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## **Undertaking practice-led research through a Queensland-wide women's history project**

**Bronwyn Fredericks**

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on a practice-led research project where the author as artist/researcher participates in a Queensland-wide women's history project to celebrate Queensland's Suffrage Centenary in 2005. The author participated in the Women's Historical Shoebox Collection, where Queensland women were invited to decorate and fill a shoebox with personal and symbolic items that speak about their lives and the lives of their women forebears. This paper explores the practice-led research process that enabled the artist/researcher to design and assemble her contribution. Fredericks describes the iterative process of developing the shoebox and the themes that developed through her artistic practice. She also describes the content of her shoebox and explains the symbolism underpinning the items. The Women's Historical Shoebox Collection is now owned by the State Library of Queensland and the Jessie Street National Women's Library.

### **Keywords**

Artist, Indigenous, Australia, practice-led research, action research, learning, shoebox, Queensland Women's Historical Shoebox Collection

### **Introduction**

To celebrate Queensland's Suffrage Centenary Year in 2005, women throughout Queensland were encouraged to reflect on what the centenary meant to them, both collectively and individually. As part of the celebrations, women were invited to decorate and fill a shoebox with personal and symbolic items that could speak about their lives and the lives of their women forebears over the past 100 years. The shoebox activity was designed to encourage women to celebrate, research and record their everyday lives from various perspectives – including the political, social, cultural, environmental and family.

I accepted an invitation to be part of the shoebox project, and embarked on my own practice-led action research project to create my contribution. In this paper, I explore the artistic, practice-lead research process used to create my shoebox.

### **The Queensland Shoebox Project**

The Women's Historical Shoebox Collection project was developed in 2005 by Jillian Clare, Beverley Perel and Scotia Monkivitch as part of the Queensland's Suffrage Centenary celebrations. Queensland Senator Claire Moore suggested that the project enabled women to:

... look at their own history, to go back and to commemorate what was important to them and their families about the issue of the vote, about the issues of being part of a democracy and about what they were doing now and also what their mothers and their grandmothers were doing then ... to research their own histories and then record them. (Moore, 2006)

Women were encouraged to be as creative as they liked in assembling their shoeboxes, and to include any items that were relevant to them – such as photographs, pieces of fabric, specific mementos, cards, things they might have collected over time, fragments of memory or maybe even suppositions in place of memories. They could paint their boxes or decorate them to reflect themselves and their female ancestors.

Senator Moore (2006) described her experiences in creating her shoebox. She learned new things about her family and discovered the extent of her family's involvement in politics on Queensland's Darling Downs. She talked to her mother about suffrage and other aspects of women's history. She also learned about how suffrage and women's history affected the women around her, including people in her office and her two sisters. She writes:

... we got into the process – which was one of the exciting aspects – of celebrating, researching and talking to each other about the kinds of things that we would put into the box. We got the normal documentation. We found records – such things as birth certificates and school reports, which caused a bit of interest in terms of who actually did get the higher marks at different times. We also found out about different statements that were made in the family regarding celebrations that occurred. We found old cards that had been circulated in the family on the occasions of birthdays and marriages, and we were able to put them in the boxes. That brought back memories of the family members who have passed now. Through this process we were able to relive experiences. We found things like candles that were used at special celebrations, graduation certificates and photographs from school. This led to people talking and catching up with old school friends. So the process and the project had a life of its own – and it grew, because as we did this we gathered more people into our celebration and our research. (Moore, 2006)

Women from across Queensland sent their shoeboxes to the coordinators of the project and created an historical record of the personal lives of Queensland women. The shoeboxes formed the Women's Historical Shoebox Collection and were donated to the State Library of Queensland to be locked away for a period of time. Senator Moore reflected: 'Imagine what will happen in 50 years or 100 years, when the women of that generation will be able, I hope, to open these boxes and see what all of us thought was important in our time' (Moore, 2006). The Women's Historical Shoebox Collection is now owned by the State Library of Queensland and the Jessie Street National Women's Library.

### **Creating my shoebox**

I approached the shoebox as a creative, practice-led, action research project. I saw myself as an artist/researcher/writer, so I started with a series of questions: What message did I want to convey? What memories and images did I want to share? What memories were fragile and traumatic, and therefore definitely not for sharing? How could I present my life and the lives of my forebears in a way that would be engaging? How could I avoid being objective, dry and fiscal in the objectives I chose – like the shoeboxes in the tops of many cupboards or under beds that contain bits of letters, cards, receipts, warranties and insurance papers? How would I balance things that might provide a more reliable record compared with a more subjective memory or record? (Papastergiadis, 2002).

My practice-led model of action research meant that I needed to allocate plenty of time to the project, to undertake relevant research, and to focus on myself and beyond myself to other women in my family and community. I began to gather, experiment, explore, document and

generate data or evidence. I tried to learn by doing – by applying my knowledge and techniques, and then having time to reflect, make changes and reflect again. My process involved multiple, uncountable iterations.

As part of the research, I asked women members of my family what they thought about voting and democracy. This was difficult at times, as they hold such varied views. My family ranges from conservative through to hard leftist and radical perspectives. I spent a lot of time wondering how I could create a shoebox that would mirror the different perspectives I was hearing, and the relationships people had with Country, history, each other and the community.

Gray (1996) explains that, for the practice-led researcher, the research is initiated in the practice. It is in the process of the practice that questions, problems and challenges are identified and reflected upon, and the outcome that results is shaped by the practice and the research (p. 3). My experience of the process oscillated between frustrating and exhilarating, as my practice developed and shifted over time. My performance of the practice was not static, but rather catalytic in approach (Haseman, 2006; Strand, 1998). As with many practice-led projects, the art that emerged was nothing like what was originally imagined. It still, however, may be accepted and seen as aesthetically pleasing (Sullivan, 2005).

My shoebox creation process happened in my studio at Keppel Sands, about 40 kilometres out of Rockhampton, near Queensland's Capricorn Coast. Keppel Sands is within the Country of the Dharumbal and Woppaburra peoples of the region. I also worked at the nearby Sandhills Studio, which is owned and managed by Capricornia Arts Mob member Pamela CroftWarcon. At the time, Pamela was working full-time as a professional artist.

From Pamela, I learned about mixing different ochres and other paint mediums. We shared ideas about representing Country and travelling between places. I began to experiment and work on the shoebox itself. Pamela's studio provided me with a culturally affirming and Indigenous-centred environment, and a place where we could acknowledge our relationship as sisters, colleagues, artists and community members (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

I also took my shoebox to some women's meetings in Rockhampton, so that I could work on the box in the same way that other women might take their knitting, crochet, sewing or painting. Other women became very interested in my work. They would ask where my work was, and I would open up the shoebox and sort through my collection. Through this process of sharing with other women, I was able to explore themes, ideas, concepts, historical memories and contexts of artistic inquiry. The conversations helped me to push the boundaries in my imagination and in the creating of the shoebox. This way of working was situational and intervening (Gray & Malins, 2004), allowing me to engage with the work and with numerous other people. I was able to undertake my creative practice while involving others and being inspired or challenged by others, rather than completing the work in my studio in isolation (Gray & Malins, 2004). In this way, I was able to continue the research process informed by the practice, and continue with the practice with minimal disruption due to life's circumstances.

The shoebox project reflected the interplay and connection between different aspects of my life – between my roles as an artist, a writer, an educator and a researcher. Most of the time, I don't like being asked to choose which title best suits me, and I see them all as a continuum of myself (Papastergiadis, 2002). I often choose to represent myself as artist/researcher or

artist/writer/researcher/educator. While I recognise that they are seen as different roles, for me they work in collaboration with each other, in much the same way that I collaborate with myself in practice-led research (Barrett, 2006). In essence, my various roles are elements of the whole as I undertake my practice-led work and my creative practice (Schon, 1983; Stewart, 2006). The words of Priest (2006) are useful here:

Creative practice is central to all my teaching and, within that, exploration, innovation and discovery are paramount. This approach makes the praxis between research/practice and teaching a real and vulnerable one. It's where students are exposed to the nature of both the practice-based and industry research I undertake and how that informs my own practice, my passion for experimental sound, and the framework in which I position my teaching. (p. 9)

The flow of knowledge that moves between my artistic practice, research and teaching is inspiring and dynamic. It propels me to do more, to be more. I understand that I can be an artist-educator, and that this is a positive thing (Blom, Wright, & Bennett, 2008; Hannan, 2006). Moreover, being with students and teaching others is, in a sense, integral to my creative practice. As artist-educator, I can explain how my work flows and how I make new contributions to knowledge. Through feedback, I know that others learn from me. I believe that my artistic practice and teaching helps to growing the practice of others (Reilly, 2002). For me, the learning is two way: from teacher to students, and students to teacher.

I documented the process I used to create the shoebox through a series of photographs, sketches, a journal and a daily diary where I kept notes about my thoughts, discussions and reflections (Stapleton, 2006). I maintained a visual wall, as I do for all of my projects, as I find that this allows me to move images around and add words, arrows and more pictures. From a research perspective, the visual wall offers me an opportunity to reflect, learn, interrogate, and be more rigorous in the practice of my research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Holbrook, St George, Ashburn, Graham, & Lawry, 2006). It helps me to explain the work to myself, collaborate with myself, analyse my ideas, and challenge and extend myself in ways that minimise any questions around the methodology (Hockey, 2003; Schon, 1983; Scrivener, 2000).

Research is central to this work, as is mindful practice (Stewart, 2006), reflective practice (Schon, 1987, 1983) and artistic practice (Barrett, 2007; Odam, 2001). At times, the practice-led research literature is confusing, because the field is new and writers do not widely agree (see Bolt, 2006; Hockey, 2003; Petelin, 2006; Rubidge, 1996; Smith & Dean, 2009). Despite this, it is an exciting area of work because it is grounded in 'long-standing and accepted working methods and practice of artists and practitioners across the arts practitioners across the arts and emerging creative disciplines' (Haseman, 2007, p. 148).

### **My shoebox**

Sometimes, the results of practice-led research are fully discussed and described in text, without including any images of the works produced. In the text of 'art talk', the artwork itself may be referred to as the 'artefacts of the research' (Pakes, 2004). In other examples, the textual discussion of the practice may include images of the artefacts, even though the focus of the text is to explore and advance knowledge of the practice or within practice (Bolt, 2006; Petelin, 2006). In this paper, I would like to showcase parts of the artefact alongside my personal narrative on the work. In sharing the images in this way, readers become the audience of the artefact.

My shoebox project started with a shoebox that I found in the cupboard. It was not particularly ornate. I began to think about what the box represented in shape and form, and reflected on the various assemblage works with boxes undertaken by Pamela CroftWarcon (Croft, 2003).

Over several weeks, I looked through my studio and cupboards at the bits and pieces I had kept over the years. Each one reminded me of an event, person, emotion, time of day or thought. I used a separate box to gather the fragments of my life, almost as if I was adding them into a database of time. I kept returning to the box and reviewing the items to rethink and rework my ideas.

The fragments in the box combined to make a memory story about my life so far. I didn't want to make a linear story, because my life does not seem linear even though it moves in minutes, days, weeks and years. I gained an aesthetic understanding of each piece before placing it near another piece. The fragments in the box also combined in practical ways, through the binding, gluing, sticking, placing, stitching and fixing. Some items seem to inform another item, and allowed words and concepts to be through the items. This exploring helped me to gain further insights (Wright, Bennett, & Blom, 2010).

The outside of the shoebox became a frame for the memories of my life. I painted the outside and the inside with ochres that reflected and were made from the colours of the earth. I ground the rocks in multiple colours of red, brown, yellowy-red and rust. The ochre on the shoebox is from the Woogaroo Creek area of Goodna and Redbank Plains, in the Countries of the Ugarapul and Jagara. I used rock on rock to make the paint from ochres and then mixed it with water from the Woogaroo Creek at Ipswich and the Fitzroy River at Rockhampton (see Figure 1). I painted blue on the lid and underneath to represent the water of the Capricorn Coast, Fitzroy River, Brisbane River, Bremer River, Moreton Bay and Woogaroo Creek. The dots that I painted represent my travelling lines – to and from Ipswich and Brisbane, and Rockhampton and Keppel Sands. I frequently travel between these regions and they are special within my heart and spirit. The travelling line inside the lid represents all of my other travelling. The yellow dots within circles at both ends of my box represent me meeting and gathering with others in both the Brisbane and Rockhampton areas.



Figure 1. My Shoebox on the outside. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.

Inside the box are items that represent past ancestors and friends who have passed away, and those who are within my life now – including a bone; friendship band; angle friendship pin; red, black and yellow binding; pink binding; shells; and seeds (see Figure 2). The bone symbolises humanness, and the understanding that we all experience life and death. The friendship band and angel pin were gifts, and are symbols of the items and relationships that bind people to each other. The red, black and yellow binding represents the Aboriginal people, while the pink binding represents the non-Indigenous people, all of whom are friends, relatives and extended family. I am of both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The shells and seeds represent people of land and water, freshwater people and saltwater people.



Figure 2. Ancestral Bonds inside my Shoebox. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.

Other items in my shoebox represent my love of adornment. I included bracelets; a sparkly earring; a plastic ring; seeds; and red, black and yellow binding (see Figure 3). I am comfortable wearing silver, gold, bone, seeds or plastic, and I see beauty and a sense of fun in many objects.

I included some red, black and yellow binding bound together with purple ribbon to symbolise that Aboriginality and womanhood go together for Aboriginal women. At times it seems that Aboriginal women are almost asked to make a choice between Aboriginality and womanhood, but how can we do this? Aboriginal women never have Aboriginality without womanhood. Any attempt to split ethnicity from womanhood, or womanhood from ethnicity is a European/North American, dualistic form of reasoning. It comes with divide-and-conquer tactics. In this split, Aboriginal women could be caught in a triple jeopardy of betrayals: accused of betraying men (or a particular man), betraying her community, or betraying women. At times, feminism itself can translate into a Westernised, colonising influence, where gendered activity is converted to Westernised sex-role stereotypes and applied to Aboriginal women. This feminism is not about Aboriginal women's notions of equity. It only adds confusion about what Aboriginal women may see as oppression, and becomes a new form of the colonising practices amongst white women.

There are two hearts at the bottom of my box, one larger than the other. The larger one represents my life partner. We were lucky to find each other. The other smaller heart represents my past loves and those who have broken my heart; they are people who gave me new ways to see and know myself.



Figure 3. Adornment and love inside my Shoebox. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.



My box also includes a vintage cotton reel, vintage buttons, retro buttons, new buttons, red binding and pink binding (see Figure 4). Together, these items symbolise the women in my family who are linked through sewing. The red binding is a symbol of woman and our connection through being birthed through the generations. The buttons represent the many generations of women in my family who have sewn. The pink thread represents the woman who taught me the first word I ever spoke. Her name was Mrs Gregg, and my first word was 'button'. My sewing collection also acknowledges the many Aboriginal women who worked hard as domestics for non-Indigenous people from the time of invasion and through the years of colonisation. Sometimes they were victims of violence and sexual abuse, and they received little remuneration for their work (if any).



Figure 4. The inside of my Shoebox. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.

The shells, coral, sea urchin, driftwood, and twisted rope represent my love for the sea and water. When I was creating the shoebox, my home was near the water at Keppel Sands, overlooking the Keppel Islands. I have always liked being near water and in water. I give recognition here to my dear friend Angela Barney Leitch, who is a Woppaburra Keppel Island woman, and her husband Paul Leitch; together they gave me the honour of being Godmother for their daughter Kate Terese Leitch.

My box includes emu feathers, with red, black, yellow and pink binding tied at the top. They are fixed to the box and sit over everything, because they represent my Aboriginal family through time and space.

My box also includes numerous non-attached items, many of which have details written on the reverse. These include:

- A paper I wrote on Feminism and the Plight of Aboriginal Women in Australia
- Photographs of my house at Keppel Sands
- Photographs of my office/ studio where I create
- A photograph of my eyes when I get an allergic reaction
- A photograph of me public speaking
- A photograph of me receiving a facial from a friend at our spring-time brighten up
- A photograph of me hamming it up and singing on stage as Dr Rock
- Poem: these eyes and this heart remembers
- Poem: Meat, Chips and Eggs
- Cover of NTEU Advocate Journal featuring the Indigenous forum
- Details of places of I have travelled
- The tops of some of the writing magazines I get delivered
- A couple of travel stories I have written.

My box is complete with personal and symbolic items that speak about my life and the lives of my forebears.

### **Conclusion**

The shoebox project can be seen from many perspectives: as art, craft, history, research or scholarly activity. For me, it is all of these things combined through the process of a practice-led research project. Creating the shoebox required a form of inquiry that is different from conventional action research, although it still involves engagement, collaborative experiences, evaluation, learning, reflection, change, data analysis and processing, and movement within the process itself. The practice-led action research process allowed me to contribute in a meaningful way to the Women's Historical Shoebox Collection. When other people open, view and interact with our shoeboxes, at some time in the future, I hope they will be able to see what my life was like in my time and place, and understand my contribution in some way that inspires them for their time and place.

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