

Painting Monkey or Painting Elephant? Some Comments on Measuring Research in the Creative Art

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Abstract

Like my colleagues, I recently went through the Excellence in Research for Australia evidence gathering process. The measurement of creative work as research output as part of this process has raised a number of issues for me, as a creative scholar, which I feel will be useful to share.

Introduction

In the creative arts (and health sciences) practice-led research (also known as practice-as, practice-based, mixed-mode) is an emerging tool for exploring certain kinds of creative work. It involves a combination of theoretical research and propositional thinking in combination with a creative work, perhaps answering the same proposal/question, often with some critical reflection concerning the process and efficacy of the result. In many respects it is experimental in approach. In terms of student work within the academy there is an exegetic component and a creative work. (Leahy, 2009, Kroll, 2008) Relative weighting concerning the quality of the components can vary between institutions and, of course, between departments within the same university.

The validity of practice-led research continues to be a subject of debate, not so much within creative areas as with the committees of traditional research fields who oversee research output. Pressure continues to be placed on creative academics to conform to a traditional humanities qualitative methodology even when the existence of a practice-led model is acknowledged, forcing research to be ‘about the arts rather than of them.’ (Kroll, 2008) And this raises a further crucial question regarding the practicing artist within the university. To what degree is creative output the actual research output and not just an addendum, parallel or tangential to the real research?

The ERA process has focused the notion of measurement on the creative arts and it is up to practicing creative academics to articulate the standards and defend the validity of the way ‘creatives’ also create new knowledge. It is an opportunity to argue that the process of creative text creation is a form of research output in itself, not merely a text that is analysed conceptually, somehow before it exists.

This paper is a case study focusing on my own experiences in being measured for the ERA. There will be whinging, but also an attempt to put the alternative case for measuring the creative output rather than attempting to change that output into something else. Please bring your own paint brushes.

Painting Monkey

There is a video clip on YouTube: *painting monkey*, accessed on 11 February 2011 at (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_qlt_qbfYw) A zoo keeper gives a monkey some paints and the monkey uses a brush to smear paint on a page and eventually on the back of the keeper. In terms of those people within my university who collected data on my research output for the ERA process, I have come to identify myself with this monkey, or at least understand that this is how I am seen by them.

I was a practicing film and television director and screenwriter for some twenty years, during which I directed for ABC television, directed a feature film, wrote an AFI nominated telemovie and wrote, amongst other things, many hours of children's and adults television. Approximately ten years ago, I took up a position at Curtin University where I continue to teach production and writing. I have continued to write for television with the blessing of my school. My first novel, *Spinner* was published in 2010.

There's another video clip from YouTube, *painting elephant*, accessed on 11 February 2011 at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=He7Ge7SogrK>. A keeper leads an elephant to an easel and gives it paint. The elephant takes the brush and slowly, but clearly paints the outline of an elephant. You can hear tourists gasp as the likeness emerges. I have come to realise that it would be easier to measure my creative output for the ERA if I were more like the painting elephant than the painting monkey. Clearly, the elephant is painting another elephant. Even I can see that this is a talented elephant. Concerning the monkey's skill, I'm not so sure. There's paint and there's a brush, but the monkey's daubs and smears, while colourful, do not look like another monkey... or an elephant.

I'd like to use a number of my creative works, including my novel, *Spinner* and an episode I wrote for the television soap opera *Home and Away* to explore creative research and measuring output especially in regards to the multiple disadvantaging of the academic artist. In doing so, I hope to also defend the place of the painting monkey in the Academy.

The ERA asked that creative works be accompanied by a research statement. This statement needed to include Research Background, Research Contribution and Research Significance. In order to fulfil these statements, I was forced to massage descriptions of my work heavily so they complied.

While it is encouraging that creative work is being counted as research, the models used to measure it are inappropriate.

The University of Sydney offered suggestions which my university used. (Research Statements for Creative Works Submitted for Peer Review, 2010) Under the heading Research Background it was suggested I use one sentence to explain the research field and tradition, then a sentence explaining the work's aim and intent, especially in terms of a gap in the knowledge. Finally I was asked to write 'the research question'.

I am not against research questions, per se. They can be useful tools in research of a certain kind - certainly at say Honours level where relatively simple questions can lead to simple answers within a known field. They are sometimes useful in formulating creative works but they are not always the most useful approach.

I had no research question when I approached my novel, *Spinner*. Now, you can attempt to simplify the process, in retrospect if you wish, but I promise you I had no clear question in mind. I jumped in. I had an idea about a twelve year old who might be the greatest cricket spin bowler in the world.

For a variety of reasons which I don't have time to go into here, I placed my story in the late 1920s. I decided on a quest structure based on previous work and readings such as Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (2007). I embarked on research into the historic period in Australia and Western Australia. I also researched spin bowling and cricket techniques. In terms of narrative and story structure, I drew on a great many films, literary works and my experience as a screen writer. I soon discovered I also needed to research elements of the First World War.

As Jeri Kroll in *Creative Practice and/as/is/or Research: An Overview* (2008) cites Tripp (2003), 'we see a cycle of asking questions, generating methodology, collecting data, creating, revising, reflecting, and modifying practice, which then moves to another level to clarify significance through systematic (or theoretical) evaluation.' (Kroll 2008, p. 6) (Schon, 1983)

In creating works it is not so much a single research question but 'a conversation'. This model was explored at some length by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, adopting the term "double-loop thinking" which can be used to explain the creative process.

'In single-loop learning we learn to maintain the field of constancy by learning to design actions that satisfy existing governing variables. In double-loop learning, we learn to change the field of constancy itself.' (Argyris, 1974 p 19)

Nicola Boyd in *A Creative Writing Research Methodology* (2009) actually draws this non-linear process as a spiral. She also uses the Escher drawing, *Drawing Hands*, to highlight this ongoing interactive process of realisation. (Boyd pp. 7,8)

Many questions arose during the act of writing *Spinner*. I had never written a novel before. I wrote it outside direct Academic mentorship. In fact the novel was written without a sage or tutor. Don't get me wrong. I studied literature at university. I know what point of view is. I know what the term unreliable narrator means. I understand the term willing suspension of disbelief. I do know what things are called. More importantly, I have read a lot of novels. But I entered the writing of this novel as a trial and error process. For instance, I spent three whole chapters describing my character's first test match - and I think it works. It's there in the finished novel. But when it came to the next match, I didn't want to go there again in the same way. Call it instinct, or the 'sum total of experience and learning', but I got bored with telling that part of the story in that way. Maybe the reader might get bored too. (These issues are widely explored, I believe, but I found Steven Scrivener's *Reflection in and on Action and practice in creative production doctoral projects in art and design* (2000) and Hart Cohen in *Knowledge and a Scholarship of Creativity* (2009) useful.)

The solution to that problem also solved another problem. I wanted to break out of the limited point of view from which I'd been telling the story – that is, from a naïve twelve year old perspective – for some three hundred pages. This solution led to another discovery and to a key issue of *Spinner*. The finished novel is about story telling as well as the story, diegetic and ultimately self-reflexive. The spinner is a cricket bowler, but his uncle is a spinner of tall tales, as is the novelist. Yet, I had no conception that this story would become about story telling itself until the decisions around page 300. And that meant then returning to the beginning and teasing out some latent threads there too.

These series of questions arose and were shaped and experimented with and amalgamated. And they came not from a set survey of the field (although by implication that occurs) nor by any consideration of the gap in the field (although I didn't think there was a book around like it), but as Brad Haseman puts it in *A Manifesto for Performative Research* (2006), by jumping in.

Incidentally, a most useful article for everyone interested in the academic artist is *The Interface between arts practice and research: attitudes and perceptions of Australian artist-academics* by Wright, Bennett and Blom (2010). They survey the field in Australia and demonstrate art as research before interviewing a number of academics working in the creative arts.

The notion that dance choreography operates on this same model is illustrative in terms of the process being part of the output, but is also the research – which also involves collaboration and experimentation. The other really useful article I found amongst the many grappling with art as research is by Combrink and Marley called *Practice-based research: tracking creative creatures in the research context* (2009). It has a great survey of works on practice based research and develops a model of what practice-based research might look like.

Oh, and look what I have done. I have just made explicit some of the research contribution and background which has contributed to this paper. Even in attempting to refute the research question model, I have shown some of you that I might indeed be a painting elephant.

But here's the thing. I shouldn't have to.

I grant that reflective practice is a useful model for our creative students... even our PhD students. Part of the learning is an awareness of a variety of methodologies and processes and kinds of research and practice being used in creating the work and commenting on both the work and the act of creating. This is most useful when training creatives as well as scholars. It is not the only way, but perfectly valid.

In fact, it would be quite strange to ask a student to create a work and then write an exegesis but forbid them to comment on their work. This would deny the learning process in creating the work.

However, I'm a grown up. I've directed nationally, written internationally for decades. I've taught for another decade. I have knowledge. I have methodologies. I reflect. Why is the ERA now asking me to demonstrate this?

Wright, Bennett and Blom (again) cite Gye citing Professor Ross Gibson, who says:

'It [ERA] will benefit artists who are able to engage in some extra, fairly traditional routines of academic scholarship, adding some linguistic discourse onto their productions. The ERA probably won't benefit artists who happen to teach in academies but who are not that interested in being the new-style creative arts academic. The rules are pretty clear – knowledge has to be explicit and communicated.' (Wright, Bennett and Blom, p 472)

My criticism is that it has to be explicit and communicated in a way that the so called traditional researcher will accept. In some fields, this is akin to demanding liquid volume can only be expressed in linear metric units of measurement. In other words the knowledge must be translated into the language of the research scholar... not left in the language of the medium in which it was created.

I'll come back to this. The ERA's next category is Research Contribution, in which the creative must explain why their work is innovative and original.

How original? In what way original? I would not know where to begin in explaining *Spinner's* originality. It seeks to be familiar in many ways. What if it were less different? How would you quantify the innovation of Baz Lurhman in *Romeo and Juliet* to someone who didn't understand film making and the field. It's an old play, been done to death really – and Lurhman uses pastiche rather than new forms. There was this artist once who put a urinal up on an art gallery wall. I don't believe Duchamp would be able to explain himself adequately to the ERA. How many words would you need to spend to explain the originality of a reproduction of a Campbell's soup can? I don't know whether *Spinner* is original, but I am sure I will find a way to massage it into that category for my next academic demonstration of research output. I have no choice.

There were a number of other double standards I encountered within my university's collection of data for the ERA measurement which I would also like to highlight. (I should make clear at this point that I dealt with a team within my university charged with assisting in the collection and measuring. These people answered to others within the humanities, who I am sure, worked upwards again. I acknowledge that I have no way of knowing what the ERA may or may not have judged, but only the face of that encounter within my own university.)

First, I was only able to enter a number of episodes I wrote on one particular television series as one item. Although I was part of the children's drama television series creation of *Parallax* and wrote five of the first six episodes and a number of other episodes including the last, episode 26 (which is an honour in the television industry), this was only counted as one research output. Effectively, the first episode I write is full of research and is an output of that, but subsequent episodes are like those mass produced soup cans or photocopies of the first.

I began to see a pattern. The process of the artistic output was being counted neither as research nor as output. And if you don't count narrative, character, drama, themes and episodic convention mastering, then you are actually only measuring the traditional research topic component of the work. Then instead of *Parallax* being an extended twenty five minutes multiplied by the eight episodes, which would be a four hour explication of the research – it is only counted as the first twenty five minutes ... and nothing. The other episodes don't even have echo status.

Let me move to the measurement of two of my episodes of *Home and Away*. Episodes 3518 and 3519. You're smiling. Me too. That's a lot of episodes. And I'm going to have to demonstrate originality? Significance? It's already low rather than high culture – (unlike the novel, of course).

If I had a research question for my episodes for *Home and Away*, it would have been something as general as 'Can I write an episode of soap?' This was not considered at my university to be an appropriate research question. I was quite honoured to be asked actually, by someone I knew, to write for this internationally televised war horse of the industrial model of television story telling – extreme long form drama. It's actually quite hard to get a gig on television shows, but I also understand a little derision. It ended up not my cup of tea either.

But I studied the show. I examined other television soap operas. I met with the story designers and other writers, and I wrote three episodes following the story lines provided. And I used my years of practice in writing for many other television shows. Is it innovative? Perhaps not. But is episode 3518 of *Home and Away* less original than article 2500 on Thomas Hardy?

Why should an esteemed colleague have to go through enormous gymnastics to demonstrate that her fifth novel is not just another one about old ladies in love, when another colleague is lauded for his 50th article on Shakespeare without the same demand to explain?

The reaction of the ERA proof collection team to *Home and Away* was very illustrative in terms of coming up with a research question. My research could not be into soap opera writing because my scripts were not deemed to be an output, but rather a delivery system, a little like a telephone line, perhaps. Because there was a tiny element of alcohol abuse by one character and a little tough love given by whatever doctor was in the show at the time, it was helpfully suggested that my research question be, ‘How can this entertainment oriented television genre be used to convey crucial social messages regarding teenage alcohol abuse and make an impact on a mass television audience?’

Wow. That is worthy. That is serious research. It would also be a lie. I declined the assistance on this output. However, the pattern was being repeated. Research was only being perceived in terms of topic, not in terms of the process of creative work. Alcoholism is a research topic. Writing soap isn’t apparently. The process is denied in the explication. Only the traditional research components are seen and easily made explicit and communicated. It needs to look like an elephant.

Here is something you probably won’t encounter in a scene from *Home and Away*. ‘Foucault’s archaeology of the emergence of modern, Western man as a problem of finitude, inextricable from its afterbirth, its Other, enables the linear, progressivist claims of the social sciences – the major imperializing discourses – to be confronted by their own historicist limitations.’ (Bhabha, 1994 pp 46,47)

The passage clearly needs some serious unpacking. Why doesn’t Bhabha have to explain? I’m not asking that he does, by the way. We accept that some degree of expertise needs to be brought to most academic writings. However, we might also apply that understanding to the creative scholars. The academy might stop treating me, for instance, as a dim-witted honours student, and consult an expert in *Home and Away*. Let’s call that person a peer. Incidentally, this peer is most likely not going to be a cultural theorist.

In effect, not only are creatives being called on to go through extra stages of explication and communication, but we must also deny the value of the creative process itself and only highlight the traditional research components, expending double the work and half the kudos.

I think there are things that can, and need to be done towards establishing a fairer measurement of creative output as research output. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the discussion.

In terms of screen practice, a number of Australian universities have sought to develop their own peer assessment process in order to provide expertise in the measurement of creative output. The Australian Screen Production, Education and Research Association (ASPERA) has developed national peer assessment panels for screen projects. (*Diegetic Life Forms II, 2010*) All scholars working in creative areas need to build or strengthen peer reviews that stand up to outside scrutiny. In the short term this may require a lot of extra work from practitioners.

But artist academics must also continue to argue with the traditional research academics concerning creative output as research output. We need to gather together some of the work being done around the world on practice as research and creative work AS evidence of research output, which I felt I needed to do as a consequence of my inability to engage with the ERA proof collectors at my university. I hope some of the readings mentioned are useful to other creative scholars in framing legitimacy and parity.

I also care for selfish reasons. I teach, and am happy to do my share. But I want to keep my research day. The ERA is converted to my university's research points system called the Research Performance Index. By these guidelines, a non-fiction work of scholarship is worth five hundred points, whereas *Spinner* as a creative work is worth one hundred and fifty points. If I have to produce the work, then write about the work and then only count some of the work and then only get credits for one fifth of the work, my likelihood of proving I am a productive researcher is significantly reduced. I will lose my research day, and therefore lose my space to be creative while teaching in the academy.

However, this is also a loss to my university. Outside of undergraduates wanting lecturers who have made and still do make films in a Screen Arts course, there is a variety of values in enhancing the stock of human knowledge in human experience, not just facts and not just in short term economic measure. Indeed, Wright, Bennett and Blom point to Krieger's *Social Science and the Self* (1991) concerning the need of social science that is 'soft, subjective, idiosyncratic, ambivalent, conflicted, about the inner life, and about experiences that cannot be measured, tested or fully shared.'

As Edward de Bono says in *How To Have Creative Ideas* (2007), ‘Our culture and habits of thinking insist that we always move towards certainty. We need to pay equal attention to possibility.’ (p. 8)

I’d like to go out on another image. It’s from the documentary *Who the #\$&% is Jackson Pollock?* (Moses, 2006). It’s a clip of him painting. For those of you who don’t know his work, it is quickly plain that he is not painting anything that looks like an elephant. He smears and trickles and splashes and flings. The images, of course, evoke the impenetrability of the painting monkey. I don’t know much about art, but people who do say his work is significant. Difficult to measure, of course.

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