

Knowledge and A Scholarship of Creativity

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My presentation today is an attempt to respond to this challenge by Stelarc – one of Australia’s most accomplished artists – who has excelled in both arts research and creative practice while maintaining appointments at two Universities.

Design and reflection in practice

The impetus for this reflection on practice-based or practice-led research comes from an ongoing engagement within the staff of our School who are seeking to establish within Design and Media Arts Practice the terms that would establish it as a “scholarly” endeavour. The motivation is provided in part by the urgency to enable conformity to the earlier DEST categories for research output. Since that time, the now defunct RQF and current ERA regime also demand that we measure the impact and quality of our research. As Donald A. Schon has written, “...Bureaucracies are the institutional setting for professional practice...” (326)¹ Those of us who teach and research within the academy as well as maintain a creative arts practice would recognise the significant bureaucratic processes that mediate our worlds. The implication of Schon’s statement is to highlight the constraints under which this kind of work must proceed.

The consequence of this bureaucratisation results in a split in the discourse surrounding the strategic engagement with practice-based or practitioner-based² research in the academy. For those within the bureaucracy itself that work as administrators, the urgency is to develop the criteria that can drive the valuations of this research and degree-assessment – both Honours and Higher Degree – so that a credible comparison can be made between the accepted conventions of scholarship³ and creative arts research.

Recent work in the field has insisted that the unique qualities of creative practice demand entirely new paradigms to assess research applications, research outcomes and higher degree dissertations be they hybrid Doctorates (PhD) or the Doctorate of Creative Arts (DCA). One important caveat that breaks down the binarism between conventional and creative arts scholarship is that the hybrid Masters, Doctorate or Doctorate of Creative Arts, in the UWS rules, require an exegesis - in the hybrid PhD it is about 40K words or about half the word length of a normal PhD while the DCA asks for a 20-25K word exegesis.

Despite the “junior” partner status in the DCA, the exegesis document must still retain the generic standards of a doctoral thesis: intellectual rigour, reflexive relationship to

¹ Schon, D., *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1991).

² Following Schon’s title, it may be that *practitioner-based* research is more appropriate nomenclature for citing the work that proceeds under the general terms of practice-based research because it places emphasis on *reflection* as the key to productive professional practice. See below.

³ The conventions of scholarship entail: identification of a problem or question, developing appropriate methods, understanding the wider context of the research and making an original contribution to knowledge based on peer review.

practice, contextualisation within a field of research, engagement with an identified scholarship and stylistic consistency. In other words, the logic of thesis exposition is maintained even if scaled down in word length and driven by the candidate's creative work.

The scholarly bonfides of these kinds of higher degree pursuits can be modelled on the scholarly values by accepted standards of scholarship in Australian higher education. One relatively recent comprehensive account of scholarship is a study by Boyer in the nineties (Boyer 1990, 1997) in which several criteria were outlined as the basis for a scholarly process and outcome.⁴ For example, the principle of intellectual integrity is enunciated as an important quality to be achieved through a comprehensive re-working of the problem in the drive towards arriving at solutions to a research question. Boyer enunciates four areas of scholarship:

The Scholarship of Discovery as the collection of new information - basic or original research; the Scholarship of Application as in the application of knowledge for community engagement; the Scholarship of Teaching related to pedagogical practices and The Scholarship of Integration which is primarily interdisciplinary placing known information into broader contexts. It synthesizes, interprets, and connects the findings in a way that brings new meaning to those facts (Boyer 1990).

In un-picking the core elements of these processes, several aspects of creative work can be identified – particularly those associated with an arts and design practice. However in the example I will bring forward of a recent PhD student completion in Design at UWS, the work was consistent when matched against this criterion but achieved in a manner that was more in line with work in the creative arts because it took an experiential and subjective approach towards the goal of establishing and responding to a research question. This example therefore stands as a critique of a sometimes too narrow approach to the way these outcomes can be achieved.

Dr. Ian Coxon wrote his PhD thesis on the design experience seeking to establish taxonomy of **design experience** with reference to his particular interest in the design of new motor vehicles. As a graduate in industrial design, Ian struggled with finding the philosophical ground for how to analyse experience in general. He saw this as a necessary step towards its application to Design. Ian finally did succeed in capturing his research question, one that could be articulated as a key issue for Design research.

I would like to tease out some of the salient parts of Ian Coxon's thesis so as to inform larger questions in design research and the relationship between scholarship and creativity.

One of the aspects of Ian's search for a research question for Design was that he only found the question at the **end** of the research process. This flies in the face of most conventional approaches when either the PhD student is asked to enunciate a research question in their PhD proposal or the ARC researcher who must define their research question for the assessors at the outset of any research project.

⁴ Boyer proposed an expanded definition of "scholarship" based on four functions discovery, integration, application, and teaching. (Boyer, E. L., *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990, 1997)

This is not in any sense a negative, but reveals that the particular epistemological character of design - and I would argue the creative arts - and deserves attention. It re-defines the sort of methodologies that are suited to the creative work process.

Following Andrew Patrizio's critique of the mainstream research paradigm⁵ – a work introduced to me by Kathryn Millard⁶ along with that of Associate Professor Angela Brew⁷ – he suggests that ready-made questions imply a ready-made, off the rack set of answers This has been referred to in Thomas Kuhn's work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as “normal science” (1969).⁸ Here, problems are selected **because** they can be answered. For Patrizio, this constrains knowledge because the problems conceived are too conventional and the creation of genuine new knowledge is inhibited.

Capturing the research question

Ian Coxon's specific interest was in new motor vehicles (NMVs) and the relationship between the design of these vehicles and the experience of driving them.⁹ Specifically Ian was curious as to why, despite all the logical reasons for these vehicles to be popular, they were **not**. He wanted to find a way of analysing the **experience** of driving the vehicles but from a Design perspective:

“What is the NMV experience like? How can we know and understand it”? (p.35)
Can we develop a deeper understanding of the psychological and physiological experiences NMV drivers have in their everyday interactions [] with their vehicle? (P.201) And further how Designers understand experience? (378) How to define experience? How can it be researched? And most importantly, how can it be made understandable and useful to design?

⁵ Patrizio, Andrew *Art in academia: an unfolding personal project*. Centre for Practice as Research in the Arts, Edinburgh College of Art www.cpara.co.uk/events/tin/academia.html Accessed 4/10/2009.

⁶ Millard, K., Looking Again: Reflections On Screen Media Practice Research, paper delivered at the Interventions and Intersections Conference, June 2009 found at http://www.commartarts.uws.edu.au/showcase/audio/interventions_intersections2009/UWS_Intrvntns&Intrstcns09-01welcmkeynote.mp3

⁷ Brew Angela, *The Nature of Research: Inquiry in Academic Contexts*, Routledge: London 2001.

⁸ The characteristics of *hard* knowledge production are associated with reductionist approaches to problem solving through specified methodologies and the accretion of a body of knowledge over time (called *normal science* by Thomas Kuhn) through the establishment of theories and laws by a detached and objective subject. These employ the use of reductionism, methodological specialisation and continuous practice within a knowledge paradigm. A scholarship of creativity isolates a more progressive view of knowledge building through an alternative view of scholarly practice: exploration, discovery, application, integration, and dissemination. These are extended to include across the board criteria for effective outcomes: clear goals, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique.

⁹ Coxon, I., *Designing (Researching) Lived Experience*, unpublished PhD thesis, UWS, 2007. <http://www.bluearth.net/site/phd-dissertation> accessed 4/10/2009



By its focus on experience and a subjective vantage point, these methods suggest that the scholarly values are to be respected even if the methods defy the norms of a more linear model for research. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, Ian struggled with how much of the thesis should reflect the philosophical question of understanding experience and how much should be grounded specifically in analysing experience for designers and design.

He accurately concluded that the arguments in his final write-up report did not reflect the in-the-field experiences – or in other words the discursive structure of his text did not reflect the heuristics of the field/experimental research process. In this instance, the idea of a **heuristic** approach to the production of knowledge includes an anticipated endpoint, though unknown pathway of how to arrive there. The heuristic approach allowed for this “uncertainty” (Barrett and Bolt 2007)¹⁰ to thrive. It is an important feature of how we can better respect the qualitative differences of this research practice.

Ian’s thesis managed to move from capturing its design research question to demonstrating the importance of this question to key issues of sustainability and urban quality of life issues. But equally, the compelling aspect of this work was to show how contemporary design research has not been profound enough in approaching the phenomena of **experience** – what it is or how it could be understood - though the thesis did include fellow travellers from user-centred design and emotion-in-design research.

Finally, this form of knowledge building showed that it might work best in the form of action research or problem-based learning methodologies. Ian kept a close account of his experiences and was able to offer these as data in the appendix to the thesis.

More significantly, he was able to show clearly to his examiners the whole journey from uncertainty in developing the research questions to the search for methodology and finally the development of provisional answers. In this way, the examiners came to recognise that Ian had achieved the key outcome as enunciated by Boyer as the scholarship of integration: “...illuminating data in a revealing manner, drawing together isolated factors, or placing known information into broader contexts. It

¹⁰ Barrett, E., and Bolt, B., Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry, Macmillan, 2007.

synthesizes, interprets, and connects the findings in a way that brings new meaning to those facts...”¹¹

Thus the principle of intellectual integrity in scholarship is achieved through a comprehensive re-working of the problem towards the development of solutions to a research question.

This introduces another key element of a practice-led research thesis – that of reflexivity thoroughly analysed and celebrated in Donald A. Schon’s key text in the field.¹²

Schon’s text establishes that knowledge is largely intuitive and tacit and it is a requirement of the **practitioner** to engage in a conscious reflective process. As research, this turns the creative work from one that is “*making something*” to **knowledge about making**.

It re-focuses the argument about knowledge production on what should be called practitioner-led research and not simply practice-led research.

Reflection in action is about the momentary conscious acts of a practitioner that do not necessarily entail access to languages of description. Despite an on-going dialectic of framing and re-framing – solving and retracting solutions, there is no systematic accounting for the process of **making** without a conscious intervention of the **practitioner**. The process of scholarship requires the practitioner to move from a tacit knowledge condition (c.f. Polanyi¹³) to an explicit one.

So taking Ian Coxon’s work as a problem–exemplar, we can isolate some key modalities of knowledge production that are characterised by this kind of approach:

1. The definition of the problem or question may be fluid – found in multiple iterations.
2. The adoption of a heuristic approach to the development of core materials may be appropriate.
3. The tolerance of uncertainty may be required in the struggle for clarity of topic and approach.
4. Knowledge may reside in a subject-centred, action research model that reflexively may test presumptions in practice.

Screen Media Arts

This approach has its particular relevance to screen media arts and can be adapted to it using the work of screen theorist, John Dovey¹⁴ whose work was first introduced to me by Kathryn Millard¹⁵.

¹¹ op.cit.

¹² op. cit.

¹³ Polanyi, M., *Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*, 1962.

¹⁴ Dovey, Jon (2007) ‘Screen Media Practice and Peer Review’ *Journal of Media Practice* Vol. 8, No.1 pp. 63-70

Dovey isolates 4 areas in screen media arts for particular attention:

1. Platform technology research
2. Media production research (Manufacturing Consent)
3. Aesthetic research
4. Processes research and related issues such as ethics, methodology

On (1) Platform technology research

Following Dovey's outline I was able to find in my own work the articulation of these concerns. For example, in the introduction to our recently published book, **Screen Media Arts: An Introduction to Concepts and Practice**¹⁶ we state,

“This book would not be relevant without a serious consideration of how new media technologies and practices influence contemporary screen media arts production. One of the key aims of this book, therefore, will be to understand how the use of different platforms can change the meanings of the media works being made. In this era of media convergence and rapid change, we will also explore how programs may be advantageously translated from one platform to another.”¹⁷

In terms of (3) Aesthetic research we add:

“Our aim is to impart creative strategies and technical skills as baseline goals. These would be inadequate, however, without the fostering of intellectual growth in this field. It is the ability to generate well-founded, fresh **ideas** that enables media production graduates to make relevant and original contributions to film culture and ultimately the screen media industry.”¹⁸

In terms of (2) Media production research and (4) Processes research, e.g., ethics, methodology there is a new reality of numerous screen media producers who pose significant challenges to contemporary models of screen education. Ross Gibson, in his introduction to our book wrote of an early (1940's) intuition that has now arrived,

“...a cross-referenced, searchable set of databases that would be available in every home and workplace. He called it the 'memex'...[something that] would change the way people learn and teach. Associative detective-work and discovery-based learning -- *heuristic* inquiry rather than didactic instruction -- would become the standard way to uncover the workings of the world.”¹⁹

¹⁵ op.cit.

¹⁶ Cohen, H. Salazar., J.F., and Barkat, I., (2008) *Screen Media Arts: An Introduction to Concepts and Practice*, Oxford University Press: Melbourne.

¹⁷ op.cit

¹⁸ op.cit.

¹⁹ Gibson, R., *Preface to Screen Media Arts: An Introduction to Concepts and Practices*, 2008.

So learning is experiential and now the technologies at hand enable active experiences and reflections on that experience. The active learner combined with reflective learning makes for a dynamic relationship between practice and research. This means a different role for teaching and learning than has hitherto been the case.

Academic study in the arts, including research, is mediated by the changing technical base for creating art, for design and for performance. This crosses more generally with the emphatic presence of the Internet and social networks that now mediate knowledge production. The central concerns of a pedagogical interest complements the research interest and turns practice-base research towards the knowledge contribution goal that is the enduring value of any higher degree.

Conclusion: Creativity and new knowledge

One of the abiding and near-universal criteria of a research degree is the test of the research as a contributor to new knowledge. In the context of research, this is demonstrated by both a mastery of previous research on the topic and then the provision of evidence for a knowledge gain in the discipline. The engendering of new ways of thinking about a topic and the invigoration of the discipline with more compelling theories, motivates much research. There is strong claim made between a productive research and development sector in any country and the benefits to society and culture. A similar motivation drives the artist. Arts-practice research can create new knowledge and contribute to new ways of thinking. The practitioner constructs theories of “artistic knowing” and in this manner can develop theories about art, about learning and teaching art and about the cultural worlds to which art is frequently linked.

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