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Practice vs Praxis:

Constructing Models for Practitioner-Based Research

This paper, in an earlier form, was presented at the ACUADS Conference: Adelaide, Australia, September 2000.

This paper considers differing understandings about the role and praxis of practitioner-based research for the arts. Over more than a decade the nexus between theory and practice has been a point of debate within the contemporary arts school both in Australia and overseas. This paper attempts to reveal ways of approaching this issue from within and across the disciplines. Discussions with colleagues from the arts representing fields as diverse as music, visual arts, creative writing, women's studies, dance and theatre studies indicate that the research principles explored, albeit briefly, here have resonance for each of these disciplines. Consequently, in an attempt to be broadly relevant for these diverse fields I have chosen to position the model as practitioner-based. Within this widened context I will be exploring the different ways in which studio-based practitioners and academics conceptualise the processes and characteristics of research in the arts and professional practice. However, as this is still work in progress, my exemplars will largely reflect my own field of the visual arts. Further research will enable this model to expand.

Presented is a way to conceptualise and explain what we do as studio-based researchers in the arts. In so doing I am recognising that 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. I see practitioner-based research and the resultant exploration of personal praxis as a way to achieve this. What I propose is that as artists we open up a larger domain by recontextualizing and reinterpreting aspects of standard mainstream research processes, looking at the resemblances, the self-resemblances and the differences between traditional and practitioner-based research methods as a logic of necessity.

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. As Alverson and Skolberg (2000) suggest, to be creative it is important to be acquainted with material from several essentially different fields.

I am investigating the reasoning behind the representation that we use, and how we can decode and recode what we do in the language of appropriation and bricolage. In mapping the processes and territories, I am interested in the use of autobiography or autography as ways to incorporate and map a deep sense of the intricate relationships of the meaning and actions of artistic practice and its embeddedness in cultural influences, personal experience and aspirations (Hawke 1996:35; Jefferies 1997:5).

This paper reflects a study that explores possible parameters for practitioner-based research, questioning in what sense is it the best way to understand our relationship with traditional research fields. What I am finding is that, rather than cloning a process, there are potentially as many different approaches to research as there are practitioners in the field. However, what I also argue is that the underlying structures need a base that is informed, purposeful, rigorous and ethical.

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, as a younger lecturer in visual arts and art education, I was first challenged to confront the notion and processes of 'research' when the topic of my Masters research project arose. It was a daunting and paralysing prospect. I can remember well my bewilderment and sense of helplessness when given the task of identifying a topic, posing 'the question', creating hypotheses and identifying an appropriate research methodology to test these. Thank heaven for an informed, committed supervisor who was able to guide me through this period of panic, to achieve, ultimately a successful outcome. I quickly became very familiar with Campbell and Stanley, authors of the then 'bible' of *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Research Methods*. The research methodology I used was a highly sophisticated, carefully controlled, rigidly conducted, statistically verifiably sound 'Solomon Four Group Design'. This study gave me a quick, thorough baptism into the realms of scientific research and an understanding of how objective, uncompromising and unforgiving such methods are. It also required me to understand and compare something of the basic characteristics and central ethics of quantitative research methods and processes so that I could defend, with some sort of credibility, my choice of process. But importantly, I learned that collaboration is legitimate research practice, as I inveigled a colleague to set up and assist me with the statistical analysis of data, something which as a failed math student I was utterly unable to attempt. This was my first research collaboration. I learnt about statistical analysis, its processes and interpretation, and he learnt about the process of artistic practices and analysis.

Imagine my bewilderment when some years later I was once again thrown into confusion over the problem of identifying and selecting an appropriate qualitative research methodology to use for my PhD study. Like a good student I knew how to search the literature, but unlike the structured quantitative methods, processes of phenomenography, ethnography, narratology, etc. were less defined, less certain, less prescriptive than I expected. Indeed I had to learn to let go of certainties. So, as I read more widely into research methods and discovered aspects of many of them which 'fit' what I wanted to do, but none, which clearly fulfilled all my requirements, I ultimately decided to create an amalgam of processes and procedures. And I saw this as a process of bricolage. And so was born the research methodology known as 'Neonarrative', which was applied successfully to complete the study. However, it is important to note here that as I progressed through these studies I was constantly reminded of the connections between these research methods and my practices in the studio. Both involved deep concentration, problem solving, trial and error, referencing the field, etc.

Upon reflection it is quite clear that those understandings and experiences of research, developed as part of my higher education, underpin and are central to my teaching, research and supervision now. If we are to claim practice as research then it is critical to know what are the basic ingredients of practice and research. To have the capacity and knowledge to identify and discover appropriate research methods for investigating particular needs, is something which is a necessary constituent of any discipline which claims research as an outcome. Consequently, with the help of many colleagues, here and overseas, and based on personal experience of what it is to cross over between studio practice and theory in my own praxis, I am developing ways which are designed

to uncover and explore the rudiments of studio-based research. My aim is to promote knowledge and awareness of how to access, understand and appropriate information and procedures to best fit our needs. This is my attempt to study experience, to demystify research as a way of thinking practice, and to collaborate to develop pathways to empower praxis.

I now realise that I am into my third phase of understanding and developing research praxis. I have looked at others, using very subjective quantitative models and interesting and pluralistic qualitative models. Now I search to model ways for investigating and theorising personal praxis. This is my attempt to unpack this nexus and place it in a context of credibility for our fields.

My central questions concern what it means to study experience, and why artists and art students do what they do. And the answer remains, 'because of their experience'.

Practitioner-based Research: paradigm or paradox?

Why is research an issue for the arts? Are we really so different from other disciplines which embrace research as a way to move knowledge forward? If we look at the work of Thomas Kuhn (1977:340), we see the difficulty he has, as a physicist and philosopher, in separating the 'close and consistent parallels' between the enterprises of visual art and science. He argues that 'what are the ends for the artist are means for the scientist and vice versa' (343) and that the parallels need to be further underlined and developed. For example, both are subjected to public reaction and are involved with product, activity, technology and aesthetic considerations. Kuhn suggests that 'both disciplines present puzzles for their practitioners, and in both cases the solutions to these puzzles are technical and esoteric' (347). Scientists call their problem-solving 'research'. What do we call ours?

In the visual arts, I hear many of my colleagues argue that studio practice is research because it is usually underpinned by investigative, exploratory, intuitive and developmental processes. In the same breath I hear people argue that formalising practice as research will destroy creativity, encumber practice and deny the role of intuition, serendipity and spontaneity. However, there is generally a difficulty in explaining how those processes become research or indeed in identifying and describing the research processes involved. From a pragmatic point of view, most art schools are members of a university community. The culture of this community is underpinned by notions of the centrality of research as a tool for the ongoing development of, and challenge to, knowledge. As practitioners within this culture we may either join in, subvert or deny these basic assumptions. To deny them may spell our demise, to join them may deny the unique characteristics of the arts, to subvert them, by appropriating their accepted processes and restructuring them for our needs, may be the way to go.

My argument centres on the notion that if we, as artists can understand and situate our practice then we own the practice. We can use the notion of research as a way to develop better understandings of the changing and significant roles of artist, artworks and agency in this rapidly changing world. Perhaps this is a way to enhance the ability of our students (and ourselves in the process of collaboration) to move forward as effective, informed and prepared practitioners. To be an aware, knowledgeable and articulate practitioner surely is an enabling paradigm.

Practice or praxis?

After much consultation in the field, my approach to research in the arts is to conceptualise it as critical, reflective, investigative praxis. Praxis, for me, involves the critical and inextricable meld of theory and practice. Thus practitioner-based research is concerned with processes for theorising practice, using appropriation, pastiche and collaboration as basic tenants. 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. The research function for developing and extending knowledge is judged on the outcome of the research, which synthesises, extends or analyses the problematics of the discipline. It is important to realise that this creative work resembles pure and applied research in any field. As Richard Dunn says: 'a work of art or design is embedded in or deforms the theory and practice of the discipline' (1994:8).

It is not good enough to claim that what we do is 'research' when we do not recognise that the very act of researching is a discipline in itself, with its own knowledge field, theories and processes. To neglect these and pretend that practice is research, undisciplined, without knowledge of what established research paradigms are, is to fall into the same trap as our detractors, by devaluing what we do as vicarious practice.

Appropriation and bricolage

The aim of this approach to practitioner-based research is to introduce artists and students to the essences of traditional research models in order to understand and critique their scope, breadth and basic parameters. In this way we become better able to seek out relevant models for praxis, to appropriate terms and processes and to research knowledgeably within the field. The process is a kind of simulacra in the sense of the paradox of being simultaneously the same and different (Giles Deleuze 1983:52) to traditional and established research models. Its emphasis is largely qualitative, demonstrating and playing with the interconnecteness between differing methodologies as a kind of intertextuality, a bricolage.

Analogous with Nicholas Tsoutas' (1996:11) remarks about Australian art's relationship with overseas art, I argue that the act of appropriating and reinterpreting traditional research methods may free us from our 'provincialism', to give disciplines like the visual arts a certain power vis-a-vis those at the centre. By appropriating the fits between what we do when we research and what other disciplines accept as legitimate research practices we can contextualize, define and situate the many practices of practitioner-based research as legitimate praxis within the field of academia. What we are doing is discovering and exploring alternative ways of conceptualising and understanding research and its practices.

'Bricolage' is a term that seems to describe appropriately what we do. It refers to research processes that use multiple methodologies of qualitative research (Stewart 1994:141). These consist of a pieced together, close-knit set of practices providing solutions to a problem in a concrete situation. Weinstein and Weinstein describe the solution (bricolage) which is the result of the bricoleur's method, as an emergent construct (1991:161). The construction changes and takes new forms as different tools; methods and techniques are added to the puzzle. For example, Nelson et al (1992) see the methodology of cultural studies as bricolage which is pragmatic, strategic, self-reflexive practice. The bricoleur appropriates available methods, strategies and empirical materials or invents or pieces together new tools as necessary. The choice of research practices depends upon the questions asked. The questions depend on their context, what is available in that context, and what the researcher can do in that setting.

It is not easy being a bricoleur. A bricoleur works within and between competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms (and is familiar with these). To do so they must read widely, to become knowledgeable about a variety of interpretive paradigms that can be brought to a problem, drawing on Feminism, Marxism, Cultural Studies, Constructivism, and including processes of phenomenography, grounded theory, visual analysis, narratology, ethnography, case and field study, structuralism and poststructuralism, triangulation, survey, etc.

As you see I am arguing that if we are going to play in the field of research we need to understand many research methods, appreciating the limits and strengths of each, so that we are able to make a fit between the models selected and the particular needs of the paradigm under investigation. We need to use research as an interactive process shaped by our personal histories, gender, social class, biography, ethnicity and race.

The resulting bricolage will be a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's stories, representations, understandings and interpretations of the world and the phenomena under investigation. This bricolage will connect the parts to the whole, stress meaningful relationships that operate in the social worlds and situations studied (Weinstein and Weinstein 1991:164).

Creating a Self Portrait.

The important issue here is where to begin? Where does the emphasis for practitioner-based research lie? As studio practitioners a strong base is in autobiography as a means of linking art and life (Stewart 1996:38). Its methods enable us to explore the variances of artistic decision-making and the diversity of creative experiences. Hawke (1996:33) describes autobiography as a qualitative application, which enables us to 'address the important aspects of influence and meaning and use these to effectively collect the sort of data needed to investigate and exhibit personal knowledge'. Autobiography is 'A special case of life-writing... It gives voice to people' (Smith 1994:288) and addresses aspects about the artist by the artist. It is a personal investigation of the self: self-research, self-portrait; self-narrative.

Autobiography enables the studio practitioner to apprehend artistic practice by revealing personal experience, in the context of life stories, as the basis of research. It makes rationalisation possible by the revelation of personal reflection, interweaving self-consciousness with experience. Thus the artist becomes the principal researcher of their own artistic endeavours. Autobiography is the process of exploring the artist and their ideas involving the self, identity, history, time, narrative, interpretation, experience and knowledge (Smith 1994:102), and it allows us to attend to issues which give meaning to our thoughts and actions as artists (Smith 1994:289) by ordering and presenting personal experience as a way of understanding aspects of reality.

Conclusion

The Arts in the Western world and have been variously constituted as disciplines of knowledge and practice since the fifteenth century, and for many centuries have demonstrated their capacities to advance our knowledge and understanding through conceptual discoveries. Because new developments in the arts are made in the context of their theory, practice and history, it follows that the education of artists includes significant research training.

Over this long historical span the production of artworks has been recognised appropriately as leading to practical outcomes of importance to the research endeavour

itself within and across our disciplines. However an important aspect of research is the setting of boundaries on what will be studied. In 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. However as qualitative researchers we need to understand those particular and often peculiar phenomena that underpin our practice within the context of our cultural environment.

Part of this phenomenon involves us, as educators, in a close collaborative exercise with our students. We must be very clear about our responsibilities here. How many of us have examined candidates at Masters and Doctoral levels who clearly are unable to articulate their methods of investigation, show a clear sense of purpose, structure, or even an awareness of positioning within their field? The very processes of supervision, mentoring, critique and editing inextricably implicate us in their research processes. We are responsible to model our field, to give our emerging practitioners a sense of what it means to work within their field, and to establish standards about what it is to produce work at Honours, Masters or Doctorate levels. However, the research processes we explore have wider implications than these. The process of writing a research report can be likened to that of grant writing, or publication, exhibition or performance proposal. In each of these instances we are required to provide a well structured brief which introduces the project and makes it relevant and important, situates the work within the field, describes the process of production (research) and the projected outcomes.

Too much damage is being perpetrated within the field by our so called 'research students'. Many instances are being related about students who unwittingly compose inappropriate questionnaires and survey instruments, and in other ways approach practicing artworkers to participate in what they see as essentially unethical, unaware and downright ignorant methods of exploitation. It is critical that the practices of visual research are developed as significant research models that will ultimately add credible knowledge to and about the field.

In 1994 NCHADS, the National Council of Heads of Art and Design Schools argued that

The research function of developing and extending knowledge is to be judged on the products of that research. In the same way that a learned paper is evidence and coherent argument for all the processes that preceded it, laboratory or speculative, the finished work of art is the culmination of the theory and practice of the discipline. Based essentially on investigative, exploratory, speculative or analytical processes, the outcomes are a result of synthesising the problematics of the discipline. Like the best research in any field, it is expected that creative work will comply with the defining characteristics. The aim of the program is to develop new knowledge, or to preserve and critically assess it. It is also the case that works of...art are available for critical assessment by peers, and are available to the wider intellectual community, as is expected of well-defined research (1994:3).

The way ahead is to model best practice in our field, to promote in our field an awareness of real-life pressures and practices, and to use research as a method for empowering practice. In doing so we can be seen to have come a long way from the old days of vicarious practice and gatekeeping approaches to the preparation of arts practitioners for the realities of the artworld.

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Notes and Debates

Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo *"Exit Jesus": Relating the Exegesis and the Creative/Production Components of a Research Thesis*
Jeri Kroll *The Role of the Examiner: Scholar, Reviewer, Critic, Judge, Mentor*

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Notes and Letters

Nigel Krauth TEXT Vol 6 No 1 April 2002

Alyssa Ryan TEXT Vol 9 No 1 April 2005

TEXT

Vol 5 No 2 October 2001

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

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