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Experiential learning in practice as research: context, method, knowledge

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Abstract

Creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns; it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit and experiential knowledge. Experience operates within in the domain of the aesthetic and knowledge produced through aesthetic experience is always contextual and situated. The continuity of artistic experience with normal processes of living is derived from an impulse to handle materials and to think and feel through their handling. The key term for understanding the relationship between experience, practice and knowledge is 'aesthetic experience', not as it is understood through traditional eighteenth century accounts, but as 'sense activity'.

In this article, I will draw on the work of John Dewey, Michael Polanyi and others to argue that creative arts practice as research is an intensification of everyday experiences from which new knowledge or knowing emerges. The ideas presented here will be illustrated with reference to case studies based on reflections, by the artists themselves, on successful research projects in dance, creative writing and visual art.

Keywords

aesthetic experience

tacit knowledge

personal knowledge

creative arts research

practice

sense activity

There is a growing recognition within the field of science that restricting enquiry to those things that can be exactly measured would mean denying many of the benefits of alternative modes of enquiry (Eisener 1997). Creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns, it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit and experiential knowledge. Experience operates within in the domain of the aesthetic and knowledge produced through aesthetic experience is always contextual and situated. The continuity of artistic experience with normal processes of living is derived from an impulse to handle materials and to think and *feel* through their handling. In this article, I argue that creative arts practice as research is an intensification of everyday experiences from which new knowledge or knowing emerges.

As Terry Eagleton has observed, aesthetic experience can be understood by going back to the Greek concept *aesthesis*:

> The whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought [….] that territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces.
>
> (Eagleton 1990: 13)

Post enlightenment separation of the arts from science along with scholastic constructions of discourse or knowledge as 'incorporeal' (Carozzi 2005) has deflected understandings of how

aesthetic experience plays a vital role in human discovery and the production of new knowledge.

Drawing on the work of John Dewey, Richard Shusterman (1992) suggests that a key term for elaborating the relationship between experience, practice and knowledge is 'aesthetic experience'. His view that products of art have no value divorced from their actual use value in aesthetic experience requires an alternative understanding of aesthetics to that given in eighteenth century definitions. These emerged partly as a process of differentiating cultural spheres into the 'scientific, the practico-moral and the artistic and "also gave birth to our modern concept of art as the narrower practice of fine art"' (Shusterman 1992: 48). The problem with eighteenth century conceptions of aesthetics is that they tend to efface materiality by casting aesthetic experience in terms of disembodied contemplation. Shusterman observes further, that the subsequent separation of art from reality and everyday experience, not only brands it as practically worthless, 'but also isolates it from practical life and socio-political action' (Shusterman 1992: 52). The challenge for practitioner- researchers therefore, is to restore the link between practical or lived experience and the aesthetic, and to demonstrate how, in artistic practice, this realizes a mode of generating knowledge that has application beyond immediate points of production and consumption of the artistic product. The framing of art discourses by the gallery system and the appropriation of art by what is broadly known as 'art business' not only perpetuates reification and fetishization of artistic products as commodities, but also diverts attention away from the work that art does in transforming experience and extending knowledge. Shusterman demonstrates that Dewey's work is a useful starting point for redirecting our focus in this regard.

Dewey contends that knowledge is by definition experiential, whether it emerges from art or from science. His work *Art as Experience,* first published in 1934, comes close to providing a model for artistic practice that is predicated on experiential knowledge. In illustrating the link between materiality, experience and knowledge, Dewey's thinking also broadens our understanding of the value of the artistic product beyond the confines of traditional aesthetics. He states:

> A conception of fine art that sets out from its connection with discovered qualities of ordinary experience will be able to indicate the factors and forces that favour the normal development of common human activities into matters of artistic value.
>
> (Dewey 1980: 11)

Dewey tells us that knowledge, gained by the artist through everyday living and activity, is instantiated into the artwork through creative practice. Though more intensified, the process of artistic enquiry can be likened to what is described by Dewey as: the flow of experience that runs its course to closure or fulfilment through processes of adjustment to our environment and objects in the world. In artistic experience, as in everyday experience, 'action, feeling and meaning are one' (Dewey 1980: 35). Experience involves interaction as a response to discord or lack of adjustment. In the flow of experience occurring in the everyday, or in artistic practice, a problem can be said to emerge when there is a lack or absence of adjustment to surroundings. Initially, such experiences are aesthetic, since they involve sensory responses which are then qualified with emotion, a process by which positive or negative value is attributed to experience. From this, conscious intent or thought emerges. The process of attributing meaning and value in artistic practice (and the contemplation of art) is therefore necessarily experiential.

Dewey claims that only in reflection, does the resolution of various instances of experience and adjustment become intellectual. In actual occurrence they are emotional and sensory. Thinking, which is predicated on our material experiences and interaction with the world, emerges through signs and symbols that stand in for the things that were materially and emotionally experienced (Dewey 1980: 38). It is in this sense, that thinking can be said to have an aesthetic dimension. Dewey's account provides us with a way of understanding how both art and science are underpinned by this experiential process. He brings science and art closer together by suggesting that in the flow of experience, ideas are encountered in much the same way as we experience material objects. According to Dewey, what distinguishes the artist and the scientist, is that the artist's responses and thoughts are embodied in the object, whilst the responses of scientist emerge through mathematical symbols and intellectual ideas. Whilst Dewey's thinking challenges the traditional art/science divide, it does not adequately account for an important qualitative distinction that needs to be made in order to indicate the specificity of experiential knowledge derived from studio enquiry and therefore, to question the hegemony of science in the research arena. Paradoxically, we must turn to philosophers of science in order to achieve this task.

If, as Dewey has argued, all knowledge is essentially experiential, how might the practitioner-researcher claim that knowledge derived from artistic practice has particular value beyond that which is derived from science? Bruno Latour provides grounds for such a claim. He observes that science predominantly works through the study of inscriptions – graphs, maps, tables and data rather than actualities (Latour 1986). This is a relatively recent way of experiencing the world:

> People before science and outside laboratories certainly use their eyes, but not in the same way. They looked at the spectacle of the world, but not this new type of image designed to transport the objects of the world, to accumulate them ….
>
> (Latour 1986: 10)

Latour argues that in science, the process of amassing inscriptions is a way of mobilizing power. Science, according to Latour has become less about direct observation of the world, and more about amassing inscriptions in order to maintain its hegemony over alternative knowledge claims. These inscriptions and cascades of inscriptions (inscriptions which refer to each other, rather than material realities) are circulated as what he calls 'immutable mobiles'. This is a process by which the 'optical consistency' required to maintain the immutability of ideas across time, irrespective of where they are located or applied, is achieved (Latour 1986: 8) and is necessary if the laws and knowledge of scientific enquiry are to be upheld.

In his critique of science, Latour points out that, as new technologies of reproduction of inscriptions increase, the volume and rate of circulation of inscriptions also increase; this in turn, speeds up the spread errors or inaccuracies that are carried by them. Through this process of displacement and circulation, knowledge becomes less and less tied to real conditions. The circulation of inscriptions results in the displacement of experience in favour of representation and discourse. It can thus be argued, that artistic research which draws predominantly on lived experience and more direct engagement with materials and objects, provides a crucial alternative mode of knowledge production compared with the scientific method described by Latour. The case studies to be discussed later in this paper, demonstrate this distinction as well as value of experiential knowledge implicated in artistic practice.

Donald Schön's work on reflective practice and his notion of 'knowing-in-practice' extends our understanding of the process of experiential discovery that is central to practice as research. It involves reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, processes through which the researcher is able to 'Surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialised practice, and make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience' (Schön, 1983 : 62).

The notion of 'knowing-in-practice' can also be understood in terms of Michael Polanyi's account of 'personal knowledge'. It could be argued that both of these terms are interchangeable with the notion of experiential knowledge. Polanyi argues that positivist and objectivist philosophies that underpin modern science obscure the fact that knowledge belongs to human agents who engage personally in their knowledge. Such philosophies are therefore unable to establish the objective validity of science on impersonal grounds. He states further, 'complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and in fact a false ideal' (Polanyi 1958: 18). Polanyi reveals the errors of positivism by showing that its account of scientific knowledge does not reflect the actual practices of science.

It should be noted here, that Polanyi's theory of knowledge does not advocate a retreat to irrational subjectivity, nor does it deny the existence of established knowledge and rules for guiding the process of discovery. However, the scientist (or any researcher) must always make a personal choice or decision before applying any particular rule. This decision relies on acts that are not determined by rules, but by the situated demands of practice. For Polanyi,

‘no solution to a problem can be accredited as a discovery if it is achieved by a procedure of following definite rules’ (Polanyi 1958: 123).

Polanyi suggests that the measure of objectivity is not an absence of personal involvement, but the presence of what he terms ‘universal intent’ related to the innate human striving to reveal what lies beyond that which is already known; and also to ‘responsible commitment’ which is underpinned by the expectation that the discovery will be accepted or acknowledged by others – that is to say, that a particular discovery may have more universal application beyond the point of its emergence in practice. It can thus be argued that in acts of discovery, the personal ‘transcends the disjunction between the subjective and objective’ (Polanyi 1958: 300). This also pertains, because the process of discovery involves movements between actions guided by individual passions and the personal as well as those that are guided by rules and elements that lie beyond the personal.

Polanyi’s account of tacit knowledge adds to our understandings of experiential knowledge. Though not explicit, tacit knowledge is always implicated in human activity and learning (Polanyi 1969). It refers to embodied knowledge or ‘skill’ developed and applied through practice and experience and apprehended intuitively; this process is readily understood by artistic researchers who recognize that the opposition between explicit and tacit knowledge is a false one (Bolt 2004).

Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge precludes the possibility of a completely logical process of scientific discovery. His account is closely related to what Bourdieu has theorized as the logic of practice, or of being *in-the-game* where strategies are not pre-determined, but emerge and operate according to specific demands of action and movement in time

(Bourdieu 1990). Michael Grenfell and David James note that Bourdieu is in accord with Polanyi in suggesting that culture and the material relations that make up our objective reality can only be grasped through the activity of human agents. The acquisition of knowledge may thus be understood as a cognitive operation, or 'sense activity' involving relations between individual *subjectivities* and objective phenomena. The latter include mental phenomena – knowledge and ideas (Grenfell and James 1998: 13).

The emergence of qualitative research methods in the social sciences and related disciplines (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 1994) and accounts of experiential learning challenge the traditional notion of scientific objectivity. David Kolb (1984) for example, has demonstrated that in learning, discovery starts from one's own lived experience and personal reactions. Learning takes place through action and intentional, explicit reflection on that action. This approach acknowledges that we cannot separate knowledge to be learned from situations and experiences in which it is used. Situated enquiry or learning demonstrates a unity between problem, context and solution. A general feature of practice-based research projects is that personal interest and experience, rather than objective 'disinterestedness' motivates the research process. Recognition of this permits us to articulate more clearly, the contexts, methods and value of knowledge derived from artistic research, and to validate the subjective, emergent and interdisciplinary research methods of studio enquiry, that I have argued (Barrett 2006), constitute the innovative dimension of practice as research.

Case studies dance, creative writing and visual art

The case studies presented here, draw on contributions to the recent publication entitled, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (Barrett and Bolt 2007). They are based on reflections by artist researchers on their own higher degree by research projects in response to the question: 'What did the studio enquiry reveal that might not have been revealed through other modes of enquiry?' In each of these case studies we can see that knowledge emerging from artistic practice is always materially situated, subjective and experiential.

Shaun McLeod's discussion of his dance project *"Chamber": Experiencing Masculine Identity through Dance Improvisation* completed for a Master of Arts by practice and exegesis in 2002, illustrates the way in which experience both motivates and is productive of new knowledge:

> The choreography itself was derived from the experiences of the four men involved in the process—the three dancers and myself as choreographer. *Chamber* was an attempt to present a small moment of troubled masculinity as a metaphor for problematising what is otherwise taken for granted.
>
> (McLeod, 2007: 81)

Mcleod's account reveals the multiple levels at which the artistic experience can produce a commercially viable artefact and at the same time, generate knowledge outcomes that have the potential for changing social and attitudes and practices. *Chamber* was choreographed by McLeod and performed at Dancehouse in Melbourne in April 2002. McLeod suggests that dance as research can be used as a means of revealing aspects of masculine identity in ways not available to other modes of enquiry. The design of this project not only emerges from

personal experience, but allows direct exploration of the role of experience in producing knowledge:

> Part of my wanting to work with male dancers was simply to seek out the company of like-minded men: men who were asking the same questions about what constitutes positive communication amongst ourselves. Through this process, it became apparent that the working questions should not be about why men do *not* dance, but to find the positive perspective on the same issue. In other words what happens when men *do* dance? How do we experience dance and identify ourselves through it? And how can these perspectives be realized in choreography?
>
> (McLeod, 2007: 82)

The use of improvisation as the main methodological vehicle of investigation provides interesting illustration of experiential learning and of Bourdieu's ideas concerning the relationship between institutional structures, intuition, experience, knowledge and research. In this project dance is used as a medium for exploring and articulating experiences, which give shape to previously unexpressed aspects of masculinity through a re-embodiment of those experiences that have remained unanalysed and unspoken in social and institutional discourses of the male body:

> As a choreographic tool, I found that improvisation can reverberate with the sentience of the male dancers themselves. It also allowed for the unexpected in what I, as a male choreographer, see as possible. It interrupted the habitual in my choreographic sensibility letting me work in an intuitive way rather than following a blueprint of choreographic intent. This enabled me to engage in a process of trial and error, of feeling my way, of touching the contours of the thing before it is seen.

(McLeod, 2007: 91)

Mcleod discovers that the significance of improvisation in dance lies in its capacity for realizing an ongoing dialogue between the objective and the phenomenal, and for mirroring the relationship between experience and knowledge. Improvisation allows the artist to *experience* a temporary suspension of what is culturally encoded as *the masculine,* and provides the performers with a means of externalizing 'knowing' that has been socially repressed. It also presents the choreographer with new materials for extending choreographic possibilities.

> With such an orientation, improvisation has the potential to tap into these experiences and how each dancer embodies his sense of identity. As this work is directed toward the specificities of masculine subjectivity, what Rothfield calls "kinaesthetic sensitivity", was crucial to realising the goal in an embodied form.
>
> (Mcleod 2007: 88

By allowing the private self to enact the world through dance, Mcleod's work also extends the cultural, emotional and psychological possibilities of his audiences.

Gaylene Perry's studio writing research project for her Ph.D. resulted in the publication, by Picador, of *Midnight Water: A Memoir* (Perry, 2004). The work emerges from a childhood experience. It combines autobiography and fiction and demonstrates a crucial aspect of the process writing as research and discovery. A feature of her studio-based enquiry is that the method unfolds through the artistic experience or practise – *practise* is itself, productive of knowledge and engenders further practice demonstrating the emergent nature of the process. Perry observes 'I think what I learned most from the act of writing this novel was about the

instability of boundaries between the fictive and the autobiographical, the singular experience and the collective, the personal and the political' (Perry 2007: 37).

The real transformations and assuaging of grief that resulted from the research, indicate possibilities for broader applications of the experience of writing for dealing with grief and trauma in the community.

In her reflection on the development of her research, the writer's focus shifts from the tangible artefact (the novel), to what she has subsequently understood as the intangible benefits of the writing experience – the new understandings and knowledge that it has engendered. She has found that the act of creative writing is, in itself, an agent of emotional reconciliation and change; the imaginative act or experience confers empowerment that has real and material effects. Perry discovers that creative writing permits a collapse between fiction and reality and a reconnection with real life events and experiences. Her writing process involved practising through to a resolution of childhood trauma: it allowed emotions to be moulded and shaped as reparation and redemption:

> I myself kept a journal as I traveled over Skye, and I consider this journal to be part of my studio enquiry. At first I expected the journal to be a notebook for recording details such as dates and place names and historical facts, but it actually became a creative work in itself. The physical act of writing in that journal became part of the writing of the novel, although few of the words from it can be found in the text of *Water's Edge* itself. Now when I read the journal I am again struck by prescience, by the way that as I traveled and wrote my journal entries, I seemed to strike something solid, something with its own body and mind.
>
> (Perry 2007: 37)

Annette Iggulden's reflection on her Deakin University Ph.D. research project *Silence: In the Space of Words and Images* (2002) illustrates again, how subjective dispositions and personal motivations drive the process of enquiry and are the source of innovation and new knowledge in research. Her project involved the production of a body of paintings influenced by Iggulden's investigation of illuminated manuscripts and their embellishment by monastic nuns in medieval Europe.

Iggulden (2007: 67) acknowledges the role of personal experience as a primary motivation for her research. She comments that it was impossible to separate writing and research from the circumstances of her life and her emotional and personal responses to everyday experiences (Through this project, she came to understand that objective rationality is always secondary to intuitive response, and is ultimately relinquished to the material and temporal demands of making the work and to finding the means of expressing previously inexpressible psychological states.

This involved an investigation of the work of nuns from silent orders and included 'copying' or appropriation of the texts as an aesthetic device in her own painting. This resulted in the discovery of an 'alphabet' developed by the nuns, through use of coloured forms abstracted from the shapes of *spaces* or the in-fills in the lettering of the scripts. These shapes and other marks often appearing in the margins of illuminated manuscripts, were previously thought to be merely decorative. However, in this research, they were found to constitute a hidden code of communication.

The process of feeling the way and responding to experience in practice provided Iggulden with an expressive outlet and a means of achieving aesthetic closure in the art works. In

addition, the research, principally her *practice*, uncovered new knowledge about the lives of the monastic nuns and a more profound intellectual and aesthetic engagement with the contents of the manuscripts by medieval nuns, than was previously understood by historians and researchers from beyond the creative arts disciplines.

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