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Capturing Creative Practice

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Introduction

Creative practice as research at the university level has gained recognition nationally and internationally. This has brought ongoing growth in the number post-graduate enrolment in the creative arts disciplines (encompassing visual arts, performing arts, design and creative writing). Between 2001 and 2007, there was an 80% increase in enrolments in creative arts doctoral programs Australia-wide (Baker and Buckley, 2009). At Edith Cowan University (ECU), the number of creative arts HDR candidates at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) has risen from 12 in 2008 to 51 in 2014. The number of practice-led researchers enrolled in doctoral programs in the broader Faculty of Education and Arts (FEA) at ECU has also increased dramatically in recent years.

A PhD in creative research usually involves both a creative research project and a written, critical and/or theoretical component (the exegesis). Both should contribute new observations and knowledge and together they comprise the thesis. The creative component (performance, musical score, exhibition, etc.) is a substantial, original creation in the practice of the chosen discipline or disciplines. The exegesis articulates the idea or internal representation of the creative component and becomes 'a re-enactment of the artefact as process...a vehicle for validating the process of studio enquiry and elaborating the values of its outcomes' (Barrett, 2007). According to Hamilton, Thomas, Carson & Ellison (2014);

in the creative arts where a thesis may be comprised of creative and written (exegetical) components, conventions around length, form and strategic intent of the two elements have not yet reached consensus, let alone quality.

Ideally, the exegetical writing should reflect the specificities of the discipline and include documentation that best articulates 'the value of creative processes as modes of revealing—in other words of enquiry and research' (Barrett, 2007), whether that be sketches, video or sound files. This documentation is vital for reflective practice, a key aspect of practice-led research (Gray and Pirie, 1995).

The diversity of students undertaking post-graduate level studies in creative arts has prompted recognition that there are a variety of ways in which a student might submit their doctoral work (Paltridge et al., 2011, Phillips et al., 2009). As such, one of the biggest challenges for supervisors of creative arts HDR candidates is providing

students with guidance on how to document the tacit knowledge that informs and underpins their creative process. Such documentation is vital in order to promote deep and thorough reflection and properly represent research findings (Haseman, 2007, Mercer et al., 2012). As supervisors of HDR candidates in the creative arts at ECU, we see the problems that arise when key aspects of the creative process cannot be written down yet need to be captured. The aim of this project is to gather more concrete data on how the capturing tacit knowledge in creative research processes can impact on supervision and learning experiences. This data has been gathered from interviews with a selection of creative arts HDR supervisors and focus groups with HDR candidates at ECU. The second aim was to explore ways to address the problem. *Beyond Thesis and Exegesis: capturing creative practice to improve supervision of creative arts higher degree candidates* is a scoping exercise to draw on data from the interviews and focus groups with supervisors and HDR students as well as information about comparative approaches taken by other tertiary institutions.

Background Information/Literature review

The growth of practice-led research (PLR) in higher degree by research programs is evident from the ECU experience where it is the predominant methodology used by the School of Communication and Arts (SCA) and WAAPA research candidates. PLR refers to 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humankind, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications' (Cited in Sullivan, 2010). PLR as a reflexive paradigmatic research structure calls for creative research to be conducted *for, into* and *through* the practice (Frayling, 1993, Webb et al., 2013). It is led by practice, uses multi-method techniques tailored to the individual project and recognises and acknowledges the importance of the interaction of the researcher with research material. Reflection on the process is absolutely critical to the research findings in PLR, whether this leads to an examinable creative artefact (for example, a play, a choreographed dance piece or series of paintings) or not.

Multi-modal strategies present possible ways for practice-led researchers to synthesise and clarify experiential and embodied creative processes (Naugle and Crawford, 2012). Just as there is no typical or universal methodology for PLR, there is not a typical or universal methodology for capturing the creative processes of practice-led HDR candidates. Video or digital motion capture, for example, may prove an excellent medium for visual artists to document a specific artistic technique that could not be captured adequately in still photography. However, to simply press 'record' on a video camera may not be enough to adequately engage with questions of research or methodology for a creative researcher in live performance.

Work done by Nicola Wood, for example, well illustrates this issue. She notes that while video can 'accurately capture very rich material' there is always the 'danger that the act of observation will change the situation being observed' (2010). However, she argues this can be mitigated by the selection of equipment appropriate to the situation as well as 'good interpersonal skills to ensure that recording results is a useful record but does not intrude on the activity'. Video documentation can also be a part of the research output as well as used for instruction. However, for the craft based arts she was researching (for example wood turning) the complex skills required are largely tacit and 'video has a tendency to conceal rather than reveal the practice'.

In addition to finding other ways to 'document' or to 'capture' creative research, including the ephemera of performing arts the project aims to investigate the potential for an accessible, multi-modal repository of previously conducted research in the creative arts. The need for such a resource has been highlighted in the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) funded project, *Effective Supervision of Creative Arts Research Degrees* (Hamilton et al., 2013). This on-going project has already highlighted the need to expand and deepen the scope of the supervision experiences, process and practices in and for creative research.

We wonder if there is value for HDR students and supervisors in exploring how other researchers play, experiment, 'fail' and ultimately produce knowledge and innovation through creative research. Currently there is no such integrated repository and supervisors must often rely on anecdotal storytelling or examples on YouTube or Facebook in order to offer their students a practice context.

1. Research Plan And Methods

The project is being conducted in five stages throughout 2014:

Stage 1: Literature review (February 2014)

From February to May, a thorough literature review explored corresponding programs nationally and internationally to establish comparative contemporary context for creative arts research processes. Two major findings are worth noting. Firstly the somewhat superficial rendering that documentation is required only for recording purposes, that is, it feeds into the exegesis for examination. Secondly, there was little discussion of how capturing the process might assist in extending the coverage or impact of research.

Stage 2: Interviews (March–April 2014)

In stage 2 we conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 supervisors of creative arts HDR students at ECU in WAAPA and SCA (this included interviews with the three CIs in their capacity as HDR supervisors) across creative disciplines at ECU:

- Visual Arts (Paul Uhlman & Lyndall Adams)
- Performing Arts (Renée Newman-Storen & Maggi Phillips)
- Design (Stuart Medley & Chris Kueh)
- Creative Writing (Marcella Polain & John Ryan)
- Music (Cat Hope)
- Screen Academy (George Karpathakis)

Interviews were conducted to discuss the following questions:

- How do you define or understand the creative process of a research journey in your discipline?
- What are your thoughts on the capturing the developmental documentation of research?
- How do you encourage your candidates to capture process?
- What are the ways in which capturing process could benefit the HDR candidate?
- How is the documented material currently managed/stored
- What is the relationship between the captured data and reflexive thinking?
- In what ways might this capture process be improved?

Stage 3: Focus groups (May–June)

Some of the themes that emerged from the interviews were used to inform two focus groups with approximately 15 HDR students and supervisors of creative research. The focus groups were conducted via the existing interdisciplinary practice-led research forum; *This is not a seminar* (TINAS) (initiated in 2012 to address the specific needs of practice-led researchers).

Stage 4: Data analysis (July–August)

At the time of writing we are currently analysing this data, some of which makes up the preliminary research findings. Further analysis and synthesis of this data needs to be made to ascertain whether and to what degree failure to capture creative processes impacts on teaching and learning outcomes and to then identify key strategies to address these issues.

Stage 5: Dissemination (September–December)

Stage Five involves the dissemination of the findings of this preliminary study. This will be in the form of a report and several articles discussing the issues, concerns and ideas revealed through the literature review, the interviews and focus groups and conclusions surrounding the needs and direction for further research. This will be especially relevant to best teaching and learning practice for post-graduate students and ultimately improved research quality and completions. Some areas of interest that we have already considered as part of the next stage include 1) how this capturing might function, 2) what it might look like, 3) how the data collected might be stored, 4) who would have the right to access what is essentially raw data and 5) what are the ethical issues surrounding disseminating this raw data.

Preliminary Findings

This section focuses on themes revealed in the analysis of the focus groups and the supervisor interviews. Only summaries are presented although permission has been obtained to use identities. Possibly and partly as a reflection of the varied disciplinary backgrounds, a very diverse understanding on the purposes of documenting research was uncovered.

Documentation

One stream relates to the writing and examination stages. Both supervisors and students believed that documentation can reveal key moments in the research and bring these into relief and as aid in the linking of practice and theory, primarily; it seems, by revealing what was hidden in plain sight. Further, by sampling from the documentation, the material was seen as being able to provide a history of the research process, clarifying it and be an aid for the examiner. This was seen as important as for some of the supervisors the exegesis is about showing the development of the project.

Our project wanted to explore access and usefulness of documentation for the supervisory team and for students. Generally, supervisors reported they saw student documentation as primarily a part of the monitoring process – draft chapters, assessing progress from ‘mini-deadlines’ and the material was sometimes brought to supervisor/student meetings to discuss together. Despite this currently restricted use of the material, when asked specifically, supervisors did see other uses for this material. Some suggestions were expansions on the current uses of the material, for example, as part of a strategy of research verification (interviews are conducted appropriately and ethically). However, others related to wider issues such as facilitating structure and form of the thesis based on the documentation as well as a trigger for areas a student might explore further.

Memory

A somewhat related theme centred on ideas of memory. Supervisors saw this as important partly in relation to keeping a record of material for the exegesis. The

exegesis was often conceived as something not started until near the end of a project and so early material and decisions could easily have been forgotten if they were not documented. Supervisors and students had in common the idea that if a line of enquiry was followed and subsequently did not prove fruitful, good documentation would mean they could retrace their steps, alternative paths found as well as being able to see how they arrived at their current point. Both also felt that documentation was a type of creative memory – excess material that might have been discarded in terms of a particular project may provide a base or trigger for future work.

Technical concerns

The interviews revealed that some participants expressed a perceived resistance to documentation as ‘artists do not reveal their processes;’ they are a type of trade secret. However, participants also raised technical concerns as to procedures and methods that can be developed by individual researchers to suit their situation and discipline. It will be important to explore understandings on the nature of research (for example transparency) as well as any creative benefits of documentation if this notion of procedural secrecy is found in further explorations to be widespread.

The tools and strategies used by supervisors and students were substantially more limited in scope and number than the purposes envisioned for documentation but did vary depending on the discipline area. Typical tools included keeping journals and field notebooks, taking photographs and audio recordings and even the simple suggestions such as using the ‘save as’ option in word processors. Video was also an option for some disciplines but raised particular concerns (discussed later in this paper).

Perhaps not surprisingly, supervisors could envision many problems or potential problems when considering the documentation process and although there was some similarity in the issues of students, there were also differences. The concerns fall into roughly two areas, those of a technical nature and those better described as more theoretical in nature. Technical concerns related mainly to questions of archiving the captured material such as the longevity of materials; continuity of file formats; storage space, both physical and digital; standardisation across platforms as well as costs and accessibility of equipment and suitable software.

Supervisors offered numerous suggestions to alleviate the perceived technical problems they identified. These included a dedicated server for students to store their data (possibly accessible to supervisors), the responsibility for storage being taken up by the library and the introduction of a team of ‘documenters’ whose task it is to document the research of others. Student suggestions on improvement included better and/or the latest technology (as best suited to their own discipline), but a recurring theme related to access and availability of equipment and suitable spaces.

Documentation and creativity

One area of concern that was more theoretical in nature related to the ability of documentation to actually capture what was occurring in the research environment. The question was asked by both supervisors and students as to whether the process of documentation might impact on the creative process and how the presence of a camera, for example, may impact on an individual's 'normal' practice? A related fear, again expressed by all participants, was that the capture process could become so important that it began to impinge on the research process and that the researcher may find they work within the confines of what the documentation equipment and processes can capture. All participants – students and supervisors – were concerned there is a danger of the 'institutionalisation' of the documentation and its processes; it might become an end in itself and overly formalised.

In this area, suggestions were offered that, in addition to addressing these key concerns, also served to challenge the superficial purpose of documentation as simply a record of research. There appeared a tension between the problems of the documentation and issues that might arise if a student failed to document the research process.

Some supervisors suggested that seeing a student's documentation may help them assist the student see information in a different light. This observation relates to another specific purpose we wished to explore, that is, how the documentation related to *reflexive thinking*. This is a term often confused with reflective thinking and, although they are related, there is an important difference. Reflection can be understood as 'thinking about the conditions for what one is doing, investigating the way in which the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched' and the way research considers the various 'premises for our thoughts, our observations and our use of language' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2010). Simply put, reflection represents a researcher's thinking and analysis on their particular engagement and processes with the project. Reflexive thinking, however, is a more multi-layered activity. It includes this dimension but goes further. It is 'an unavoidable feature of the way actions (including actions performed, and expressions written, by academic researchers) are performed, made sense of and incorporated into social settings' (Lynch, 2000). In other words, there are different levels (in Alvesson and Sköldberg's language) to reflexive thinking. It asks questions of the researcher, the data, the theoretical underpinnings of the research and the claims to knowledge and understanding of a project.

In light of this understanding, supervisors suggested that documentation can give insight into the researcher's own practice, providing some distance from the project

allowing the possibility of a more objective and critical viewpoint of the research. Further, when considering documentation as a reflexive tool, it was seen as having the potential to make the difference between surface research and deeper or more radical research.

One supervisor summed up the benefits of a reflexive approach when they argued that it aids the critical faculty and may help to shorten the creative process as the student can ask questions they need to at the time they are doing the work. A project's documentation, it was suggested, helps students to see what is working and what is not and to provide a certain 'distance' from the project to allow this to happen; a more objective, critical perspective might be possible.

Conclusion

This project has generated insights into how documentation processes and approaches may allow creative HDR candidates to examine, discuss, question and challenge assumptions and critique their practices as research in their quest to generate new knowledge. It does seem that currently, most researchers felt that documentation was about burden of proof rather than a tool for extending their research or the research of others in the future. There were some suggestions that indicated that capturing data along the way would not only help streamline what was included in the exegesis but also provide an enormous data bank for future researchers to draw from.

However, on the whole we did find through the focus groups and in the interviews with supervisors that improved research outcomes and learning experiences might be achieved through the development and expansion of documentation processes.

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