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Knowing what is known: accessing craft-based meanings in research by artists

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Abstract

Much of the work of artists relies on tacit or inert understanding of their craft and consequently communicating this knowledge is not necessarily easy or straightforward. This presents many challenges for art-based researchers. It also presents teaching and learning challenges involved in developing appropriate education and training to prepare artists. Arts practitioners have ways of knowing about themselves as ‘artists’ and it is argued in this commentary that these have grown out of their own deep and personally significant experiences. The ways in which this knowledge is rendered also appears to be based in practical experience – that is, in particular communities of practice. Artists may typically express values and concepts that are practice-based, are difficult to express in theoretical terms and reflect what is deemed by them as desirable or preferable conditions for the execution of their artform. Socially and artistically constructed ways of knowing are formed in practice and through practice as *craft-based meanings*. Craft-based ways of knowing are founded on particular meanings inherent in practice which are often difficult to communicate.

By drawing upon the author’s own research into practical actor training, this exposition attempts to capture the particular types of knowledge artists possess and why these may present challenges for researchers in using more open-ended methodologies whilst ensuring they provide validity. In doing so, this exposition also examines the fundamental question of what represents ‘evidence’ in art-based research – knowing what is known.

Keywords

Tacit knowledge

Knowledge types

Reflective sketchbooks

Craft-based ways of knowing

Art-based research

Subjective knowing

Introduction

One ongoing challenge for artists is legitimising the knowledge and benefits contained within artistic processes – the often forgotten piece of the puzzle. In this results-driven, outcome-focussed society in which I work, the necessary process of creation is made invisible and no longer valued as it should. Seemingly contradictory to this is the applied use of arts for health and well-being movement that has gained considerable momentum in the last decade.

Governments and universities have begun to raise the profile in highlighting the way the arts can play a social role in health and well-being. However much of this raised interest has come about through a growing body of research which is now shifting public perception from the intangible into the more practical evidence-based results of therapists and applied arts workers. Many claims are made in relation to the benefits that the arts can play within health, well-being and social change agendas but substantiating these claims to others has proved a particular challenge for a field that values ‘different’ forms of knowing which are not always scientific or even easy to pin down. Those who work with the arts as a medium for therapy and as an instrument of focussed social change will ‘know’ the many benefits offered to participants.

Artists do possess a great deal of knowledge about their craft which is difficult to communicate. This poses many particular issues when it comes to traditional and formal education, training and research. Undoubtedly this reality has somewhat hampered the progress in the clinical acceptance of using the arts for health and well-being. It also raises many issues concerning the ‘researchability’ of these applications when articulation has been difficult or not compatible with more traditional scientific or accepted clinical methodologies. The purpose of this exploration is to examine craft based ways of knowing and to explore the fundamental question of what represents ‘evidence’ in art-based research – knowing what is ‘known’ to those artists who work this way.

Understanding through practice

Artists call upon multiple ways of knowing which are likely to become further enhanced through the experience of practice. In 1916 John Dewey, the famous American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer whose ideas have influenced education

and social reform, links *knowledge* with *experience* and identifies the habitualised nature of such knowing:

[...] the function of knowledge is to make one experience freely available in other experiences. The word 'freely' marks the difference between the principle of knowledge and that of habit. Habit means that an individual undergoes a modification through an experience, which modification forms a predisposition to easier and more effective action in a like direction in the future. Thus it also has the function of making one experience available in subsequent experiences. (1968 [1916]: 339)

Rather than the question of *how we know the truth*, Jerome Bruner, renowned cognitive psychologist and cognitive learning theorist, suggests that we may be better advised to consider the question 'how do we come to endow experience with meaning?' (Bruner 1986: 12) and thereby acknowledging multiple truths. This significant repositioning in thinking opens up understandings of practice and what might subsequently be researched in new ways, particularly when we do not give way to a false hierarchy of truth of science over art.

The more recent notion of *embodied practices* contributes to an understanding of artists' practices which are replete with meaning. My own work in training actors and subsequent research in applied arts and health has highlighted the need for more academic recognition that meaning is generated through practice. Experience in acting is an essential attribute to becoming accomplished within the profession, but it is not simply the list of credits that gives the actor expertise. What really counts is the actor's ability to learn from experience and create meaning from those experiences.

Experience affords mutual opportunities to share within practice and generate common beliefs and shared knowledge or ways of working. Bruner alerts us to an examination of 'those dealings which are premised on a mutual sharing of assumptions and beliefs about how the world is [...]' (1986: 57). Artists hold craft-based knowledge and come to build upon that knowledge within particular 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) which often have agreed or accustomed ways of communicating. For example the way painters communicate within their craft maybe different to the way musicians communicate with each other. For the purposes of this discussion these differences are not as important as is the acknowledgement that artists, like all specialist fields, have agreed ways of communicating.

Types of knowledge

Meaning is generated in multiple ways. However meaning has long been associated with the practical act of *doing*. For example Dewey 1968 [1916] identified that meaning is actually derived from one's capacity-to-do. Direct personal experience is *synnoetic* (Phenix 1964) – evidenced in tacit knowledge where the knowledge is personal or relational. 'Meaning in doing is concrete rather than abstract, and specific rather than general' (Stevenson 2003: 8). This emphasis upon the practical rather than the theoretical builds a particular practical knowledge. Therefore the predominant types of knowledge exhibited by artists are likely to be influenced by this practical and experiential history of understanding.

Complexity is also encountered when seeking systematic descriptions of knowledge as the literature on 'knowledge' is diverse and it is not the intention to do proper justice to it here. Various authors provide an array of distinctions between multiple knowledge types. Some of those attempts are based on cognitive theories and instructional design theories but most take either an explicit or implicit epistemological viewpoint.

More generally examples of the types of knowledge encountered in 'knowledge' literature include, but are not limited to: *procedural knowledge, situated knowledge, declarative knowledge, strategic knowledge, domain specific knowledge, meta-knowledge, general knowledge, structural knowledge, tacit knowledge, abstract knowledge* and *concrete knowledge* (Prior 2012: 89). In my own research I have found the following four knowledge dimensions useful constructs which are applicable to my specific research on actor training (Prior 2012: 91): *personal knowledge, social knowledge, intellectual knowledge, and practical knowledge*. All of these contain deeply individualistic understandings of a subjective nature.

Subjective knowing

Subjective knowing can be divided into two ontological levels of knowing: *explicit* and *tacit*. Explicit knowledge has generally been represented in research as theoretical whereas tacit knowledge has been represented as practical or praxis-based knowledge. The latter is a deeply personal type of knowledge that frequently manifests itself in the acting studio through improvisation or in responding to scene work. The actor responds to situations moment by moment and which is more accurately termed 'being in the moment'. When being in the moment the actor is not thinking about outside concerns or even thinking about his or

her technique. To a non-actor this might seem slightly curious, but to a trained actor it is core business. As an actor you learn this ‘know-how’ which does not require you to consciously refer to a technique or procedure whilst acting. Once the actor has undertaken professional training then the technique comes as if by instinct. Of course some non-trained actors, particularly on screen, may naturally possess sufficient instinct to do the job convincingly. Similarly other artists would recognise the identical situation when allowing a state of flow to occur. Painters and musicians are equally able to make art or perform without constantly referring to technique – they have the technique and know how to use it.

This personal, practical knowledge is largely *tacit* – that is knowing more than we can tell (Polanyi (1983 [1966]: 4). It is therefore hardly surprising to realise that expert knowledge held by practitioners, be they artists or otherwise, often remains tacit in nature. Indeed many artists frequently can’t comprehensibly tell you how they execute their craft with expertise but may tend to describe what they do in terms of feelings and instinct (the stuff of aesthetics). Articulating one’s practice as a meta-dialogue can therefore pose a challenge when dealing with the unconscious realm of decision-making. It is in these hazy areas practitioners are likely to expose ‘patterns of error’ and through routine become less attentive to reflective practices (Schön 1983). On the counter-side, tacit knowledge may contain more worth in practice than can be demonstrated by what can be said or proven in what I might uncomfortably term ‘more traditional’ or ‘scientific’ research. It must be remembered that what a practitioner can *do* instinctively may not be what they can readily *discuss*.

In acting, as with most artistic pursuits, there can be found a difference between *doing* and *being*. An actor simply *doing* a performance will not look the same as an actor *being* in the moment. As we have already explored, it is this immersive embodiment that houses the store of what it means to work with instinct. By way of example, even the most basic use of what drama practitioners call ‘hot seating’ allows for an actor to be placed in role and can talk through the authentic voice of that role. This can in fact be a type of art-based research wherein the actor uses the form to further explore the fictional form and take the role and the work further and deeper. The actor uses known and imagined information about the character to research the world of the character in order to take on that role with more depth and understanding.

In the process of acting, Zarrilli (2001) suggests that when one steps back from an exercise and thinks about it, one is engaged in 'reflexively articulating knowledge about this exercise, about the optimal mode of doing and state of consciousness in its doing' (p. 38). I would argue that this is true for any artistic endeavour. Particularly as researchers we must find time and ways to stop, step back and reflect, particularly during artistic creation. This allows the reflective artist or artist-researcher to fully recognise what it is they know.

Reflective sketchbooks as a way of recording and researching

In my work with actors and doctoral students I have come to appreciate the importance of what is called the 'reflective sketchbook' as a method for capturing those moment-by-moment thoughts and reflections which unconsciously spring from improvisation or working in process. The reflective sketchbook is a powerful tool for personal artistic research which moves the researcher beyond the realm of statistics and even the use of well written qualitative commentary. Too frequently research favours a single linguistic communication system as 'more effective' than other non-dominant communication systems such as, for example, the non-verbal, pictorial, idiomatic, symbolic and metaphoric. However a reflective sketchbook becomes a type of living document that forms and informs the artistic process throughout.

A former doctoral student of mine, Sally Harris, took much delight in discovering the potential of reflective sketchbooks and in particular how they are used by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, two actors and founding artistic directors of Frantic Assembly, a renowned UK based physical theatre troupe. Harris writes in her teacher-research:

Their notebooks had always fascinated me. They were their constant companions. They referred to them, scribbled in them. They shared and made notes with each other. I would catch a glimpse over their shoulders at their diagrams and annotations as they taught their workshops to my students. During these workshops they would stop midway during a heart-thumping activity and dip into them. The students would stop and in silence look expectantly and often breathlessly, as Scott and Steven referred to each other and their notebooks. They would close them, lay them on the floor by the sound system and resume the activity. At the dinner table they would be at their elbows. At night they would be taken up to bed to be added to for the following day. The notebooks seemed invaluable to their work as directors. (Harris 2011: 156-7)

The reflective sketchbook becomes a rich artefact that captures and informs artistic process. It is about trusting in artistic process and developing ideas and recording thoughts. Ideas come from play and observation. Reflective sketchbooks assist in developing personal views and creative thinking. Artists may also find it useful to record ‘creative blocks’, fears and concerns: either in narrative, visually or both. The sketchbook can be examined and re-examined as one might during any research process enabling the artist to evaluate their current work, creative achievements and shaping future objectives.

Whilst reflective sketchbooks offer one method there are in fact diverse methods of inquiry – multi-arts based from preverbal, pre-reflective and the process of experiencing into conscious awareness as a basis for artistic enquiry. Artist researchers must make decisions about how to access and capture meanings. Art-based research offers artistic solutions to methods of researching itself without the need to layer non-related research methods borrowed from other disciplines.

Sharing craft-based ways of knowing

The term ‘craft-based ways of knowing’ is defined in this discussion as being, for the most part, those practical components accepted in, for example, actor training. These include Acting methodology, Voice, Movement and other skill-based considerations where practices become habitualised, and include the kind of knowing that is *synnoetic* and experientially derived. In general terms this is evidenced in the way actors and actor trainers make meaning of their practice, both for themselves and for others derived from their personally significant experiences

Interestingly, part of becoming ‘expert’ or at least at one within a community of practice involves moving from knowledge controlling and guiding the individual, to the individual controlling and selecting knowledge as required for him or herself (Bruner, 1986). Bruner alerts us to the level of awareness the individual has in relation to this knowledge. He writes:

If he develops a sense of self that is premised on his ability to penetrate knowledge for his own uses, and if he can share and negotiate the result of his penetrations, then he becomes a member of the culture-creating community. (Bruner 1986: 132)

It is useful to be reminded that Michael Polanyi (1983 [1966]) found that not all meanings can be made explicit through articulated language. That is, some knowledge always remains

tacit. By way of caution, it is essential to note that Polanyi argues that we legitimise the importance of language in constructing and communicating meaning to others. In contrast, much educational thought views knowledge as 'empirical' or 'analytical' and has traditionally placed a relatively low value on experiential knowledge (Elbaz 1983) which is largely found within the arts for example.

The way in which artists, educators and researchers may view their own knowledge and the knowledge of others will as a consequence ultimately shape their own personal philosophy. Art-based research recognises the valuable role that different art forms have in exploring and responding to personal experiences, the meanings that they have and the choices that can be made. Within craft-based ways of knowing there is essential subjectivity which is part of the spirit of human experiencing. The challenge, and certainly for art-based research, is always to find ways of responding within one's own self, *in* and *through* art to make meaning.

Evidence in art-based research

The nature of how we evidence in arts research is a question for serious interrogation. In fact the very idea of what actually constitutes 'evidence' is a particularly interesting one. Phrases such as 'hard evidence' or 'soft evidence' have been used as distinctions between quantitative data and qualitative data. Issues of measurement in art-based practices have also come under some debate for many of us. In field of applied arts and health, for example, one of the largest questions still remains is: Can we demonstrate long-term benefits of art-based interventions? Policymakers want to be given complete certainty, but as we know, research cannot always be expected to provide that level of certainty. 'Researchers can reach different conclusions on the same subjects, and their work contains caveats and qualifications' (Attwood 2009: unpaginated).

The major difficulties with art-based interventions are that they are usually not funded to include longitudinal studies; there are so many other variables which may intercede in the lives of the participants; evaluations are often conducted at the request of funding bodies and 'positive results' are invariably derived in the hope of continuing funding; and many artists work on instinct. If opportunity permits, it may be possible to conduct on-going evaluations after an applied theatre performance for example. However it is not particularly useful to conduct longitudinal research of the audience/participants since there are simply so many other factors which influence an individual's decision-making.

There are, however, other ways in which we may research using the arts. Shaun McNiff (2009) points out the potential of the artform itself in responding to issues of research:

[...] the arts and therapy communities have historically been so thoroughly tied to traditional social science methods of research and the more general notions of scientism that we have not appreciated our own unique potential to further human understanding.
(p. 144)

To undervalue personal knowledge in arts practice to misunderstand the essential nature of the arts. The issues surrounding personal knowledge and research pose such essential epistemological questions as:

What to know?

What is known?

What is knowing?

Who knows what?

How to know?

Researching the tacit and instinctual requires a broadening in the definition of 'evidence'. For example, an actor's knowledge allows him or her to communicate through the body and the spoken word. An actor's knowledge is constructed over time. It is discovered and created – made not simply by reading a book or the latest piece of research. Like any artist, these multiple ways of knowing, and importantly those craft-based ways of knowing are mostly borne from personal experience. How an actor captures his or her own (re)search must equally come from a deeply personal place.

Meaning and artistic content derive from the unplanned, the spontaneous happenings through process. Play and improvisation are essential to actors, as might be for many artistic pursuits. Evidence of this can be found in the reflective sketchbooks of actors where the process of 'hap'¹ happens. Captured in the pages are thoughts, spontaneous actions, observations, reflections, decisions which form the artistic process – and instrumentally this artistic searching is captured for ongoing research.

Conclusion

It is argued throughout this commentary that arts practitioners have ways of knowing about themselves as artists and that these have grown out of their own personally significant experiences. The ways in which knowledge is rendered by artists also appears to be particularly based in practical experience. Artists may typically express values and concepts that are practice-based; are difficult to express in theoretical terms; and reflect what is deemed by them as desirable or preferable conditions for the execution of their artform. These socially constructed ways of knowing are formed in practice and through practice as *craft-based meanings* or art-based meanings. These ways of knowing are founded on particular meanings inherent in practice (the act of doing and the act of being) which are often difficult to communicate. For example, when asked, many great actors can't precisely tell you how they do it.

Some research methodologies can overlook or devalue experience which is intrinsic to art-based practices. Indeed the very nature of tacit knowledge, which is much a part of arts practice and ontology, makes scientific approaches less reliable or useful than might first be assumed. The reflective sketchbook has been offered here as an example of how we might capture the more instinctive; streams of consciousness; and individual artistic processes of acting, directing and designing – a place for mementos, thoughts and workings out in aesthetic form. It is a way of capturing what the body knows– it is deeply personal and is about enriching the process of personal creativity and not dislocating it in within external modes of enquiry. I suggest that the expansion of accepted qualitative methodologies to include arts-based research is not simply about adding to the vast array of methodological approaches already on offer, but authentically embraces *particular ways of knowing*. Art-based knowledge presents both challenges in broadening definitions of evidence and opportunities to artists in valuing the concept of knowing what is known.

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¹ 'Hap', Middle English, from Old Norse *happ* good luck; Old Church Slavic *kobī* lot, fate.