Arts practice as a site of knowledge/research: An Australian perspective of the artist in academia

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ABSTRACT

Due, in part, to the previous lack of recognition for arts practice as research, artists working as academics in Australia have been active in a growing body of writings addressing different approaches to practice-led research. In February 2008 the Australian Federal Labor government announced Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA), a new research framework that formally recognizes the research component of many creative works. There is now formal recognition of both the practice itself, and of practice-led writing. This paper draws on interviews conducted prior to the implementation of ERA with eight artist-academics employed at Australian universities. The study sought participants' views on their arts practice as research or a site of knowledge. The relationships and interactions between the work of the artist and the work of the academic were being constantly negotiated and emerged as integral to the recognition of practice as research. Participants' views appeared to be shaped by the creative medium in which each worked, and while responses married with views in the literature, several new issues were identified. Findings suggest many ways of writing about and teaching the knowledge contained within the artistic process and product. This knowledge has particular value to the academy in different locations.

Keywords

Creative practice, creative research, ERA, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Due in part to the previous lack of recognition for creative practice as research, artists working as academics in Australia have become active agents in a growing body of written research addressing different approaches to practice-led research (Bennett, Blom & Wright, 2009; Blom, 2006; Bolt, 2006; Hannan & Vella, 2006; McIntyre & Paton, 2008). However, in February 2008 the Australian Federal Labor government announced Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA), a new research framework with a 2009-2010 budget of AUD$35.8 million. The framework incorporates formal research recognition for creative works in four categories:
1. Original (creative) works in the public domain;

2. Live performance works in the public domain;
3. Recorded/rendered creative works; and
4. Curated or produced substantial public exhibitions, events or renderings.

To meet framework requirements, the artist-academic must articulate the research component of each creative output using a 250-word statement that identifies the research background, contribution and significance (ARC, 2009). Thus, artist-academics—whether or not they have previously chosen to engage with practice-led writing as well as the creative process and outcome—must now think reflectively and critically about their arts practice as a site of knowledge.

This paper draws on a study involving interviews with eight artist-academics employed full-time at Australian universities. The interviews were conducted prior to implementation of the ERA framework and the initial interview question related to participants' views about their arts practice as research or a site of knowledge. The paper summarizes responses to this question.

All three investigators considered their own arts practice to be a site of knowledge and had previously articulated their discoveries using the written word, so they brought empirical knowledge to the project. This knowledge provided an experiential platform for the multiple perspectives exposed by the literature. Key areas of interest included how knowledge is embedded; how this knowledge comes to light; whether knowledge is found within the process or the creative outcome/artwork; and ways of writing about this knowledge.

LITERATURE

Whilst an international literature review was undertaken, writings by Australian artist-academics are used here to illustrate insights into embedded knowledge within the creative process and outcome, and to consider how this knowledge comes to light. For example, Bolt (2006, p. 4) draws on David Hockney's investigation into Ingre's paintings to illustrate how an exegesis can "do much more than explain, describe or even contextualise practice" by enabling Hockney and others "to look at, and think about paintings and drawings from a different perspective. It enabled a shift in thought itself" (p. 4). For Bolt, a visual artist herself, this 'shift in thought' occurred when making landscape paintings and being "left inadequate to the task

of rendering this complex landscape in paint" (p. 8). The challenge unraveled her preconceived ideas about landscape painting and took her work "elsewhere" (p. 9). Similarly, composer Bruce Crossman (2002) describes his transition to "valuing the intuitive over the purely intellectual" (p. 63). While preparing Ross Edwards's *Kumari* for performance, pianist Diana Blom (2006) experienced "uncertainty with [her] conceptual thinking of the shape of the work as a whole" (p. 111) and undertook several strategies before actually learning the notes of the piece. Investigating 'comprovisation', his own term for his practice of "making new compositions from recordings of improvised material" (p. 1), composer Michael Hannan (2006) found in his practice an engagement with cultural, social, linguistic and theoretical formations, surmising that while there are features in common with traditional forms of research, "experimental methods used are likely to produce new sounds and new and unexpected ways of combining them" (p. 13). All of the Australian artist-academics encountered the unexpected, and the resulting shift in thinking moved each discipline forward.

Knowledge of arts practice can be found within the creative process, the creative outcome, or both. For Odam (2001), practice-based research is now "at the forefront of arts research thinking … plac[ing] the artist and her/his own practice at the centre of the enquiry and … usually carried out by the artist" (p. 81). Odam considers the artist undertaking systematic enquiry into his/her own practice, and he refers to both teaching and to research into "the artistic process" (p. 82). The experience of being within (rather than abstracted from) the performance is important here because "creative knowledge cannot be abstracted from the loom that produced it" (Carter, 2004, p. 1). It is here that the artist-academic can offer insight of a kind not available to the non-practitioner.

In discussions of authenticity in the performing arts, dancer Sarah Rubidge's continuum of views on the real-time performance outcome is most helpful. Rubidge's interrogation of practice identifies a variety of ways of writing, distinguishing between 'practice-based', 'practice-led' and 'practice as' research (Rubidge, 2005). She identifies performance as different to 'the artwork' and she works to identify the 'languaging' (Maturana & Varela 1987) base of art. Rubidge finds that "no single performance can exhaustively realize the work, it can merely reveal one or another of its facets or 'profiles'" (p. 220), a view shared by Cook (2001). All of these views contribute to the revelation of the knowledge inherent in the making process of the 'scored work' and in the process and creative outcome. The value of this knowledge lies within, but extends beyond, the creative arts. It offers opportunities for more meaningful conversations about a wide range of learning and research processes.

Arts practitioners suggest several different ways of writing about what Rubidge (2005) identifies as practice-led research: research using practice to research practice, often without an initial clearly defined question or hypothesis.

Performance theorists Richard Schechner (1990) and Victor Turner (1987) were influential in the attempt to systematize the performance experience. Turner's anthropological readings of performance enabled Schechner to construct models of teaching and learning that contributed to the development of contemporary performance practices: an aesthetic construction that seeks to remove artistic fiction and replace it with a heightened sense of participation in creative communication. In this work the audience is admitted, indeed invited, to find personal significance in the performed research of informed artists. Schechner sought to identify performance in cultural and experiential, rather than artistic, terms. In doing so he differentiated 'insiders' and 'outsiders', a view shared by several of our study participants and discussed later.

Vital to this discussion is the work of Schechner and others on the experience of being 'inside' the performance. Indeed, the literature reveals strong debate about whether and how this inside knowledge can (or indeed should) be expressed in words.

METHODOLOGY

Eight arts practitioner participants from six institutions in Australia were identified from within professional networks. Purposeful sampling was employed to identify academics employed in full-time permanent positions, which carry expectations of traditional research publications in addition to the maintenance of a high-level arts practice. The eight arts practitioners, their arts discipline, length of time in academia and post-graduate qualification are given in Table 1. All participants had an active creative practice.

Table 1: Participants

Arts discipline	Years in academia	PG qualification at time of interview
Actor	10	Completing a PhD
Electro-acoustic composer and performer	5	PhD
Composer	40	PhD
Songwriter, popular musician	4	Enrolled in an MA
Dancer	15	PhD (literature)
Theatre director, drama teacher	10	Enrolled in a PhD
Ceramicist	14	PhD
Keyboard performer	12	Enrolled in a PhD

Each interview built a profile of the participant, gathering information on qualifications, academic position, years spent in academia, and a description of the participant's arts practice. Shown at Table 2, participants were asked to mark on a continuum where they would situate themselves as artists and academics, and where they would situate their

research. Three artist-academics situated themselves as artists, three as academics and two in the middle. In situating their research, all responses were on the left of the continuum: five towards the artist side and three towards the middle.

Interviewing commenced with the question: do you view your arts practice as a site of knowledge (that is, as research) and if so, how is it so? Analysis adopted Glaser's "constant comparative method" of analysis whereby codings were compared "over and over again with codings and classifications that have already been made" (Flick, 2002, p. 231). Seeking new responses to the topic, aspects of grounded theory were adopted to develop "analytical interpretations of … data to focus further data collection" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509).

Table 2: Continuum

The Artist as Academic

Name of participant: **Name of interviewer:**

Date:

1. Mark (with a black pen) where you perceive yourself in the university environment as artist and as academic.

2. Mark (with a red pen) to situate your research on the continuum

  Artist----------------------------I-------------------------Academic

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participants identified many types of knowledge embedded in the creative process and outcome. Whilst they all commented on aspects of the unexpected, intuitive, mysterious and serendipitous in the creative process, they voiced different views of how their arts practice constitutes research. Whilst there was general consensus that forms of creative knowledge can be shared, participants stressed that creative practice involves constant exploration of new territories and activities, and if this were thoroughly accessible and without conceptual challenge it would hold no interest.

The songwriter considered songwriting to be an intuitive mode of research that he was reluctant to analyze. His almost superstitious attitude is reflected in interviews with other songwriters for whom songs "arrive at your doorstep and all you do is give them an airing, make it possible for them to exist" (Keith Richards, in Flanagan, 1986, p. xiii). The electro-acoustic musician and the actor each talked of working through arduous skilled regimes. Four participants (the songwriter, actor, theatre director and composer) recognized the self as a site of knowledge, visceral and beyond, drawing on emotion, sensory perception and social

intelligence and dealing with a wide range of intelligences. All participants spoke of the creative process as holistic.

The songwriter and electro-acoustic musician spoke of arts practice as being about itself, while the composer, the actor, and the theatre teacher talked of their arts practice communicating beyond its own medium. In this way they acted as storytellers or public intellectuals within their community, which in turn formed part of an international community of arts practitioners. These dichotomies work together to shape a broad view of the creative process and product from the inside looking out and from the outside looking in.

While all participants agreed that their arts practice was a site of knowledge, two felt that the artistic outcome or artistic object could not stand alone as research. Only the keyboard performer considered the creative outcome to be more important in research terms than the codifying of the process. Rather, the development process was the aspect recognized as research, a view shared by Davidson (2004). Demonstrating "the [opera] rehearsal process as a research activity" (p. 134), Davidson found it "problematic to define performance per se as research" (ibid). Davidson described the western art performance as "typically a more presentational than a reflexive activity … rather more analogous to the skills and knowledge-base necessary for a written examination" (ibid) compared with the reflective processes and experimentation of the rehearsal process. For Davidson and her singers, an action research approach to rehearsing "made us work more deeply and thoughtfully than we would have otherwise" (p. 134). These comments illustrate the depth of engagement and knowledge to be gained from process. They also indicate analytical skills and the capacity and willingness to contribute these insights to enrich current discourse: creative artists writing about their creative practice as research.

Encapsulating these views are the three principal types of experiential knowledge identified by Biggs: explicit, which can be expressed linguistically; tacit, which has an experiential component that cannot be efficiently expressed linguistically; and ineffable, in which the content cannot be expressed linguistically. Biggs (2004) argued that all three types form part of practice-based research subject to the context, framing of questions, and methods of investigation. For Biggs, the term practice-based research applies to both the process and communication of the outcome: "it seems unlikely that artefacts will be essential to communicate content that is not itself ineffable. On the other hand, ineffable content does not necessarily require non-linguistic communication" (p. 13). Participant views appeared to be shaped by the creative medium and by whether the medium was established, or new. This aspect requires further investigation.

In line with the literature on the unique perspective of being inside a performance, several participants felt that research into arts practice should be undertaken by the practitioner rather than by an external agent. However, participants

acknowledged that arts practice could be undermined by too much analysis, with some artists finding such self-focus anathema to ongoing creative expression. Nonetheless, research about and into arts practice was heralded for its invaluable contribution to artistic practice in assisting the development of skills to analyze, critique and reflect.

Whilst practitioners and others who write about their practice could be viewed as co-dependents, there appears to exist a degree of suspicion and antagonism, particularly when practitioners sense a loss of agency or experience misrepresentation of their practice. Ultimately, artists need to define their work before others do so, and our participants recognized that research skills enable this to occur. A further consideration for participants was that an external agent inevitably defines creative work for an external audience, whereas practitioners can inform both an external audience and their own practice.

Participants identified particular difficulties in relation to traditional written research for academics whose arts practice is not primarily in the written word, and for artists whose arts practice is 'real-time' or performative. However, they recognized the important role of academia in creating an environment for this way of thinking and writing. Participants concurred that the emphasis on the written word as research encourages artist academics to write about their work (and that of others), which feeds their practice and, in turn, their teaching.

Despite academia being viewed as an environment providing strong, critical peer review and support, the practitioner's understanding of creative work was often at odds with academic structures, traditions and methodological approaches. This created angst for artist-academics needing to gain recognition, meet expectations and advance their careers. The challenge for some was to find a language that would allow their work to be situated in a research environment. More than language, the challenge voiced by participants was to find a form and structure that can be recognized as meeting the needs of two highly critical audiences.

Traditionally notated research results in a product that is accessible and easier to evaluate than creative research output. Despite general acceptance of the priority afforded to traditionally notated research and the promise of recognition for creative output under ERA, there was a strong view that academia does not currently understand creative practice. If it did, there would be no reason for the artist to justify practice to the academic audience. The situation reflects Odam's observation (2001, p. 82) that practice-led research offers "interesting thoughts … concerning the way our society values, understands, trusts and respects its artists and teachers".

Some participants had opted not to accommodate both audiences, deciding that reflective writing was not necessary, appropriate, possible or even desirable. With the introduction of ERA in 2009 and the inevitable mainstreaming of creative work, this stance is no longer an option. How artist academics manage this transition remains to be seen.

Between the roles of artist, researcher and tertiary educator, artist-academics bring innovative approaches to both traditional and creative research, and the results are seen in new forms of knowledge. These approaches could be of great benefit to the academy in the future through informed teaching, new ways for students to engage with their arts practice, and new knowledge through research publications. Our findings suggest that elements of creative arts practice such as analysis, writing, critical inquiry and informing one's own arts practice and teaching, take several forms. These align with existing descriptions of approaches to writing about creative arts practices, but also suggest further models including:

- Mindful practice: A fairly constant awareness of what one is doing during the practice itself, of particular relevance where the whole body is fully engaged in real-time disciplines such as dance and acting;

- Reflective practice: Pausing to reflect on and review what has occurred and/or is occurring;

- Artistic action research: A deliberate trialing of new ideas within the creative practice flow.

The relationships and interactions between the work of the artist—the creative output and the process leading to it—and the work of the academic—through teaching and research—are constantly negotiated and emerge as integral to the recognition of practice as research. Findings suggest that the many ways of writing about and teaching the knowledge contained within the artistic process and product, are of particular value to the academy. These findings will resonate in many locations.

In the next phase of our study we plan to broaden the group of artist-academics, revisit the ERA cohort one year after the implementation of ERA, and form collaborations in order to make comparisons internationally.

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