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Connecting Two Research Strategies: A hybrid model

Abstract

This paper outlines and evaluates the creation of a hybrid postmodernist method, using a rhizomic research structure to combine various research strategies within an interactive space of creative writing praxis. The model presented is suited to a practice-led researcher working within the traditional boundaries of academia.

Introduction

Researching in a postmodern era and interdisciplinary field requires an exploration of the spaces between traditional research methods to form new forms of enquiry. As a creative writer, I promote a hybrid research method stemming from a postmodern paradigm as a possible alternative to traditional methods. Beginning with a situation that promotes dissolution of traditional boundaries, I explore the praxis between textual content analysis and creative-led research. This creates a cyclical situation where innovative forms of research can promote active enquiry and the discovery of new ideas and techniques of presenting them.

Interpretative Paradigm: A dissolution of boundaries

Kincheloe and McLaren write that '[p]ostmodern theoretical trajectories take as their entry point a rejection of the deeply ingrained assumptions of Enlightenment rationality, [and] traditional Western epistemology' (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994: 143). As such, working under this paradigm, traditional quantitative research methods need not apply. Particularly useful to postmodern researchers can be the concept of 'resistance postmodernism', which Kincheloe and McLaren state

> can help qualitative researchers challenge dominant
> Western research practices that are underwritten by a
> foundational epistemology and a claim to universally valid
> knowledge at the expense of local, subjugated knowledges.
> (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994: 153)

By operating within this paradigm, it can be possible to use a rhizomic, non-traditional research method created by the combination of creative

practice, textual content analysis, and praxis.

A Hybrid Method: Crossing the divides

As a creative writer operating under this postmodern paradigm, I research with a hybrid method. Understood best in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of research as possessing a rhizomic configuration, I use a combination of creative writing practice and textual content analysis. The method is solidified by being situated in the interactive space of praxis, which generates theoretical connections between the two research structures. It is an integrated method, which requires the combination of traditionally separate elements for its formation, organization, and operation, as illustrated in the diagram below.
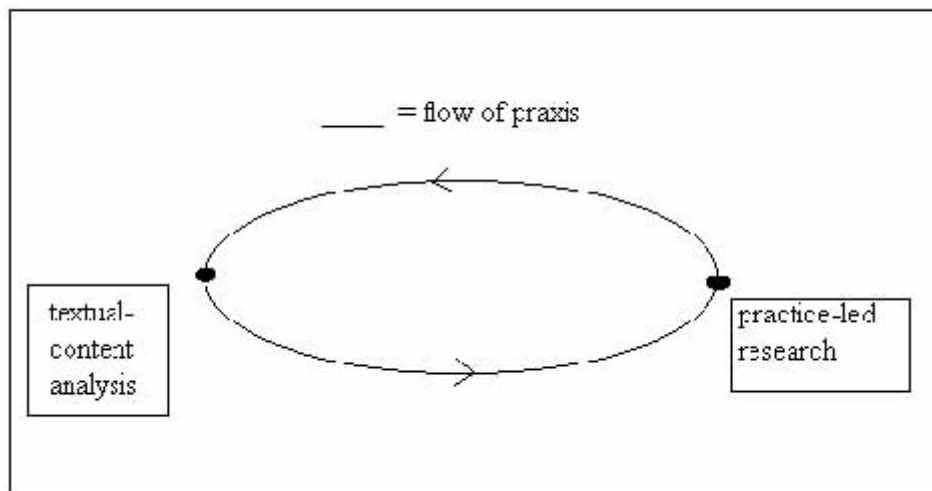
The fluid nature of this research structure is typical in a postmodern era characterised by circulating rhizomic structures such as Deleuze and Guattari's (see below). Previous academic boundaries that promoted quantitative research in single domains have been dissolved to allow for possible interaction between traditionally separate domains. We are in a situation where, as Stewart describes,

> contemporary practices in the arts reflect a meridian era of evolution, which requires us to be articulate practitioners. This includes being able to analyse and write about our practice in sophisticated ways…[where]…practitioner-based research and the resultant exploration of personal praxis is a way to achieve this (Stewart 2001).

As a challenge to traditional notions of research, Stewart also writes: 'It is important to realise that this creative work resembles pure and applied research in any field' (Stewart 2001). Operating with these structures in mind, traditional opinions of practice-led research can be revised to validate creative writing as a legitimate research method.

Creative writing no longer has to be restricted to the purely internalised, self-reflexive and fictional practice trivialised during the seventeenth century (Richardson 1994). With the advent of postmodernism, the boundaries have blurred and as Richardson explains, '[w]riting is also a way of "knowing" - a method of discovery and analysis' (Richardson 1994: 516). She continues to develop the concept of writing as exploration, as social commentary, and the questioning of established

social norms (Richardson 1994: 517). The suggestion here is that creative writing as practice can become a valid form of research; it can interrogate social issues via investigative writing, plot events, characterisation, and story outcomes.

Textual content analysis can provide a historical grounding for this otherwise non-traditional research method via its use of a traditional quantitative method to gather data. It is a strategy that allows for the gathering and analysis of a variety of textual forms, where a 'text' can be understood as any type of cultural product. As Neuman writes, content analysis can be applied to any text that 'includes books, newspaper or magazine articles, advertisements, speeches, official documents, films or videotapes, musical lyrics, photographs, articles of clothing, or works of art' (Neuman 2000: 292). This methodology can thus be applied to my research where a variety of literary and fictitious, sociological-theoretical, and popular culture-produced texts are used to inform my theory and practice. To give my work a theoretical base, I read, analyse, and synthesise the theoretical works from industries such as: sociology; popular culture and literary studies; and medical research. Textual analysis of other fictional works from various periods can create a knowledge base in contemporary creative trends and the styles and ideas in works before mine. As well, the analysis of visual art works allows for an insight into the ideas of society. A combination of all of these varying texts can be used to give a rounded view of the theoretical and creative world the work will be situated in. This is especially important for me as a postmodern writer and researcher, where intertextuality is a major consideration in the production of cultural and creative pieces. A wide, varied and informed knowledge base of previous theoretical, literary, and popular works can provide an avenue for the work to relate to the wider society, via the intertextual links with which readers can connect and relate.

Connecting these two research strategies, praxis creates the cyclical movement between theory and practice to complete the development of the hybrid research model. This can enable an interactive environment where creative writing and established theory combine to create new ideas. Stewart's comment - 'It can be argued that the study of creative processes has shown that innovative thinking is often triggered by the joining of seemingly dissimilar phenomena' (Stewart 2001) - justifies this claim. Praxis can provide a communication between the creative practice and the textual content analysis, and link them to form a useful and integrated research method.

The Rhizomic Research Structure: A fluid and adaptable approach

This hybrid method is best understood as operating within a rhizomic research structure. Deleuze and Guattari describe traditional research as a linear, hierarchal, tracing of the world. As an outlined replica that shows nothing new, such methods can be limited, with little possibility for expansion and adaptation. Contrasting this, their concept of the rhizome is as a fluid, anti-hierarchical structure, which can promote the combination of different research techniques to form new styles of enquiry. The logic behind this model explained by Deleuze and Guattari, is that '[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7). They describe a rhizomic model as more beneficial than traditional methods in a postmodern research

paradigm as it resembles a map not a 'tracing'. Deleuze and Guattari believe

> [w]hat distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely orientated toward an experimentation in contact with the real…it fosters connections between fields… The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 12).

This style can be useful in my research as a creative writer, for, as outlined above this technique attempts to forge associations between the theoretical and the creative work. It can also further the impact of my research by enabling me to promote such results in the wider society via the published story, whose commentary encourages further research.

Deleuze and Guattari conclude their description of the rhizome as having 'neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows…defined solely by a circulation of states' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21). In my research, this circulation exists as the generative praxis between the creative practice and the textual content analysis.

By using this research model, the practice-led researcher can be given the freedom to creatively explore ideas in a non-hierarchical, anti-linear, multi-method research style. In this sense, the practice-led researcher can operate in contrast to the traditionally-led researchers. This is similar to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the Orient state as a contrast to the West, where it 'does not act following a schema of arborescence corresponding to reestablished, arborified, and rooted classes' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 19). The rhizome structure thus destroys the binary opposition where the orient (or creative writer) is positioned as the Other in relation to the West (or traditional researchers), enabling the creative-led researcher to operate more independently and creatively. The situation constructed can be seen as one of de-territorialisation, where the boundaries defining credible and non-credible research areas and methods are destroyed, and the researcher can roam freely.

The rhizome structure can be appropriate to a hybrid postmodern method, where traditional or singular research methods are often not suitably applicable and cannot usually adequately cover the areas of inquiry. An integrated and hybrid method can be more suitable, where the fluid structure and multi-genre style can apply itself to the creative, the theoretical, and the practical areas of inquiry in my research.

Evaluation of Method

As with any research model, it is useful to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the hybrid method, so any disparate elements can be altered, and any solutions implemented.

1 New forms of exploration, new elements to explore
The ability to use the value of entertainment in creative products and apply this to research can be a useful attribute of the hybrid method. According to Kroll, '[c]reative writing has a range of purposes and benefits for the community. It provides entertainment and intellectual stimulation… writing is cultural capital' (Kroll 2002).

Richardson discusses the crisis of traditional research methods and their lack of audience. As a sociologist, she describes the predicament where '[a]lthough our topics often are riveting and our research carefully executed, our books are underread' (Richardson 1994: 517). Her solution to this problem is the re-writing of traditional papers in a creative style, as she concludes that when research is

> staged as imaginative renderings, they allow the field-worker to exaggerate, swagger, entertain, make a point without tedious documentation, relive the experience, and say what might be unsayable in other circumstances. (Richardson 1994: 521)

A further strength of practice-led research can be the possibility for the creation of sites for discussion in the wider social community, not solely the academic world where traditional theses have their only audience. Thus writing theory in a creative genre not only allows for the possibility of a wider readership, but may also give the researcher a vehicle with which to go further than possible when writing in a traditional academic style, via the art of story telling.

A way of creating this entertainment can be writing from personal and lived experience, where the author may draw on their individual knowledge base, and connect it to the wider pool of common human experience. This can also combat the earlier dilemma discussed by Kincheloe and McLaren, where local, dominated knowledge was rejected in favour of universal concepts (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994: 153). Creative writing may allow for the expression and development of personal and localised ideas. Stewart expresses such ambitions:

> Our aim is to present a believable and credible story that melds and weaves our studio production and the storying of it, which the reader can associate as compatible with their own experience. (Stewart 2003)

Considering this, one can then claim that if the reader of a creative product research piece can sympathise with the work, find it 'compatible with their own experience[s]', they are more likely to absorb and consider the inherent theoretical ideas.

This freedom of form and opening of barriers with research style gives creative practice the possibility to push the boundaries of research definitions, and thrust the research further. Creative writing as practice-led research can allow for the exploration of new research methods. As Stewart writes:

> Practitioners, who focus on their own practice in the exploration of ideas and experiences, create idiosyncratic theory by presenting a knowledge base that is both complementary but different to the more remote accounts generated by researchers studying artistic practices. (Stewart, 2003)

In this sense, creative writers can operate similarly to the native 'other' once explored by ethnographers; allowing for the unvoiced ideas to be brought forth in new ways. By using creative writing as research, a completely new area of ideas may be opened and made available to the researcher. For example, the researching of a theory can lead the creative practitioner to apply the theory to a creative work. The unexpected

developments within the creative work, and the commentary on the effects of the work, can place the theory in a before-unexplored interactive arena. This may push the creative practitioner into further research, and shed new light on the theory.

Similarly, variations of writing style within creative writing as research can lead to many new concepts. There is the possibility of exploring original ideas and developing innovative forms in which to present such ideas. This process can be complementary and operates as a type of praxis: original ideas can generate fresh forms of experimental writing and vice versa. As Richardson believes, '[s]ettling words together in new configurations lets us hear, see, and feel the world in new dimensions' (Richardson 1994: 522).

2 Subjectivity and the question of validity

Despite these innovations in practice-led research and consequent explorations of new research methods, this model can still be at a disadvantage within academia. As Kroll writes, there exist 'difficulties with appraisal' (Kroll 2002) for creative practice as a research method, and artists must often find scientific equivalents to validate their work.

The established academic community may question the validity of practice-led research operating as a singular method. As Richardson writes, '[l]iterature, from the seventeenth century onward, was associated with fiction, rhetoric, and subjectivity, whereas science was associated with fact' (Richardson 1994: 518). This leads to a situation where even when creative practice is recognised as credible research, there may exist questions of legitimacy with the outcomes of the research project. According to Stewart, many artist-academics believe that style of practice-led research is central to this dilemma, as

> studio practice is research because it is usually underpinned by investigative, exploratory, intuitive and developmental processes... However, there is generally a difficulty in explaining how those processes become research or indeed in identifying and describing the research processes involved. (Stewart 2001)

She continues with the observation that,

> [i]n practitioner-based research we tend to start with the touchstone of our own experience. It is important to learn to step back and critically analyse situations, to recognise and avoid bias, to discover processes to obtain valid and reliable data and to think abstractly. (Stewart 2001)

This indicates that operating exclusively on a practitioner-based approach may risk becoming too personal, internalised, and abstract. This abstraction poses a problem for research in academia, for as Stewart writes, '[u]ltimately if artists' research is of any value it must make sense to other practitioners' (Stewart 2003). It may therefore need to develop its own legitimate paradigm where creative practice becomes more useful and less abstract; this is where a hybrid postmodernist method can be useful. Richardson considers this dilemma. She writes that

> [a]lthough we are freer to present our texts in a variety of forms to diverse audiences, we have different constraints arising from self-consciousness about claims to authorship,

authority, truth, validity, and reliability. (Richardson 1994: 523)

One of the foremost issues with creative practice as research can be the notion of subjectivity. The 'truth', validity, and worth of the project may be brought into question when a work has no basis in pre-established and pre-legitimised theory. As Malins and Gray write:

> The criticism levelled at practice-based research by those from other disciplines (such as the Sciences or Social Sciences), revolves around the nature of subjectivity and the difficulty of aesthetic and even functional evaluation of objects. (Malins and Gray 1995)

Apart from subjectivities inherent in the text; the subjectivities of the viewer can also be an issue. The work can be rejected before the validity of its ideas can be assessed if the style of the piece conflicts with the viewer. This is considered by Braine, Donkin, Taube and Wilkins. They write that

> [t]he work may not be received well by all audiences, as there can be a clash between the subjectivity of the maker/artist/researcher and the differing subjectivities of the viewer. This is the nature of art: it does not appeal to everyone, which is neither negative nor positive but rather particular to each work. However, this is a major problem when it comes to the evaluation of the work in an academic institution, where definitions of *'What is knowledge?'* are yet to be defined. (Braine, Donkin, Taube & Wilkins 2003)

With such unclear definitions, this dilemma can be compounded by the subjectivities of the examiner. Their opinion and artistic preferences can influence their assessment of the research project, and compromise the reputation of the research project and the researcher.

When abstraction, validity and subjectivity are issues with creative-led practice as research, this method might need to follow a similar path to the social sciences, where it tries to draw back from the personal to the general. The ideas and the style of the creative-led research can be strengthened when grounded in a base that is recognisable in the academic community as a credible and objective form of research. Stewart explains the importance of socio-historic grounding, as:

> In moving creatively into our practice we are fundamentally concerned to develop new knowledge, to challenge old beliefs and to speculate on the "what ifs" of our concepts and processes. For the arts practitioner, this new knowledge is made in the context of and challenge to the history, theory and practices of the relevant field. (Stewart 2001)

The drawbacks, such as questions of subjectivity and validity, of research based purely in creative practice can be overcome by the traditional component of the hybrid method. Using the conventional and established research strategy of textual content analysis can give a solid base for the creative to spring from. As Neuman explains, '[c]ontent analysis goes back nearly a century and is used in many fields' (Neuman 2000: 292). The strength of this strategy is the grounding of practice in a historically recognised and accepted research pattern, providing a solution to previously mentioned weaknesses of subjectivity and questionable

validity. As a further combatant to practice-led issues of personal knowledge versus established academic theory, Neuman further explains that

> [c]ontent analysis is nonreactive because the process of placing words, messages, or symbols in a text to communicate to a reader or receiver occurs without influence from the researcher who analyses its content. (Neuman 2000: 293)

This means that creative writing as a research strategy can be validated, for as Neuman comments, '[c]ontent analysis can document - in objective, quantitative terms - whether your vague feelings based on unsystematic observation are true' (Neuman 2000: 293). Content analysis can provide a method for grounding and validating practice-led research and conclusions, and allow the researcher to be informed by and build on the works of previous researchers.

3 The need for balance

There still exists weakness with this hybrid method, when it is located in an academic environment that appears to place much emphasis on scientific validation. Due to the desire for academic acceptance, the researcher may favour the textual content analysis of previous works already validated over creative practice. The creative researcher may model their creative product too closely on these previous works, or manipulate the creative so the results provided by the analysis justify it. In this situation, the research project can not only be hindered by reduction of the creative action, but also by the reliance on previously established knowledge and theory, which may limit original creativity in the need for justification. This can sometimes create an environment where new and innovative ideas are hard to foster, as pressure from a traditionally qualitative academy to provide a legitimate research project can make the leap from the already validated into the experimental, where research may be difficult to validate and justify, harder to make.

The action of praxis can be a useful tool to ensure the smooth and productive interaction between the creative practice and the textual content analysis, and may solve the above limitation by providing a constant link between the creative and established theory. The advantage of using praxis in a rhizomic research structure is that it can provide a free-flowing connection between the various strategies via its continually circulating nature (see above diagram) and often allow idea generation to move between them as one idea flows forth to stimulate the next. This can create a cyclical situation where ideas drawn from theories explored in the textual content analysis can be applied creatively to the writing narrative, and as this narrative develops, it in turn provides new ideas for theoretical exploration. In the academic sense, praxis can also ensure that the exegesis and the creative piece are closely related, each informing the reader of the other's relevance.

Conclusion

The only issue with this cyclical nature of idea generation is that there can be no clear beginning or end to the process. This fulfils the requirements of research under a rhizomic structure, but promotes a style of research that cannot promise a definitive answer to a research problem, a requirement often still desired in traditional academic circles. However,

for the practice-led researcher, the aim of the project is not a clear resolution to the problem, as often there is no conclusive answer available. The aim of such practice-led research is the creation of a forum for the discussion of the problem, and the promotion of the concept in a social forum. This style of research aims not for resolution of ideas, but an exploration, not for answers, but for the creation of possibilities.

Practice-led research operating under a postmodern paradigm allows for a departure from traditional quantitative research styles and methods. In a world where cultural and academic boundaries are now blurred, research is not limited to hierarchical, linear and quantitative processes or conclusive answers. One can use a rhizomic structure that promotes a combination of research elements to form a hybrid research method. Innovative creative practice creates new outlets for research, and textual content analysis grounds such creativity in the academic world. The praxis involved in this interaction explores the in-betweens in postmodern research, and promotes the presentation of new ideas into the public sphere for commentary.

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