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Accommodating the experiential within practice-led research

Abstract:

As practice-led research within the domain of creative writing evolves, creative writers/researchers are moving from the margins to the mainstream as they extend their research history and paradigms. This paper explores three areas in which the evolving, experiential and iterative nature of practice-led research may affect the research process and the structure, form and style of the research paper. These areas include: the validation of the research process and its location and description within the structure and the writing style of the paper; the location and scoping of the research topic in its theoretical field; the theorising of knowledge derived from critical, reflective thinking and the experiential within one's practice in the academic paper.

Biographical note:

As a creative writer and lecturer in Academic Skills in a Creative Arts faculty I have experienced firsthand some of the difficulties postgraduate students face when writing the research paper accompanying a creative artefact. My own research has explored some of these problems and I now try to address these as I lecture and run embedded workshops in research and writing to research students across several creative disciplines.

Keywords:

practice-led research—experiential knowledge—academic discourse

Introduction

As the growing body of practice-led research within the domain of creative writing evolves and moves from the margins to the mainstream of research, the writing of the theoretical paper accompanying the creative artefact continues to challenge creative writers/researchers as they establish the scope of their topic in a theoretical field, select their research methodology and theorise knowledge derived from critical reflective thinking about the experiential and the imagined. Underpinning these difficulties is the influence traditional research models have on research in general and the variations in creative processes. While this paper focuses on some of the problems students face when undertaking this difficult form of inquiry (Kroll 1999), its purpose is not to discourage, but to facilitate the student's progress through a rewarding research process that contributes to both individual and community knowledge.

A brief survey of the differences between quantitative, qualitative and practice-led research gives some insight into the reason for these difficulties. In the methodology of science, which 'basically remained unchallenged for 300 years as the most reliable way of generating knowledge' (Gray and Malins 2004: 19), the research topic emerges from an established field of knowledge. The researcher undertakes a review of such knowledge in a Review of Literature in order to locate the research question. The chronological and linear research trajectory is reflected in the design of the methodology, the collection and discussion of the data and the conclusion. While problems may emerge with the method and collection of data, which may lead to a review of the research process, the original research hypothesis or question remains the same. The quantitative analysis of the data encourages objectivity which is reflected in direct, descriptive writing characterised by an omniscient third-person stance. Practice-led research differs from such work and encourages the production of 'forms of knowledge that may not be available using traditional and scientific methods' (Grech 2006: 34).

In qualitative research, the research question may evolve from the social context, from the particular and personal interests and practices of the researcher or from an established field of knowledge. The focus is often on the essence of the lived experience, the phenomenological, or the lifeworld of the subject/s of the research. The researcher, frequently a participant, is expected to identify their stance within the research process which is often reflected in first-person writing. The research models vary and may be a combination of approaches including heuristic, hermeneutic, auto-ethnographic, action and grounded research models to name a few (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). The research trajectory is generally linear, chronological and pivots around a research question situated within an existing field of knowledge in the Review of Literature. The data, often in the form of interviews, surveys, and case studies is gathered, analysed and discussed. While the voice and personal experiences of the researcher may be directly relevant to the research, the subject and object of the research is not the researcher's personal creative work but the lifeworld of others. Both the reflective, flexible and phenomenological aspects of qualitative research paradigms make them suitable for researchers in the creative arts. However, as Brad Haseman argues, these 'orthodox research strategies ... are unsophisticated and

hamfisted tools for undertaking research “in” creative writing’ whereas practice-led research enables ‘practitioners to initiate and then pursue their research through practice’ (2007: 8).

Practice-led research, in the domain of creative writing, has a number of distinguishing characteristics: the potential for the emergence and development of new directions in the creative artefact during the course of the research; the use of intuitive, unconsciously arrived at, inscribed and personal knowledge in the creative, research process; numerous iterations in the creative process and a striving for originality in the creative artefact. In addition, there is a breadth of potential relationships between the creative artefact and the accompanying paper. For many researchers, the research is performative (Haseman 2007), that is, the research stems from the act of creating the artefact. However, the focus of the paper may also emerge from a detailed study of an informing practitioner or other foci such as the personal, historical, philosophical or social contexts relevant to creation of the artefact or the method of practice.

If the research is performative, the researcher’s voice is ever present because the making of the artefact is an instrumental force which must be ‘brought into language’ (Colbert 2009) in the research process as must the ‘intrinsically emotional and subjective dimensions of the artistic process’ (Barrett 2007: 135) if the practice is to be theorised within a field of inquiry. This process demands an engagement in self-reflective practice, ‘a necessary core of all inquiry’ (Marshall 2001: 433). This was aided in my thesis by my journaling of the experiential, the planned and my reflections on my writing process. The noted and queried ideas of other writers encouraged critical, reflective and dialogic thinking on my part. In this work I moved between ‘inner and outer arcs of attention’ (Marshall 2001: 433), between my internal and external worlds. This process facilitated the task of identifying and ‘evaluating the theories underlying and shaping’ (Stewart 2003: 1) my practice and inquiry. It facilitated a deeper understanding of my creative processes and was foundational to the ‘reflexive research praxis’ (Goddard 2007: 113). Reflexive methodologies also enable the documenting of the ‘enquiry cycle’ (Haseman 2007: 152) in which tacit knowledge becomes explicit and the cyclical ‘self-critical movement between experience and reflection ... as practice and experience are systematically honed and refined’ (Reason in Haseman 2007: 152). Such reflecting-in-action and reflecting-on-action allowed me to become aware of the ‘frames’ (Reason & Torbert 2005: 19) informing my creative writing which, in turn, influenced my parallel reading, fields of inquiry, my research path and the final structure of my exegesis.

Brad Haseman proposes that the following five criteria validate the methodology of practice-led research: a clearly established problem; a clearly articulated method; the location of the study within its field of inquiry; socially responsible reporting of the findings; and the availability of the findings for peer review (2007: 5-9). However, within these seemingly seamless and firm boundaries, which echo those of traditional research, the researcher must negotiate the singularity of creative practice and objectify the personal by way of the reflective processes noted above.

I would like to describe two journeys by way of illustrating some of the differences between mainstream and practice-led research. On the first, the researcher is interested in the effect of the river bed on the flow of water in a river. This interest is easily converted into a series of questions which reflect the research journey. What led the researcher to ask – what effect does the river bed have on the flow of the river water? How have others described, experienced or thought about the effects? How will the task of exploring the effects of the river-bed be undertaken? How will the effects be identified, measured and described? What is the knowledge gained from the research? Of what use will this new knowledge be? On this journey, the research question is scoped within a contained field of inquiry and the research path follows a linear trajectory.

On the second journey, which resembles creative work, the researcher seeks to understand and write about the nature of flowing water during a river journey. Observations and experiences are noted as well as many previously unrecognised qualities: the play of light on the water, the variations in the current, the movement of the foliage on the riverbank, the fish in the water, the birds in flight, the human traffic. The researcher seeks to understand what has been experienced, to identify, explore and understand how others have understood and written about such experiences and, in the light of such knowledge, to reflect once again on their experience. Within this context, the research journey influences the creative work and, in turn, the creative work influences the research (Day 2002). While this deconstruction and re-evaluation of what has been understood before has the potential to lead to new insights, questions and knowledge, the unpredictable nature of the process undermines the validity of the process in the eyes of mainstream researchers whose predetermined and chronologically sequenced models validate their process. And the resulting ‘inter-subjective knowledge’ gained in practice-led research becomes validated when it is submitted ‘to a community of scholars who are familiar with the theories, interpretations and explanations of the topic explored in the exegesis’ (Martin and Booth 2006: vi).

However, there can be difficulties establishing the focus of the research. Why? Firstly, the very way the researcher undertakes the journey may aid or hinder the scoping of the question or problem. Hence, the process may take longer than the amount of time allocated. A confirmation process, for example, often asks for clarity within nine to twelve months of the beginning of the research project. My thesis began with a research question which drew upon my experience of creative and academic writing. However, as I documented my creative-writing process, I discovered that my interest in the sound of the language in the creative text overrode all other aspects of my writing and I had to research a new field of knowledge. Later, when I noticed the same trait when writing the accompanying paper, I questioned my research question.

Creative writing practices vary. Umberto Eco’s uses extensive planning when writing creatively, as described in *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1985), whereas Michael Ondaatje (2007), in an interview, describes how he depends on and relishes the surprise of the artefact as it unfolds. Some writers draw on the experiential, others draw on external, researched sources of information. This diversity is reflected in practice-led research which ‘operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact

knowledge but also on that of tacit knowledge' (Barrett 2007: 143) and the inscribed and embedded processes of creative practice. The potential difficulties for the researcher become clearer if one considers two of Peter Reason's (1998) four ways of knowing: presentational knowing and propositional knowing. Presentational knowing 'emerges from experiential knowing and provides its first expression through forms of imagery such as poetry and story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance' (1998: 4). Propositional knowing, the 'knowing through ideas and theories' is expressed in abstract language (1998: 4). The task of the practice-led researcher in creative writing is to merge these two ways of knowing within the scoping of the topic, establishing the relevant fields of knowledge, designing the research method and the structure of the accompanying paper.

Research methods outline the procedural, but if creative writers/researchers draw their research processes from their practice, they may only proceed when they have been identified. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi outlines five steps in the creative process: immersion in an area of interest; incubation when unusual connections are made unconsciously; insight leading to resolution; evaluation of the insight; elaboration when the hard work of realisation takes place (1997: 79). However, as a number of insights, periods of incubation and evaluations may occur, creative practice is often 'recursive', 'iterative' and characterised by many 'loops' (1997: 80). This recursive quality may also characterise the research path. While it is during these multiple iterations that the practitioner uses 'reflexive methodologies that examine their own procedures and operating assumptions' (Goddard 2007: 120) to gain clarity, it is also, as David Evans suggests, these multiple iterations that 'almost inevitably change' the 'structural scheme' (1995: 10), that is, the research process and the structure of the paper.

Kevin Brophy has identified, within the context of creative writing courses, further tensions relevant to creative practice that need to be accommodated in practice-led research:

Spontaneity or planning, original or copy, art or craft, new or old, uncanny or familiar, play or work, self-expression or chance, Dionysian or Platonic, personal or impersonal are only some of the oppositions that come into play when we approach a creative task (or approach a task creatively) (Brophy 1998: 11).

Creative writers work within these oppositions as they write, edit and make structural changes to their artefacts. Enza Gandolfo describes fiction writing as 'a synthesis of both the intellect and the imagination' (2006: 64). Inherent in this synthesis is the movement between conscious and unconscious activity, between the intentional and unpredicted or the highly planned and intuitive. While some qualitative methods accommodate the inherent characteristics of creative practice, for example action research, the steady path of intentionality reflected in the five criteria proposed by Haseman (2007) may be difficult to realise as a writer works with these oppositions.

Theorising practice

How do practice-led researchers theorise their practice within an established field of knowledge and what problems does it present? The researcher's interests, be they narrow or broad, personal or public, must be dovetailed into a field of existing knowledge. Those who draw on 'an amalgam of processes and procedures ... a bricolage' (Stewart 2001: 3), may need to draw upon multiple fields as will those whose creative practice has a 'depth and breadth of issues' (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 80-81). Thus, the field of inquiry is open to expansion or contraction. Equally, unexpected changes in the creative process or developments in the artefact may lead to a change of field/s. The researcher may find themselves having to relocate their research into a field previously discarded. Further, as practice-led research does not necessarily evolve from an established field, the researcher may have to theorise their practice within a new field of inquiry created from two previously un-associated fields of knowledge which have been joined uniquely in their practice.

Individual perceptions of creative practice also affect the theorising of practice. Some practitioners believe that 'the creative work itself holds all meaning in isolation from any context and that its discourse is distinct from any social function' (Freiman 2007: 7). However, working with the ideas of others is essential in an academic context. Even when the writer draws extensively on personal experience, the imagined or history, without an awareness of the work and practices of similar practitioners, the practice and artefact cannot be appropriately theorised.

Individual perceptions not only affect the way the artefact is theorised, but the way in which such theories are located within the paper. In the first instance it may mean that the Review of Literature, which normally explores, maps, plots and scopes the knowledge and theories informing the research (Martin & Adams 2007) becomes a series of reviews located throughout the paper rather than single chapter near the beginning of the paper. These reviews, which are dependent on associated reading (which, in turn, affects the researcher's practice), run parallel and contiguously to the path of creative practice. They not only reflect how the theorising of practice becomes 'an extension of the practice' (Goddard 2007: 119), they also ask the researcher to be aware of the meta-functions of their processes within their practice. These reviews, while fulfilling Haseman's (2007) criteria of locating the study within its field of inquiry, must be sequenced so that the research process remains clear and the writing up of the project remains sensible. This can also be made more difficult as the researcher moves dialogically between the present and past and as new understandings emerge. The emergence of new thetic understandings may not occur chronologically or sequentially within the research process. In my exegesis, the Review of Literature was replaced by a review of research methods and a description of my emergent, performative process. This provided a foundation for the structure of the paper and accommodated the emerging insights and understandings.

Theorising creative practice can also be difficult because the creation of the artefact is a lived experience which often includes unconscious activity. There are many different views of the unconscious (including the dismissal of its existence). Guy Claxton writes that the unconscious 'is simply the wellhead from which all form and

motion bubbles forth' (2005: 152). For him, consciousness is like the 'dashboard of the mind' (2005: 344) and beneath the bonnet, unconscious activity continues. Kevin Brophy (1998) views the unconscious as a source of hidden truths; Julie Cameron (1995) vacillates between speaking of the unconscious as God, or as a divine energy flowing through writers which can be released through stream-of-consciousness writing. The unconscious is publicly acknowledged when dreams are discussed and interpreted, when symbols are decoded, in automatic writing, in psychotherapy and, I would argue for the writer, in stream-of-consciousness writing. The unknown, unpredictable and inexplicable aspects of creative practice which are acknowledged by writers such as Annie Dillard (1990), Kate Grenville (1998) and Michael Ondaatje (2007), are based in what Guy Claxton calls the 'wayward mind' (2005). Their presence continues to invoke the unknown and mysterious elements for the researcher in creative writing, disrupt the research path and force the researcher to either discard or integrate such elements into the research process.

The journey in practice-led research becomes one in which 'the development of the practice-exegesis relationship generates a mutual inter-dependence and correspondence between practices' (Goddard 2007: 120), one in which the researcher lives within the inquiry, practices new behaviours, 'conceptualizes [sic] new learning about one's identity' and 'stays present to a range of emotional responses' (Marshall & Mead 2005: 241). My experience of negotiating the two research narratives has led me to suggest that the early stages of the research process in practice-led research reflects Csikszentmihalyi's period of incubation, the stage in which unusual connections are made. It is after this period that the relevant fields of knowledge become more readily identified and the topic more clearly defined. As a first stage in a research process, it differs to the first stage in those models in which the first step is to clearly define the topic within its field. I believe it would help practice-led researchers to know that their research process may differ radically from the paradigms they encounter in other fields of research. Being able to identify the particularities of their own processes, to objectify their practice, is a necessary step as they forge a methodology that accommodates the creation of both the artefact and paper.

Conclusion

Practice-led research presents a number of difficulties. The personal, experiential and iterative processes which influence the making of the creative artefact, and the adjustments made to the artefact in the light of emerging knowledge and insights cannot be foreshadowed. Predicting the research path is difficult. The linking of 'experience, practice and theory to produce situated knowledge, knowledge that operates in relation to established knowledge' (Barrett 2007: 145) often demands that the researcher look beyond traditional models as the research is situated in a field of inquiry. An acknowledgment of the potential for making unusual and innovative connections during initial incubation period may be needed as the topic is scoped and a relevant field of inquiry is identified in the early stages of the project. More time may be needed. As creative writers, as practice-led researchers, theorise their

experiences and insights, they may need to look beyond the mainstream to marginal models which accommodate the actual path of creative practice and emergence of un-foreshadowed insights while still fulfilling the five criteria which Haseman (2007) argues give practice-led research mainstream credibility.

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