my colleagues from across the arts, media and design for many years and we have been challenged and inspired by your innovative poetic forms, reflexive creative processes and exegetical words.

So it came with some surprise to read in the editorial of *TEXT* in October 2005 that 'We have not been terribly successful in achieving formal acknowledgement of writing's identity as a research discipline as well as a creative practice' (Webb and Krauth 2005: 1).

I do wonder whether that assessment is a little too harsh, although I suspect many across the creative arts would share a similar view; but maybe we are being too hard on ourselves. For amid all the change in the higher education sector it is easy to forget that barely seventeen years ago the Dawkins Reforms created the unified higher education system in Australia, and it was only twelve years ago that the first research publication data was collected. During that time academics across the creative arts, media and design have struggled to meet the evolving challenges of research in the new culture, and it is easy to underestimate how much has been accomplished.

However we characterise the challenges and successes of the past, all is about to change as the RQF, the new road map for research in Australia presents itself to us (or imposes itself upon us). I agree with the position John Dale sketched in the *Higher Education Supplement*:

> The Research Quality Framework offers a golden opportunity for creative writers and teachers to prove that creative production makes a demonstrable change to the way Australians live. (Dale 2006: 38)

There will be uncomfortable challenges with the RQF, but I believe it represents the best chance ever to place the creative arts, and design and the built environment, inside a national research framework that recognises our distinctiveness as researchers. There remains uncertainty about this for your discipline - perhaps you will want to be part of Panel 11 with its category of Professional Creative Writing - but for me you clearly belong in Panel 13 along with the performing arts, the visual arts and crafts, cinema and the electronic arts and multimedia. I believe we need you in Panel 13 to contribute to the creative arts enterprise, to collaborate and perfect this research game along with the other art forms. For you clearly show that you have your finger on the pulse and a clear understanding of what is required if we are to be successful in the RQF. Once again from the *TEXT* editorial of last year this prescient observation:

> Perhaps as a collective we will need to be more explicit about our research role, and about the ways in which creative practice can be a mode of research, and can produce the sorts of sufficiently generalisable knowledges that will allow us to fit within the DEST categories. If so, we'll have to do this in a manner, and using a language, that research management will understand. (Webb and Krauth 2005: 3)

To my mind this is the fundamental and pressing challenge, not only for creative writing, but for all Panel 13 disciplines. How can creative practice be a mode of research that has sufficient traction not only for creative writers but for all creative practitioner researchers across the Arts, Media and Design? This mode of research also needs to bite with the research industry itself - it needs to be recognised and accepted as a legitimate approach to research, and able to take its place at the research funding tables of all countries.

This paper seeks to address the place of creative practice within the established research traditions before setting out my view of five creditability tests creative practitioners must meet if they wish their work to be classified as research. I will conclude the paper by suggesting how, in meeting these 'credibility tests', artists/researchers across the arts, media and design are challenging research orthodoxies so that we can now identify a fresh, distinctive and new research paradigm - Performative Research.

Practice and the Established Research Traditions

Traditional research paradigms are unable to have a comfortable or completely honest relationship with practice in the creative arts, media and design. In their quest to investigate and understand what Donald Schon calls 'the situations of practice - the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice' (Schon 1983: 14), quantitative researchers believe it is sufficient to undertake *research on practice* by counting and measuring aspects

of the phenomena of practice. Qualitative researchers try to be more useful, attempting to engage with the complexity of practice through a range of *practice-based research* strategies. These strategies, which include action research, grounded theory and reflective practice approaches, commonly place the researcher in the thick of the action, not only observing but also participating in the object of study, the practice, and the theory building that accompanies it.

Yet this is not enough. The orthodox research strategies, even those most congenial qualitative strategies, are unsophisticated and hamfisted tools for undertaking research 'in' creative writing; that is using the methods and practice of writing to 'create new material and cultural outcomes that transform understanding of the possibilities of the disciplines' (Redmond 2004: 104).

Rather than continuing to struggle with these traditional paradigms, creative practitioners across the arts and design are now developing their own preferred research strategies. Of particular significance is *practice-led research*, which enables practitioners to initiate and then pursue their research through practice.

Carole Gray has been a principal architect in this, defining practice-led research as:

> firstly research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray 1996: 3)

More work can be done on this definition but, for a good decade now, we have seen writers, artists and designer/researchers in a state of 'methodological churn', developing a range of research strategies that incorporate and value the research processes and outcomes of practice. Known by many terms across the arts, media and design - creative practice as research, practice as research, practice-based research, studio practice as research, and so on - these strategies have been increasing in popularity and sophistication. I have had an abiding interest in the possibilities and problems of practice-led research for about three years, feeling it is best placed to capture effectively the nuances and subtleties of all these emerging research strategies. I also believe that practice-led research is a reasonably serviceable term to capture what most of us do as artist/researchers, as well as identifying the distinctive characteristic of our research method for research funding bodies - namely that our research is led by practice.

In advancing practice-led research as a sensible strategy for us, I am not saying we should follow it slavishly across the whole sector and use it as a 'cookie-cutter' methodological template across all disciplines.

The 'Research Frame': The Five Credibility Tests

However, proclaiming a 'new' research strategy involves more than a definition and a defiant glint in the eye. To make this claim convincingly we must show how practice-led research conforms to the broad protocols of all research; how it is able to meet the credibility tests adopted and enforced by the research industry and learned bodies which define what stands as research and what does not. In doing this we will also show how practice-led research operates

differently from the research strategies that belong to the quantitative or qualitative research stables.

Practice-led research in creative writing (in fact, for all of the creative arts, media and design) needs to meet five fundamental credibility tests. Of course to have bite, as your *TEXT* editors remind us, these credibility tests need to be couched 'in the language, that research management will understand (Webb and Krauth 2005: 3).

While these tests exist to ensure the quality of research, they alone do not guarantee quality research outputs. It is possible, for example, for a piece of research to meet the five credibility tests, but fail to impress as 'good' research.

1. That there is a clearly established problem which drives the study, usually made clear through a 'research question' or 'an enthusiasm of practice'.
The importance of identifying 'the problem' or 'the issue' is evident both in competitive grant processes and in framing research proposals for doctoral study. As a matter of course, applicants are asked to give a clear statement of the problem, to set out aims and objectives and the research questions to be answered; and researchers are often asked to list the hypotheses to be tested. Statements of purpose, background, relevant literature, significance of the research problem and definitions of key terms follow.

However, many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of 'a problem' that has to be answered. A problem may be set or come with a commission, but many are led by what is best described as 'an enthusiasm of practice': something that is exciting, something that may be unruly, unmanageable or mysterious, or indeed something that may be just becoming possible as new technology or networks allow (but of which they cannot be certain). Perhaps it is just fun to do. Practice-led researchers construct experiential starting points from which practice follows. They tend to 'dive in', to commence practising to see what emerges. They acknowledge that what emerges is individualistic and idiosyncratic. This orientation of the creative artist/researcher is echoed by Henry Moore who wrote, 'I sometimes begin a drawing with no preconceived problem to solve ... But as my mind takes in what is so produced a point arrives where some idea becomes conscious and crystallises, and then control and ordering begins to take place' (James 1966: 210).

This is not to say these researchers work without larger agendas or emancipatory aspirations, but they eschew the constraints of narrow problem setting and rigid methodological requirements at the outset of a project

This absence of problem, especially early in the research process, can make particular difficulties for practice-led researchers. Take the case of PhD candidates, for instance. Across the higher education sector we find a key milestone within the first six to twelve months of candidature asking candidates to describe:

> o Background to the study
> o Significance of the study
> o Purpose of the study
> o A statement of the problem
> o Research questions - unambiguous questions to be answered
> o Hypotheses - clear statements to be tested
> o Definition of terms or operational definitions

In effect these frame Problem-led Research and my key point is that our 'major milestones' can impair progression when they impose the protocols of problem-led research on practice-led researchers.

So around this 'problem about the problem' it is important not to claim that practice-led researchers do not *have* a problem and do not need to articulate one. If you get to the end of a PhD or research grant and cannot identify the problem you've been addressing, then something is badly awry! So yes, practice-led researchers do meet the first test of all research - there is a 'problem' (often several problems) - but its definition will emerge during the research and it may well be that it is only in the final stages that a practice-led researcher will articulate and explicitly connect the problem with the trajectory their research has taken.

2. That, just as the research problem and its content are under scrutiny, so too will the process of research be scrutinised. It is necessary for the study to articulate its methodology convincingly and so make it available for scrutiny.
This credibility test is around methodology and the expectation that all research has an obligation to make transparent the process it used to get where it got, to make the claims it makes.

In this task of articulating methodology I believe the pivotal research strategy we have to deploy is practice-led research. As mentioned earlier, Carole Gray gives us a serviceable starting point by introducing two conditions that help to define practice-led research. The first of these is that the research questions, or enthusiasms of practice, arise out of the needs of practitioners as they practise. In this Gray is acknowledging the primacy of practice in the research process - these are not researchers who think their way in and out of a problem. Her second condition, that the particular methods of practice already in use by skilled practitioners can be used as appropriate research methods, gives important power to practice-led researchers. However, it does mean practitioners need to be more explicit in identifying their existing methods of practice, and probably discipline them somewhat to make them the spine of the practice-led research process. This means practitioners don't have to turn only to the arsenal of methods from other traditions in order to justify their research. Of course there is a strong alignment with some research strategies and methods from the qualitative tradition; for example, the reflective practitioner, the enquiry cycle from action research, grounded theory and participant-observation methods. But practice-led research is not these approaches; it is its own distinctive research strategy with its own methods - drawn from and inflected by the long-standing and accepted working methods and practices of disciplines in the arts and design.

I think the pressing methodological task facing us is to formulate and refine the theory and practice of practice-led research by examining how our techniques of practice can be re-purposed into rigorous and specific research strategies and methods for use and scrutiny by others.

3. That the research undertaken is located within its field of enquiry and associated conceptual terrain.
As researchers 'practise' to make work, it is essential they reach beyond their own labours to connect with both earlier and contemporaneous genres, styles, designers and theories that contribute to the overall research context for their work.

Within the traditional research paradigms this is done through 'the literature review' that is defined as:

> A research literature review is a systematic, explicit, and
> reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and
> synthesising the existing body of completed and recorded work
> produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners. (Fink
> 2005: 3)

In order to do this the literature review typically comes early in a study for it helps define the question by identifying gaps in the field, thereby ensuring the study has significance and merit. Not surprisingly, it does not work this way for practice-led researchers.

Instead the literature review, or in our case 'the contextual review', builds not from a sense of the problem but from the sense of the practice. As the researcher practises, a web of connections and links become evident to build a layered and rich analysis of the contexts of practice within which the practice-led researcher operates. In this way, undertaking a 'contextual review' appears to follow the principles of intertextuality rather than the screening and review methods that would give rise to a deliberate and systematic map of the field.

What I am proposing here, to misquote Umberto Eco from his introduction to *The Name of the Rose*, is that 'books always speak of other books just as every story tells a story that has already been told' (Eco 1983: 20). Because texts necessarily refer beyond themselves and to other texts, a contextual review for practice-led researchers builds through intertextuality, capturing perspectives that flow from the interdependence that exists between a present practice and the intersecting and ever-expanding web of references and quotations that have preceded it.

So even though it works differently, this credibility test is met; practice-led researchers are able to locate their research within its field of enquiry and associated conceptual and aesthetic terrain.

4. That the knowledge claims made from the study be must be reported to others and demonstrate the benefit of the study in social, cultural, environmental or economic terms.

This is accepted and met by practice-led researchers although they insist that research outputs and claims to knowing must be made through the symbolic languages and forms of their practice. They have little interest in trying to translate the findings and understandings of practice into the numbers (quantitative) and words (qualitative) preferred by traditional research paradigms. This means, for example, that the practice-led novelist asserts the primacy of the novel; for the 3-D interaction designer it is the computer code and the experience of playing the game; for the composer it is the music, for the choreographer it is the dance and for the designer it is the material forms. This insistence on reporting research through the outcomes and material forms of practice challenges traditional ways of representing knowledge claims. It also means that people who wish to evaluate the research outcomes also need to experience them in direct (co-presence) or indirect (asynchronous, recorded) form.

We have known the basis of this argument for a long time; it is an argument with a fine pedigree. We can trace it from Kant to Schopenhauer to Cassirer to Langer to Nelson Goodman to Howard Gardiner and so on.

On the other hand I applaud Paul Magee's recent call for writing academics to:

> take the current research imperative as an opportunity to
> address traditional intellectual questions … precisely as
> writers; i.e., with the same sorts of freedoms and licences we

allow ourselves in our creative work … What most excites me
is the possibility that we take the spaces that are opening up
here and use them to write with the same freedom as Derrida,
as de Certeau, as Kierkegaard. (Magee 2006: 1)

This enthusiasm for new and engaging ways of reporting research is being
reflected not only across the arts, media and design but also in the Social
Sciences.

5. That what becomes known is made available for sustained and verifiable peer review.

The final creditability test can be understood as follows: it's one thing to
represent what we know in a particular form, but do those forms allow for
effective and sustained peer review?

In traditional research, of course, text-based publication is the spine of the
system. Researchers' ideas, conclusions, findings and truth claims can be
represented in numbers or propositional writing. They can be published, ping
around the world and be reviewed by peers everywhere. Consequently, research
and its protocols for assessing quality, are built around publications, peer
assessment and citation.

Of course, and creative writers are among the fortunate ones here, your outputs
- your novels, short stories and poems - can be circulated widely and easily for
peer review and refereeing.

But the time-based disciplines really suffer. The opportunities for peer review
of dance or theatre, for instance, are severely restricted. Only those present at
the performance can engage in peer review - when the performance is over, so
are the possibilities for peer review. What these disciplines desperately need is
a system for commenting on and annotating works, some citational
infrastructure, a digital platform that allows peer review and artists to interact
and exchange views and interpretations on artworks.

As we examine how these five credibility tests of all research are being met by
practice-led researchers I believe it is glaringly obvious that something
fundamental is happening here. While we can recognise that this approach to
research does meet the necessary requirements to be called research, it does so
using quite a different physics from the orthodox paradigms of quantitative and
qualitative research.

In fact, to my mind, those differences are evidence of a pivotal moment in the
development of research - as important a moment as when qualitative
researchers noted that the physics of their research was different from the
physics of their quantitative colleagues. At that moment they had to claim a
new space, to mark it 'qualitative research', and then get on refining its
protocols and procedures. One pivotal difference centred on the way the two
represented their knowledge claims. As Schwandt makes perfectly clear,
quantitative research is 'the activity or operation of expressing something as a
quantity or amount - for example, in numbers, graphs, or formulas' (Schwandt
2001: 215), while qualitative research, with its concern to capture the observed,
interpreted and nuanced properties of behaviours, responses and things, refers
to 'all forms of social inquiry that rely primarily on […] nonnumeric data in the
form of words' (Schwandt 2001: 213).

Reporting Research: Beyond Words and Numbers

Before developing this argument further it is essential to make a crucial distinction between words, and … words - those words (and numbers) used in texts which constitute the discourse of traditional research reports. In her well-known study of symbolism, *Philosophy in the New Key*, Langer identifies a particular category of symbols that she names the discursive or propositional. She acknowledges that they are analytical in nature and sequential (linear) in movement. They work through precision and reference and when represented in the symbolic language of mathematics look something like this:

$$a\ 3\ b\ 3 = (a\ b)(a\ 2\ ab + b\ 2)$$

Perhaps you'll remember this from high school maths - it's a polynomial equation that allows us to determine the sum and difference of cubes. Such discursive forms of knowledge gravitate towards the abstract and general - their power lies in their ability to generalise. Such symbolic statements can be translated without a loss or change of meaning, for meaning is transferred in their discursive or determinate concepts. These discursive or propositional symbolic systems are the characteristics and necessary symbolism of the operational mind that is the dominant mode of thinking in our technological society. It is the preferred symbolism of science, humanities, organised research and all rational enquiry.

It is important to acknowledge that the conventional symbols of mathematics and the words of a language may be objects of aesthetic appreciation. We may appreciate the elegance of an equation or the metaphorical power of a perceptive written image but our main interest lies in what we can do with these symbolic orders, in the way we can use them.

Langer explains discursiveness in verbal language as the 'form which requires us to string out our ideas even though the objects rest one within the other; as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on the clothesline' (Langer 1942: 81).

This metaphor of wearing clothes rather than stringing them out on the clothesline, points us to Langer's second category of symbols - the non discursive or presentational. Following Kant, Langer argues these symbols do not work through the linear connectedness of their determinate concepts. Instead they animate us, move us and are not meant to be read literally and these symbol systems include religion, myth, the arts. They work through intuition, feeling and sensuality, and they cannot be translated. Music cannot be literally translated, for example; the meaning is the sound. Non discursive or presentational symbols bear conception of feeling and sentience and engender a very different kind of reflection than do discursive symbols. The symbolic orders of art and creative writing serve to bring emotion, feeling and aspiration to consciousness.

In attempting to understand the role words play in research it is important to recognize that words can be used within both the discursive and non-discursive symbolic systems. In the West we know only too well the power the discursive symbolic orders (especially mathematics and logic with their ability to create 'objective' evidence) to frame our world and drive policy. In the West we still live in the shadow of Socrates, who together with Plato and Aristotle so emphatically embraced the discursive and propositional and set to one side those makers of the non-discursive and presentational. After all, Plato burnt his poetry and in my discipline, theatre, we performers were banned from the Republic - 'with a garland of wool upon our heads, we shall be sent away to another city' (Plato 1970: 165).

But, as Elliott Eisner reminds us, 'Each symbol system, like each sensory system, is non-redundant. What one can say for one is not literally translatable for another' (Eisner 1979: 14). Years later he expressed it this way: 'Not everything can be "said" with anything. Poetic meaning requires poetic forms of thought and poetically treated form' (Eisner 1993: 7).

However, excluding 'poetically treated' forms from 'legitimate' means of representation, like banning us to another city, can only result in an impoverished understanding of what it is to know, what it is we can say and what it is to be human. Nietzsche recognized this when he wrote, 'Only in the dance do I know how to speak the parable of the highest things' (Nietzsche 1997: 77).

Peter Abbs, who leads the creative and critical writing course at Sussex University, chooses not to write about this same issue in the discursive forms expected of all academics and organised researchers. As a major British poet and researcher he understands it this way:

If you should meet Socrates

If on the road you should meet Socrates -
And fail to kill him,

Then avoid his ironic eyes,
His enticing invitations,

Teasing aporias. Refuse to shake his hand,
Decline the olives and the wine.

And not one word in answer to his questions.
The smallest concept

Sparks the engine of his mind, that machine of refutation
No-one survives.

So, not one word of explanation,
Not one word of greeting.

Then, if he should pester you, be brave
And simply dance.

Let your body rise before him,
Every gesture conjunctive, assertion of your blood,

Your breath, your life,
Your death. An acrobat child dancing on the grave,

A self propelling wheel, a yes and (again) a yes.
Then, without a pause, pass on:

Artist, the vessel of life, the self maker,
Seiltanzer. (Abbs 2005: 68)

So (and we do need to be mental *seiltanzers*, tightrope walkers here), to refer back to Schwandt's claim that 'words' are the principal vehicle for reporting qualitative research, I understand he is referring to those 'words' used within the discursive symbolic order. I can see no evidence that he is referring to the

presentational forms that lie at the heart of your professional practice as creative writers.

However, over the past decade a number of qualitative researchers have felt constrained by the capacity of discursive and propositional text to capture the nuances and subtleties of human behaviour. This has resulted in some qualitative researchers turning to presentational symbolic forms such as poetry, fiction writing, theatre, performance, dance, music and the visual and graphic arts to represent their claims to knowledge (Norris 1997).

Denzin and Lincoln applaud this development and relish the instability created by these messy forms of research, arguing they have 'reshaped entirely the debates around "appropriate" scientific discourse, the technical and rhetorical conventions of scientific writing, and the meaning of research itself' (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 7).

I believe they are correct in assessing the impact of this move; understandings and assumptions about research are being reshaped, and radically. But to contain these impulses to a radical fringe of qualitative researchers seriously understates the significance of innovations introduced by creative writers, designers and others who have been researching in and through their practice. These methodological developments have implications for the whole field of research, for they represent fundamentally different research procedures from those that operate in both the quantitative and qualitative orthodoxies. In fact, there is evidence enough to recognise that we stand at a pivotal moment in the history and development of research. Practice-led researchers are formulating a third species of research, one that stands in alignment with, but separate from, the established quantitative and qualitative research traditions. I believe this shift is as significant as was the development of qualitative research.

A Third Paradigm: Performative Research

But what should we call such a research paradigm - one that asserts that the dance, the novel, the design is an outcome of research? One clue is provided by JL Austin's (1962) notion of performativity. For Austin, performative speech acts are utterances that accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects. His influential and founding example of the performative is: 'I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)' which enacts what it names. The name performs itself and in the course of that performing becomes the thing done. So in this third category of research - alongside quantitative (symbolic numbers) and qualitative (symbolic words) - the symbolic data, which may include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code, all work performatively.

I have written more fully about this concept of performative research (Haseman 2006, 2007), arguing that when research findings are presented as performative utterances, there is a double articulation with practice that brings into being what, for want of a better word, it names. The research process inaugurates movement and transformation. It is performative. It is not qualitative research: it is itself - a new paradigm of research with its own distinctive protocols, principles and validation procedures.

And for me, this is your most pressing challenge from the RQF. How do you develop your own distinctive protocols, principles and validation procedures for creative writing (given those five credibility tests) and how may they be aligned with those of the other creative arts and design?

We all need to be busy now, thoroughly investigating our practice-led endeavours and engaging in the scholarly reporting so necessary to develop our field and our preferred research methodology. And that's where you come in. With the RQF you are needed as writerly *seiltanzers* - tightrope walkers, fearlessly balanced high up there, continuing to take our breaths away, but moving systematically forward.

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