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A dialogical approach to interdisciplinarity in practice based fine art research

John Hammersley

University of Wales Institute Cardiff

Abstract

This paper examines *An invitation to dialogue Kirkgate Market 2008*, as an example of interdisciplinary fine art practice as research and contrasts it against Greckhamer and colleagues' deconstruction of interdisciplinarity, arguing the former better represents dialogical praxis as a model of interdisciplinarity.

1 Introduction

This paper sets out to discuss how the artwork *An invitation to dialogue Kirkgate Market 2008*, is an example of how qualitative research as art might represent an interdisciplinary practice of fine art practice as research. Firstly it describes the researcher's understanding of the principles of qualitative research before briefly illustrating how the research as artwork is carried out. The paper then locates the artwork in the context of existing conversational and discursive art practices.

Central to the notion that this qualitative approach as artwork might constitute an interdisciplinary practice is its contrasting perspective to

Greckhamer and colleagues' (2008) deconstruction of interdisciplinarity. This deconstructive analysis presents a negative representation of interdisciplinarity as a term that allows organisations or disciplines to control the production of knowledge in a hegemonic manner.

The paper argues that this negative reflection on interdisciplinarity might be countered or contrasted by a constructivist dialogical approach that both better represents Greckhamer and colleagues' aim of achieving Freirean praxis and exemplifies the possibility of qualitative research as an interdisciplinary practice with art; a practice that in turn changes the socially constructed world of interdisciplinary practice.

2 Qualitative research, its principles

Qualitative research is seen as a field in its own right (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), and a field which crosses other fields, subjects and disciplines. As such it might be understood as a metadiscipline or a possible model for interdisciplinary practice. Qualitative researchers ask how 'x' plays a role in causing 'y' or which processes connect 'x' and 'y' (Maxwell 2005). This might be understood as how theory plays a role in practice or vice versa.

Sometimes qualitative research is thought to be unscientific as its procedures belong to a tradition that critiques a positivist perspective (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). In contrasting a belief in a stable unchanging reality it focuses on the world as lived experience, which is made up of the beliefs and actions of individuals (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

Qualitative researchers therefore adhere to the belief that there can be an individual or real subject who is present in the world and able in some way to represent their experience. These representations or reports of people's experiences may include the researcher's own reflections on his or her experience (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). The collection of representations forms the research data.

A complex system of terms and assumptions, the qualitative paradigm includes constructivist, positivist, post-positivist, critical and

feminist-post-structural paradigms. The constructivist paradigm assumes understandings are co-created by knower and respondent acting through naturalistic methodological procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The varied role of qualitative researcher has been described in different ways, including recently as a *bricoleur* or weaver of interpretations who borrows from many disciplines. This creates a complex problem of representation whereby qualitative interpretations necessarily achieve recognition through presentation within the context of a tradition.

The function of qualitative researcher is carried out through being in the world where the process and practices of the research can transform the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). In this way the discipline of qualitative research acts as a set of interpretative processes where the individual can change the world by participating in the interpretation of social meanings. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue that qualitative researchers, 'turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self.' In this way the researcher can study or attempt to interpret the meanings people bring to the phenomena under study.

As suggested above the procedures involved frequently include more than one interpretative practice in one study. Key to changing the world through qualitative research is the idea that the process of engaging with and interpreting the meanings of others shouldn't leave the researcher unchanged. This is key to the notion of *bricoleur* as qualitative researcher (Harper, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

3 Qualitative research as I am doing it

My research explores how the practice of dialogical and qualitative research might play a constitutive role in fine art practice as research and how dialogical arts practices might contribute to our understanding of dialogue. As Bateson (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) asserts, 'The researcher is bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which regardless of ultimate truth of falsity – become partially

self-validating.’ Thus I also seek to validate qualitative research as a fine art practice.

As such I affirm the belief in the importance of how artists represent their experience of art and that this represents a partial picture of how dialogue is socially constructed or understood in art. Through interviewing artists about their experience of art and by extension the world of art, I seek to construct a new picture of the social understanding of dialogue in contemporary art through grounded theory and validate dialogical research as an art practice.

I consciously identify with the constructivist paradigm and the position of *bricoleur* as the assumptions I bring to the role and practice of qualitative research include a background in illustration, conversational and interpretative language teaching of English as a foreign language, cross-cultural training and an identification with hermeneutic and interpretative theories such as the work of Paolo Freire and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

I follow two main methodological procedures. Firstly I interview artists with a semi-structured interview technique that assumes the possibility of an emergent understanding through open dialogue. The interviews are recorded but confidential and analysed for key themes which emerge from the data set as a whole. Secondly and shaped by the experience of the first set of interviews is an artwork which operates in an on-going way much like the series of interviews.

The artwork *An invitation to dialogue* parallels the methodological procedures of the qualitative interview in that it seeks an emergent theme through open conversation. Participants are invited to join me in conversation but because the conversations take place in public settings and cannot be considered confidential the conversations are not recorded. Emergent themes are reflected upon after each manifestation of *An invitation to dialogue* and are written up as reflective case studies. The artwork also incorporates the snowball method of extending invitations to participate in the research/artwork through recommendation by previous participants in the wider research conversation.

The *invitations to dialogue* draw me the artist/researcher into the life world of situated conversation and act as a critical reflective tool on the role of artist as researcher and the notion of a conversational artwork. For example, in the most recent manifestation of the artwork at Leeds' Kirkgate Market in 2008, I participated in eleven conversations at a stall in the struggling middle section of the market. What people represented of their experience was that a section of the market community was struggling and the future of the middle part of the market and its proposed redevelopment was uncertain due to the credit crunch. Stall holders in particular created a picture of not being heard by local councillors who seemed unwilling to be present in the market. The experience of these dialogues led me to leave feeling angry and with a sense that I needed to re-act in some way.

4 How is this fine art practice?

Conversational or dialogical artworks have an increasingly recognised place in recent art history. Since conceptualism's prioritising of 'art as idea' over 'art as object' artists like Ian Wilson and Liam Gillick have emphasised the notion of discussion or the discursive and movements like WochenKlausur in Austria and the Artists' Placement Group in the UK have focused on conversation as a modus operandi for artworks and socially engaged art projects.

The diverse practices that might be termed conversational art have been focused on by writers such as Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) who coined the term 'Operative Realism' to describe how these practices operate between the real world and art object with their status remaining unclear. Although Bourriaud touches upon the complexity and variety of what might loosely be termed 'relational aesthetic practices', individually they may share a resistance to art history's attempts at such disciplinary underlining in the same way the artist Michael Corris argues conceptualism did (Corris, 2004).

The liminal quality of many of these practices, where the boundaries between the everyday and the art become blurred may also echo traditions of the avant-garde and the work of artists such as Allan

Kaprow, Fluxus and the Situationists. For example, the American artist Allan Kaprow (2003) was less concerned in the status of disciplinary labels and boundaries when he proposed the notion of the non-artist, free to participate in creative play and meaning making. This was in part because he was concerned with art's ability as a discipline to create new meaning. Kaprow felt traditional art may have exhausted its own meaning making potential. Collectively however, what we may interpret from such practices is that they may lead away from a central or essential idea of art to an art practice focused on everyday socially constructed meanings.

More recently Grant Kester has described many such socially engaged practices that use conversational ideas and methodologies as their central modus operandi arguing that these works provide context rather than content as art (Kester, 2004). However the British critic and writer Claire Bishop (Bishop, cited in Community Arts Network, 2006) argues that Kester's focus on social activist artists reveals a bias which prioritises the ethical concerns of such work over their status as critical questioning or art.

Kester's book *Conversation Pieces* however represents a resurgence of interest in the philosophies of conversation that differ from discursive models of conversation and which offer dialogue as an alternative conversational model. Kester in particular sees the dialogism of the Russian Literary theorist Bakhtin as the foundational theory model of such activist artistic practices. However, Bakhtin recognises the difficulties of dialogue as Gardiner (1992) comments:

This process is not always the free and spontaneous act of human self-development that Bakhtin obviously feels that it should be. He suggests that there are two very different relations that a subject can have vis-à-vis the discourse of the other: the alien word can either operate in an 'authoritative' or else an 'internally persuasive' fashion.

I believe that Kester's ethical activism and Bishop's aesthetics of critical questioning both represent the artist as either ethical or critical authority yet it is the possibility of artist operating in an internally persuasive fashion that I seek to explore in the work *An Invitation to*

dialogue. A possibility that I believe is arguable through a critique of Greckhamer and colleagues' deconstruction of interdisciplinarity.

5 Critique of Greckhamer et al.'s deconstruction as praxis

In their paper, 'Demystifying Interdisciplinary Qualitative Research', Greckhamer and colleagues set out to define interdisciplinarity before metaphorically mapping what they call 'the terrain of knowledge production'. They do this as they believe this reveals how the sign 'interdisciplinarity' may act as a lever of power that allows organisations to obtain greater resources and maintain control over the organisation of knowledge production by disciplines. This process of deconstructive analysis, they propose, is a reflection on interdisciplinarity (Greckhamer et al., 2008). They argue that this reflection might provide the impetus for others to act and thus change the world through initiating Freirean praxis of reflection and action.

Yet Greckhamer and colleagues' focus on selective dictionary definitions of 'discipline' and 'inter', creates their notion of discipline as signifying external control, order and enforcement. What their demystification of inter reveals to them is that inter remains 'an ambiguous term' (Greckhamer et al., 2008). This latter insight reflects Derrida's (cited in Greckhamer et al., 2008) assertion that, 'texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy.'

Greckhamer and colleagues' definition might not be the same as a qualitative picture of interdisciplinarity created through participation in the socially constructed world or mission of interdisciplinary practice. The qualitative researcher acts in the world to change themselves and how they act. What is brought into question is not a definition but the reasonableness of the picture the researcher creates. Thus Greckhamer and colleagues' deconstruction might not offer a qualitative picture as knowledge that appeals to our own experiences of the lived world.

Instead it sets out to define what Derrida saw as potentially without definable meanings.

Important in the creation of an alternative picture of interdisciplinarity would be a focus on the life world, the researcher's participation through the act of conversation with the other and subsequent reflection. The conversation of qualitative research however does not exclude the possibility of reflection leaving either participant changed. Any change in the researcher's understanding would constitute a change in their socially constructed life world because such a new understanding may influence how the researcher or research participant acts in future. What is critical in this process is the researcher's stance towards change as first and foremost self-change.

Greckhamer and colleagues' deconstructive reflection might lead to changes in the actions of others but this separates their reflection from their action which is antithetical to Freirean praxis. As Freire (1993) argues, 'Within the word we find two dimensions reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis.'

Thus I argue that Greckhamer and colleagues' deconstruction does not seem an integrated part of praxis as it doesn't involve a participation in the life world of action by the researchers themselves and may only suggest action for others. This reflection without accompanying action may constitute what Freire terms verbalism (Freire, 1993). Greckhamer and colleagues' study may then demystify not the controlling nature of interdisciplinarity as an argument for Freirean praxis, but instead illustrate or suggest that deconstruction may exclude the possibility of a positive or unifying understanding of interdisciplinarity and offer only a fractured Freirean praxis.

6 Conclusion

This paper argues that qualitative research is a perspective that focuses on the life world and experience of individuals as loci of socially

constructed meanings. Within qualitative research the constructivist paradigm emphasises the researcher's role as co-creator of social meanings through their participation in naturalistic interpretative procedures which cross disciplines. This participation in the interpretation of social meanings is a world changing act as new representations of the world are created. Important however is the idea that the qualitative researcher should not remain unchanged.

My broader research focuses on participating in interpretative acts of dialogue and proposes these as representations or interpretations of dialogue as practice and understanding in contemporary art. This participation involves two procedures. Firstly I interview artists about their understanding and beliefs and secondly I offer *An invitation to dialogue* as an artwork.

Through interview I interpret what artists understand of their experience and how this may contribute to a wider picture of dialogue in art. Through the artwork *An invitation to dialogue* I reflect on what the co-experience of participating in dialogue may contribute to an interpretative picture of conversational and dialogical artworks and how I am changed by each act.

Thus the naturalistic conversational methodological procedures involved in *An invitation to dialogue* parallel the qualitative methods I use in my research interviews with the difference of being public and unrecorded.

In occupying a liminal space between the everyday focused research discipline of qualitative research and the discipline of art practice I argue that the work echoes Bourriaud's notion of the 'operative realist' artwork.

I interpret Kester's model of activist focused socially engaged art practices and Bishop's contradictory critically questioning alternative as offering authoritative models of practitioner. Through *An invitation to dialogue* I seek to offer the internally persuasive model of artist as co-participant as an alternative. Firstly the artist can be co-participant in the creation of new representations of dialogue through qualitative research and secondly a co-participant in the creation of a

conversational or dialogical artwork. By weaving a new picture of an understanding of dialogue achieved by both interview and artwork I also propose the final qualitative *bricolage* as an artwork.

To illustrate how I perceive this artwork might offer an alternative to authoritative practice and instead offer an internally persuasive model. I contrasted *An invitation to dialogue's* constructivist perspective with Greckhamer and colleagues' deconstruction of interdisciplinarity. In particular arguing as Greckhamer and colleagues recognise, that complex traditions such as interdisciplinary practices may exceed the boundaries currently occupied by disciplines and may in fact not have any definable meanings – as a constructivist qualitative perspective might also suggest.

Thus Greckhamer and colleagues' territorial mapping of the boundaries of interdisciplinarity may not productively deal with the boundary excesses of such practices as they are understood in people's experience. Furthermore, Greckhamer and colleagues propose their deconstructive analysis as a reflection which might lead others to act, initiating Freirean praxis. The integration of action and reflection as articulated by Friere would in their eyes represent a way of challenging the hegemonic control of discourses which use the label of interdisciplinary practice to reinforce their control over knowledge production.

Yet the separation of their reflection from the possible action of others contrasts with the approach of a qualitative researcher which emphasises the co-participation in action and self-reflection. It is co-participation which I argue can lead to both a change in how practitioners might represent the world and how they might act in future. In this way I assert that the constructivist or bricoleur approach provides a better model of Frierean praxis as action and reflection within the researcher.

In my view, what this research uniquely offers is a qualitative model of dialogical artwork as part of a wider interpretative practice or *bricolage*. This I believe will both have an ethical and critical dimension that may unite the concerns of Kester and Bishop and represent a truer Freirean

praxis. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) assert, 'Works that use montage simultaneously create and enact moral meaning. They move from the personal to the political, from the local to the historical and the cultural. These are dialogical texts. They presume an active audience. They create spaces for give-and-take between reader and writer.' Perhaps they might also act as an interdisciplinary space where discourses and organisations might participate in give-and-take in the process of knowledge production.

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