

Creating new stories for praxis: Practitioner-led research in the creative arts.

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In moving creatively into our practice we are fundamentally concerned to develop new knowledge, to challenge old beliefs and to speculate on the 'what ifs' of our concepts and processes. For the arts practitioner, whether studio or classroom based, new knowledge is made in the context of and challenge to the history, theory and practices of our relevant field. The research function for developing and extending knowledge is judged on the outcome of the research, which synthesises, extends or analyses the problematics of the discipline (Guba & Lincoln 1989).

While my work now explores the possibilities of research for the artist as studio practitioner it is framed by my activities as a teacher of artists. Through my teaching I approach practitioner-led research as a way of working, investigating and theorising what it is to practice in the studio as researcher (Dissanayake, 1990; Van Maanen 1990; Turner & Bruner 1986). In this process, as with many teachers of art, my classroom has become synonymous with my studio, functioning as a laboratory for research (Weirisma 1995). My hybrid practice includes crossing between spaces and places, exploring and practising in diverse and often foreign fields, retaining an excitement about change and difference, practising simultaneously as artist/ researcher / teacher.

This paper explores the process of redesigning pedagogy through an approach to practitioner-led research that conceptualises it as critical, reflective, investigative praxis. Praxis, for me, involves the crucial and inextricable meld of theory and practice. Thus practitioner-led research is concerned with processes for theorising practice, using appropriation, pastiche and collaboration as basic tenants.

Research: It's all about navigation really. In my country we drive on the left hand side of the road. Our directions, rules, pathways and processes are geared to this activity. When these are disrupted feelings of instability and insecurity pervade. To drive on the right, my certainties as a driver are disrupted, I feel out of control, destabilised and lost.

To survive I go orienteering.

My senses are heightened to cater for a new approach, I establish new ways of recognition and behaviour, I learn to read new cultural codes, I concentrate on finding my way through a foreign process until eventually I naturalise this and become a confident, comfortable driver again: on the wrong side of the road.

On a recent journey through Europe we developed a collaborative way to support each other as we travelled, by creating new ways of mapping, new codes, languages, customs and strategies. We asked questions, we observed acutely, we planned systematically. In our small car, our cultural space, we created a third space, a place of hybrid practices that crossed cultural boundaries of language, visual codes, currency conversions and national customs. We did this by associating these to our cultural conventions, things we knew and understood, and translating them accordingly. Our survival mantra became "What's my name? What side of the road am I on? Where am I going?"

Identifying Landmarks

By looking into the soul of another we often find ourselves delving just as deep into our own private worlds of identity and place (Cowell, 1997: 46).

As I grow as researcher, artist and teacher I have become acutely aware of how I have managed to recognise and navigate my learning processes and problem solving capacities. As a reflective practitioner (Alverson & Skolberg: Bartlett, 1989), I believe that these negotiations and connections strongly underpin my pedagogical praxis. So when the challenge to develop studies in research for the visual artist arose I brought to the task an awareness and mapping of my practices and understandings in the studio and in the classroom together with the need to see how others practice. I began to ask artists about what they do and how they conceptualise their practice as research. From these beginnings have grown courses that explore processes for studio-based research in the visual arts. This process of collaboration is illustrated briefly using extracts from stories by others who have worked with me in this process.

My conceptual foundations grew from an awareness of the fit between my knowledge and practice in the studio and classroom, my experience in implementing traditional quantitative research methods and the challenging necessity, as a graduate student, to construct and rationalise a qualitative methodology to best fit my research project at that time. The outcome of this exploration became known as *Neonarrative Method* (Stewart, 1994: 1996). My research practice continues as a process of continuous discovery, filled with correspondences and contradictions, intuition and surprise, serendipity and discipline.

Having been trained in qualitative (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1987; Eisner, 1979; Goetz & le Compte, 1984) and quantitative research methods and processes in the 1980's (Campbell & Stanley 1963), I initially learnt to see my practice from a distance, speaking as an observer, looking at and on practice rather than approaching it from within. In line with prevailing calls for objectivity my voice was at worst withheld and at best muted in the process of reporting about other's ways of living as artists and teachers within their lifeworlds. Yet more recently the resonance of new methodological discussions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997; Jeffries, 1997) that urge researchers to recognise the subjective nature of research and to position themselves clearly within the work was something I embraced and, I thought, adopted for my ongoing practice.

However, four years ago, the level to which I had naturalised the 'objective' approach was brought home to me rather strongly following my presentation of a research paper addressing the processes of neonarrative construction. A perceptive student observed that my voice was silent throughout the paper. What a salient and apocryphal moment! I was suddenly aware of a personal gap between my ideological position and the actualities of my praxis. It became clear that, despite my claims for centrality, I was actually writing out my position within the research process as artist, researcher and teacher. This comment signalled my apocalypse and while I remain convinced that the methods of neonarrative are useful to draw together ways we talk about our practices as practitioner researchers, artists and teachers, I am also conscious of the need to include myself in the storytelling.

I realise that the conceptualisation, design and development of the neonarrative method was a pivotal process in my researcher development and that it continues to inform the base upon which are built my current understandings of the kinds of research methods that are useful for me as artist and teacher. My approach to practitioner-based research is to conceptualise it as critical, reflective, investigative praxis. Praxis, for me, involves the crucial and inextricable meld of theory and practice. Thus practitioner-based research is concerned with processes for theorising practice, using appropriation, pastiche and collaboration as basic tenets.

In moving creatively into our practice we are fundamentally concerned to develop new knowledge, to challenge old beliefs and to speculate on the 'what ifs' of our concepts and processes. For the arts practitioner, whether studio or classroom based, new knowledge is made in the context of and challenge to the history, theory and practices of our relevant field. The research function for developing and extending knowledge is judged on the outcome of the research, which synthesises, extends or analyses the problematics of the discipline (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

As one of my research students, Chicako Urata has observed:

The process employed in creating my works of art usually comes from looking, finding, arranging, thinking, researching, drawing and creating. The difficulty of handling the materials may reflect my life experiences in both Japan and Australia. Experiences that were difficult in a cultural sense. I am looking at the 'possibility' and 'freedom' of the installation (space), because there is no boundary (limitation) in the space. When you face multiculturalism and cultural difference, I don't see the boundary or ending there, I believe that it is a starting point. Experiences contribute to the development of personal identity through recording and theorising aspects associated with these experiences... My cultural identity is unique and complex. There are always two ways of thinking, behaving, speaking and viewing. I express the characteristics in my work of art. (Urata, 1999: 46)

In a rapidly changing world of multiculturalism, post colonialism and globalisation, notions of hybridity increasingly inform our praxis.

Plotting a Course

As an artist, researcher and teacher I have long been made conscious of (and sometimes criticised for) my diverse and hybrid approach to praxis. As educator, studio practitioner, theoretician and culturalist I bring a

many faceted approach to this field (Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg, 1991; Polanyi, 1985). As a teacher with an initially trained and practised pedagogy for grades one to twelve, I have a broad understanding and interest in learning processes in the visual arts. These became highlighted when as a young academic I worked between theory and practice and across fine arts and art education. As a teacher of art educators I learned to deal with adults learning about the arts and their making, within a climate of adult uncertainty, lack of arts literacy, and sometimes an antipathy towards the arts. As a teacher of artists I continue to grapple with the nexus between theory and practice, provoking students and colleagues to work as informed, inquiring and reflexive practitioners. Consequently my concerns are informed at many levels by processes for effective and meaningful art education (Eisner, 1979; Chalmers, 1990; Goodson, 1988).

While my work now explores the possibilities of research for the artist as studio practitioner, it is framed by my activities as a teacher of artists. Through my teaching, I approach practitioner-based research as a way of working, investigating and theorising what it is to practice in the studio as researcher (Dissanayake, 1990; Van Maanen, 1990; Turner & Bruner, 1986). In this process, my classroom has become synonymous with my studio, functioning as a laboratory for research (Weirama, 1995). I see that my hybrid practice includes crossing over between spaces and places, exploring and practising in diverse and often foreign fields, retaining an excitement about change and difference, practising simultaneously as artist/researcher/teacher.

My work reflects the outcomes of collaborations with artists and students. Its process explores and suggests possibilities and sources for practitioner-based research practices. It recognises that practices in the arts and education by their very nature, are underpinned by structure and improvisation, order and creativity, experience and intuition. This approach draws heavily upon qualitative research methods from perspectives and discourses of social science inquiry (Berger & Luckman, 1981; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Crites, 1986; Goetz & le Compte, 1984; Carlgren & Lindblad, 1991). Through research and teaching, I work to delineate processes and methods of inquiry with a blend of artistic resonance, literary principles and scientific rigour. The emphasis lies in discovering and exploring alternative ways of conceptualising and understanding research and its practices.

The scaffold for this approach to practitioner-based research, is to consider the essences of traditional research models in order to understand and critique their scope, breadth and parameters. In this way we can become better able to seek out relevant models for praxis, to appropriate terms and processes and to research knowledgeably within the field. The process is likened to a simulacra in the paradoxical sense of being simultaneously the same and different to traditional and established research models. Its emphasis is largely qualitative, demonstrating and playing with the inter-connectedness between differing methodologies as a kind of intertextuality, a bricolage (Stewart, 1994, 1996; Weinstein & Weinstein, 1992; Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

I see the nature of practitioner-based research as hybrid in that although it finds its base in qualitative methods, its practices blur the boundaries of aesthetics and experience in an effort to capture and reflect the complex dynamics involved in the phenomenology of artistic practice (Marton, 1981). The practitioner researcher, whether artist or teacher, takes central place in seeking to uncover, record, interpret and position, from an insider's perspective and experience, the processes they use within the context of professional contemporary practices in the field. Their stories, when placed in historical, social and cultural contexts, form a neonarrative, a new story shaped through autobiography as a portrait-of-self that mirrors and situates their experience. This reflects a process for theorising practice. Helen Mayes provides illustration through an explanation of her artistic process:

When I draw and transfer the larger images from the smaller ones, I am not merely enlarging each drawing. I am rediscovering the lines and all of the marks associated. I am always beginning afresh ... to make something unfamiliar familiar. Research is about finding, not searching. My theory has been about finding answers to questions regarding my practice. The collection and analysis of data describe all the problems, revelations, mistakes, thoughts, highs, lows and regrets involved. My studio time seems to be constantly filled with tests and challenges which naturally needed to be solved. The materials and processes cause the friction and influence the outcome. My actual process of drawing has its own system of dialogue too. Not only that, but, I produce a dialogue when working with the materials. (Mayes, 2000: 41)

The relationships between studio and theory form meaning-rich partnerships. They resonate within and across our fields, as arenas for presentations of credible and compelling stories. These stories address processes for exploring the aesthetic, empirical (experienced based) and ethical dimensions of what it is to practice in the studio as artist, musician, writer, performer, dramatist, dancer, teacher (Chatman, 1981). These are processes of

border crossings that come together as bricolage. The resulting stories create a third space by melding theory and practice into a neonarrative, a new story that is different or richer than those that had gone before.

Intersections and Roundabouts

The pathways of my practice recognise and conceptualise the phenomenological and autobiographical nature of studio-based research in the arts. From these grew a many-faceted approach based in bricolage. This is a process of looking more closely at the practices and positions of artists as researchers while identifying avenues of appropriation from a variety of qualitative research methods (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1992; Stewart 1994, 1996). Its process hopefully reflects something of the enigmatic artistry of the essence of image production, reception and transmission. Such an eclectic approach is in keeping with visual arts practise for the artist, teacher and viewer.

'Bricolage' is a term that offers a way to describe what we do. Here it refers to approaches to research that use multiple methodologies. These consist of a pieced together, close-knit set of practices providing solutions to a problem in a concrete situation. The construction changes and takes new forms as different tools, methods and techniques are added to the puzzle. For example, the methodology of cultural studies is a bricolage that is pragmatic, strategic, self-reflexive practice. In creating a bricolage, the bricoleur appropriates available methods, strategies and empirical materials or invents or pieces together new tools as necessary. The choice of research practices depends upon the questions asked. The questions depend on their context, what is available in that context, and what the researcher can do in that setting (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1992).

A bricoleur is familiar with and works within and between competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms. To do so they read widely and become knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms that can be brought to a problem. The possibilities are vast and reflect the diverse ways of artistic practices. Research models to draw on include Feminism, Marxism, Cultural studies, Constructivism, which may encompass processes of phenomenography, grounded theory, visual analysis, narratology, ethnography, case and field study, structuralism and poststructuralism, triangulation, survey and other more research approaches.

As you see, I am arguing that if we are going to play in the field of research we need to understand many research methods. We need to appreciate that each has limits and strengths in order to make a fit between the models selected and the particular needs of the paradigm under investigation. We need to use research as an interactive process shaped by our personal histories, gender, social class, biography, ethnicity and race. The resulting bricolage will be a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's stories, representations, understandings and interpretations of the world and the phenomena under investigation. This bricolage will connect the parts to the whole, stress meaningful relationships that operate in the social worlds and situations studied.

Bricolage is hybrid praxis. It presents an approach that places the researcher's discourse and practices within another space, between artist and product, producer and audience, theory and practice so that it becomes the space for reflection, contemplation, revelation. The bricoleur is positioned within the borderlands, crossing between time and place, personal practice and the practice of others, exploring the history of the discipline and its changing cultural contexts. Bricolage enables us to collage experience, to involve issues of knowledge and understanding, technology, concept, percept, skill and cultural and discipline experience. The bricoleur appropriates aspects of research methodologies which best suit the task at hand, travelling between various research disciplines in an attempt to build the most appropriate bridge between aesthetics and experience, through processes of production documentation and interpretation. The bricoleur is seeking to explore, reveal, inform and perhaps inspire by illuminating aspects of insider praxis within their field. As Jill Kinnear explains:

[V i s u a l] r e s e a r c h d e a l s w i t h a n d
i n t e n s i f i e s e l e m e n t s o f r e s e a r c h
a n d l a n g u a g e t h a t h a v e a l w a y s
b e e n p a r t o f t h e p r a c t i c e o f a n
a r t i s t. In the studio I found I was constantly trying to reconcile images, beliefs,
facts and ideas, resulting in almost permanent turmoil. (Kinnear, 2000: 42)

I am concerned also to bring together practice and research as purposeful practice. This is to do with creating intentional meaning through a process of rigorous planning, documentation, interpretation, analysis and storying. These processes are underpinned by constant emphasis on the ongoing and critical dialogues between studio and

theory, process and product that are crucial for practitioner-based research. Emphasised is the rigour and discipline of creating art, and the imagination, skill and foresight that enrich the research of the bricoleur.

Orienteering Lifescapes

The important issue here is where to begin? Where does the emphasis for practitioner-based research lie? As practitioners we have a strong base in autobiography as a means of linking art and life. Not only does autobiographical method give us voice, it enables us to write aspects of our lives in a special kind of way (Butt, 1985; Plath, 1987; Denzin, 1989; Elbaz, 1987; Goodson, 1988; Hawke, 1996). Its methods enable us to explore of the variances of decision making within our field and the diversity of creative experiences. Autobiography is a qualitative application, which enables us to consider influences and meaning and their roles in collecting the kinds of data necessary to explore and demonstrate personal knowledge. Autobiographical method enables a personal investigation of the self: self-research, self-portrait; self-narrative. Deborah Mitchell elaborates this aspect further:

The stitches and embossing I use to create my work become spontaneous narratives. In my work the stitches and embossing tell the story though the story is more like a conception of feelings and fleeting thoughts than a particular figurative image. Each small piece is part of a memory. (Mitchell, 1999: 18)

Autobiography enables the practitioner to apprehend artistic practice by revealing personal experience, in the context of life stories, as the basis of research. It makes rationalisation possible by the revelation of personal reflection, interweaving self-consciousness with experience. Thus the researcher becomes the principal investigator of their professional endeavours. Autobiographical method describes a way to explore the practitioner and their concepts involving the self, identity, history, time, narrative, interpretation, experience and knowledge. It allows us to attend to issues that give meaning to our thoughts and actions as practitioners by picturing personal experience as a way of understanding aspects of reality. Through it we can systematically take slices of our lives.

By using (auto)biography as personal history, and viewing events within an historical context, we are able to better understand a personal situation by bringing forward prior, related experience. Consequently, the composition of biographical material presents a way of encouraging reflexivity in studies about the visual arts and art education. The process uncovers aspects of personal and cultural influences from family, nature, educational and social conditions, and material things. Such an approach provides a foundation and reference to explain why people act the way they do:

This is about who is speaking. You or me? The call of the void and the voice of the artist. It is not a verbal language. It is the unknown (but very known). It is expression. Someone calls me and I reply. Wordless, but with something to say. I have discovered how to embrace the void without exposing it to too much light. Others have too.

Breathe in breathe out.

It is possible to explore the nature of the muse without articulating it in language that is detrimental. (Prescott, 2000: 34)

It is important to realize that while researchers use biography and autobiography to prompt reflection they rely on the subjective verbal and written expressions of meaning that result. Consequently the languages of (autobiography cannot be taken as simply windows into the 'real' world of 'real' interacting participants. The languages used reflect the imaginative bricolage of methods people use to rearrange truths to create texts. Thus, autobiographical statements can be presented as a mix of fictional and non-fictional accounts of lived experiences over time.

Tracing New Stories

The process of neonarrative offers a way to investigate and reveal the many different ways our lived experiences can be described within a cultural scene. It offers a way to link theory with culture and contemporary studio and classroom practice. Neonarratives describe the spaces between and the crossovers that link practice and theory. Their process and construct enables the exploration, explanation and presentation of insider views as authentic ways to understand what seem to be changing practices within the field. Neonarrative method is used to develop new stories to account for the cultural conditions that surround and mediate contemporary art and education, teaching and learning. These tales from the field can be gathered from a number of participants using and blending their biographical stories (Smith, 1994) to create an inter-text of experience, or as autobiography to represent the practitioner as resident expert. In either case it offers an interdisciplinary socio-cultural research framework, understood in terms of the contemporary theoretical contexts that provide the socio-cultural dimensions of the study.

Neonarrative method creates a bricolage of processes that centre on the gathering of data reflecting perspectives from players within the field. The research method employs reflection and phenomenography, in which interdisciplinary notions of interpretation, description and comparison are engaged. The approach is useful in that it moves beyond individual facts to perceive general patterns, among existing links, from which to infer broad characteristics. Such an interdisciplinary approach offers a way to link art, teaching and life, by taking into account current knowledge in relevant and related fields. It is oriented towards people's ideas about the world and their experiences of it. It models one way to approach the task of identifying, constructing and situating methods for research using links and pathways, the bricolage, involved in packaging the components of a process for research.

Neonarrative method presents a process for analyzing what actually happened according to the people involved. The narratives collected become the tools from which knowledge is built (Nespor & Barylske, 1991). The experiences, approaches and responses of individuals are recorded and documented and analysed for their unique or shared qualities. Perceptions, values, insider stories, experiences and accounts inform the materials collected. It is a collaborative process and can be used with clusters of participants or as self-research where the supporting stories are found among published writers, artists and educators whose words, images and interpretations add meaning and context to the issues concerned.

The Neonarrative approach is guided by narratology, the study of stories. This is a qualitative method that offers an interpretive reconstruction of an aspect of a person's life. The resulting neonarrative is concerned with developing a plausible meaning-giving account that blends the personal histories of the people concerned with the social histories of their field. This is a process that theorizes praxis.

Narratives may be interpreted as essential aspects of social life that enable the passing on of knowledge without being necessarily concerned with the legitimacy of such knowledge (Spence, 1982; Van Maanen, 1988). They are essentially tales of the field with a focus on the personal everyday nature of experience of those involved. Important themes identified within the studies can be explored to uncover, interpret and reconstruct significant events that have contributed to the framing of particular aspects of activity in people's lives. A new story (neonarrative) is constructed when the processes that inform the conditions under investigation are theorised and reconceptualised. To do this requires a plurality of approaches designed to enable such a reconceptualisation. This bricolage of approaches is then situated by information gathered from the field. This information may be gathered from history or theory books and articles, personal journals, letters, artworks, catalogues, conversations, observations and other sources.

Mapping a Neonarrative

The research sequence for the construct of neonarratives incorporates (auto)biographical data and collected texts. These two types of account are storied within the contemporary world. This kind of investigation forms an empirical study in that it is designed to observe reality, treating the participants as natural philosophers, embedded in a cultural system and critical of it. It is an attempt to look at the world as people experience it, and to hear it through their narratives, tracing how experience modifies reality. The storytellers focus on key events or experiences in their artistic development or teaching experiences that they feel have strongly shaped their actions. These stories serve as elements for the construction of a neonarrative that consolidates yet recognises differences within it.

There are five phases in this process. These involve identification of the research method; the establishment of the collaborative process; the collection, transcription and review of data (biographical, theoretical, visual, case

studies and or other forms); analysis of the data; synthesis into neonarratives. Each phase accesses the autobiographies, stories and other data in a way that is independent, sequential and based on temporal logic.

The data first are transcribed and sorted into salient themes relating to the literature before being systematically structured into narratives constructing and illustrating the experiential quality and explanations, within the environmental, cultural and social scenes where the action occurs. A further analysis organises the data into clusters of thoughts. These initial steps provide the essential materials that define the emergent themes.

A thematic approach to the content and narrative construct is used to uncover, reconstruct, organise and highlight the emerging stories and relevant anecdotes. Each theme is used hermeneutically to deconstruct the stories being studied. Themes enable the segmentation of data into categories of phenomena that form chunks or clusters of information. The data can then be further categorised substantively, relating to particular persons or sites, or theoretically, in relation to particular types or aspects of the social process. Interactions identified among and between themes through the accounts of participants add to notions of the inter-subjectivity and wider accessibility of the narrative. In recognizing that we are each culturally located the attitudes and sentiments transmitted by culture are viewed as the framing devices, which shape our knowledge and interactions in the lifeworld.

Relevant statements made in support of each of the themes are selected to contribute to each narrative. At the completion of the initial selection and data entry process, each narrative is carefully edited to create as coherent a statement as possible. At the completion of each thematic story, a narrative reduction is created, encapsulating the main threads of the story. These reductions are then used to create the summary narrative at the end of this stage of the analysis. The final phase produces the neonarratives as an amalgam of data and theory to create new stories that are different or richer than those that had gone before. These emerging stories can then be used persuasively to support and reveal the work we do.

Approaching a Destination

Neonarrative method can be used to create as a third space, a storying place that links practice and theory. It is there that the experiences and knowledge of the practitioner can be compared and positioned among the theories from the field that frame the actions of the people involved. Taken into account is the human element that influences our understanding of aspects of our world. In a sense neonarrative method illustrates a phenomenographical approach to qualitative research that embraces numerous personal meanings and gives voice to experience. This is derived from the context of direct experience, linking perceptions and interpretations of reality with meaning structures. It's construct is an enabling process to provide distinctive insights linking the individual and their socio-cultural environment.

The experience of developing the neonarrative method has been a journey, a process of navigation, of learning to consider and articulate my praxis in research in meaningful ways. The journey has been challenging and at times confronting and the outcomes have convinced me that understanding processes for researching our own practice within the contexts of our field is a revealing and empowering process:

It is in the studio that all work becomes a realisation, and not without hiccups and practical dilemmas. One idea or concept may work wonderfully on paper and in the mind, and may have pages to back it up theoretically, yet it may fail horribly in the studio. It is your practical work, the 'final' result of your research that is on show. It must be struggled with and manipulated so it works both mentally and visually. So what it looks like and what it means has a common ideal. It is when the written and the theory dances with the practical and the visual, creating work which not only has importance and meaning but also validation. (Plowmann, 2000:35)

My argument linking artist/researcher/teacher centres on the notion that if we, as practitioners can understand and situate our practice then we own the practice. We can use the notion of research as a way to develop better understandings the changing and significant roles of artist, artworks and agency in this rapidly changing world. Perhaps this is a way to enhance the ability of our students and ourselves through the process of collaboration, to move forward as effective, informed and prepared practitioners. To be an aware, knowledgeable and articulate practitioner surely is an enabling paradigm.

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