

Using praxis to develop research methods into personal creativity in the visual arts

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Abstract

This paper focuses on building research methods for university postgraduates in the visual arts, addressing how research into the creative processes (rather than the products) of the visual arts might be constituted as new knowledge when framed through praxis. I wish to argue that by framing creative processes in this way the resulting research can then be considered as belonging to a community of social disciplines rather than being constituted solely as self-knowledge, or self-expression. My paper bases its case on an examination of the ways in which hybridised methods of research can answer institutional criticisms that research into personal creative practices is essentially narcissistic. I examine the use of praxis in helping to determine validity claims in nursing research, and I discuss of examples of methodologies encouraged within the postgraduate programme in Visual Arts at Edith Cowan University in Perth. I suggest that an understanding of the origin, process and practice of the communicative act can become not just personally significant, but socially and ethically also.

This paper addresses how research conducted into the creative processes of the visual arts might be constituted as new knowledge when framed through praxis, thus demonstrating that such research belongs to a community of social disciplines rather than being constituted as self-knowledge, or self-expression. It proposes that the relevance of such research can be made evident in implementing Jurgen Habermas's proposition that technical, practical and emancipatory interests are fundamental in human interaction, and that the intentionality of the communicative act is readily identifiable as having emancipatory potential (Habermas, 1971). Thus, an understanding of the origin, process and practice of the communicative act can become personally, socially and ethically significant.

What follows is an examination of the ways in which hybridised methods can answer institutional criticisms that research into personal creative practices is essentially narcissistic. The paper bases its case on examples of methodologies encouraged within the postgraduate programme in Visual Arts at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia, but argues its specific institutional approach also has a broader national potential.

A premise central to this paper is the pragmatic necessity of ensuring a continuing research presence in the visual arts in an Australian university culture. The practice of art making will continue outside of tertiary education, but if we accept that an education in the visual arts is intrinsically important to the individual, it is also necessary to address how that importance can be

accommodated by increasingly disinterested host institutions, and how the importance of individual communication could be extended into an engagement with the wider social and institutional realm.

Two paradigms limit the potential for research into creative communication in Australian universities. Firstly, a growing academic environment in which the basic research premise of what Anthony Giddens calls 'radical doubt' (1991, p. 46) is dampened by the promotion of 'applicable' rather than 'pure' or 'basic' bodies of knowledge. These bodies of knowledge operate under the strictures of competency based training, and demands for 'learning for the workplace' (Chappell, 1995, p. 179). Secondly, a national funding strategy is in place that can militate against basic creative arts research (1). Institutional demands are for research that can be further quantified by its 'impact' in social environments, and governmental demands for measurable economic benefits (Cunningham, 2006). Such demands can be considered not only antithetical to research in the arts, but also in the sciences. Graeme Laver, the recipient of the 1996 Australia Prize for Science, whose work was instrumental in the discovery of anti-flu drugs, has again publicly stated his opposition to Federal Government funding principles that ask research groups to derive marketable results from their research studies (ABC news report, 07.02.07). This may demonstrate only that certain contentious individuals are highly discomfited by the current research environment. Equally it may act as a cultural indicator of the current hegemonic struggle over the purposes of research and education.

This does not mean that research into the creative process does not take place in universities, neither that it is without value. As Jipson and Paley have observed, there has been much debate surrounding the possibilities for encoding analytical data in non traditional ways (Jipson & Paley, 1997, p. 3), but it is often small in scale, and this can further reinforce the outsider's view of a narcissistic arts research culture (Hutsel, 2006). It has to be acknowledged that the subjectivities of creative disciplines can sometimes promote narcissistic self referentialism, and accusations of dilettantism against data presented in fictionalised and poetic form are sometimes hard to rebut (Coyle, 1998).

Within this context ECU postgraduate visual arts candidates are encouraged to develop a theoretical understanding of communicative action and inter-subjectivity. A central research question raised at the proposal stage is: How can individuals detach themselves from their cultural circumstances in order to dispassionately assess their actions? This draws from Habermas' promotion of the adopting of a performative attitude when participating in a process of mutual understanding (1971), and Giddens' idea of the reflexive self (1991). The intention of this central question is to raise an acknowledgement of the act of communication as one that is at

least culturally contextualised, and at most culturally constructed, and to extend the concept of the creative act away from the supposedly autonomous individual and introduce it into the social realm.

The reflective practitioner of course, is now an idea that is two decades old (Schön, 1983) and alongside it has sprung the development of action research as way of understanding social subjectivity and making social change evident (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). There is a difference however between the reflective practitioner and the reflexive one, and this can be demonstrated through a brief analysis of the evolution of action research and the extending of its reach during the last decade into issues of communicative subjectivity.

Action research creates a set of professional methodologies that it can be argued are well suited to research in the applied arts. In his essay 'Action Research and Design', Cal Swan, a longstanding advocate of taking design education in universities away from professional training and subjecting it to the rigours of critical discourse, presents an argument for action research that addresses the difference between the exercise of professional expertise and research as the development of new knowledge, acknowledging the continuing debates around this issue (Caban, 1999). He quotes Dilnot's proposition that design practice as a consultative process might not be regarded as knowledge building research, unless it is coupled with reflection and analytical thinking that has the express purpose of transforming professional paradigms (1998). Whilst fully supporting Swan's position on action research in design, and acknowledging that it has an important role to play in developing an institutional profile for the visual arts, it is still an incomplete methodology for research into the act of individual creation where the processes of communicative inter-subjectivity are more intense.

In nursing, action research has been increasingly modified in order to help analyse the patient's sense of self and illness, the nurse's sense of self, and received attitudes to what illness is and how this is communicated and acted upon (Sumner, 2001). This hybridised development of action research in the nursing profession to incorporate the personal is most appropriate to research into individual creativity. Increasingly in nursing, the idea of the reflexive practitioner relates the methods of action research to praxis (Rolfe, 2000) creating an important model for research into the visual arts. Because of its ethical and action-oriented principles, a hybrid praxis/action research model in nursing offers the potential to address validity claims that remain problematic in the profession to 'pure' qualitative researchers. It can be claimed that its pragmatic approach is validity-enhancing (Hope & Waterman, 2003).

Validity claims are central to Habermas' concerns about communicative action, and I would argue that his reasoning behind 'speech acts' is applicable also to acts of visual communication. Habermas's proposition of communicative rationality is that the act of communication raises claims to 'truthfulness', normative thinking and behaviour. It is clear why this would be central to any kind of post - Foucauldian strategy for nursing, but perhaps less so for research into the creative process in the visual arts. Habermas' argument proposes that criticism, reaching understanding and agreement are simultaneously embodied in the act of communication (Neimi, 2005). This observation has obvious links with the idea of peer acceptability, what could also be characterised as 'professionalism' within a discipline. Intrinsic to the observation is also a challenge to the cosy, self enclosed nature of normative professionalism. So the 'rejection of rule-based formulae' and the 'recognition of the impact of contextual and pragmatic concerns' (Hope & Waterman 2003, p. 127) with all its potential for subjective chaos in nursing is thus regulated by a mindfulness of the relationship between practice and theory as validity claims by professional bodies are challenged. In the visual arts, subjectivities and peer consensus are equally powerful if less contested, and less important socially. In such circumstances a critical dialectic is imperative in examining the validity claims of research into individualism, creativity and how its values are perpetuated.

Just as technician attitudes towards research minimise the effects of reflexivity and do not stretch a profession's paradigms, the investigation of the creative process in the visual arts is also potentially unstable and narcissistic unless it is reflexive, because it is largely unconstrained by regulatory professional bodies. Articulating praxis as a research method is important because it demands a reflexive position. Habermas can be seen as drawing from Aristotle in suggesting that that communicative practice is concerned with human affairs, and is ultimately ethical. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle suggests that praxis is the outcome of practical judgement, and praxis involves acting in ways that are informed by social theories that must be evaluated for their ethical value (1980). Like Aristotle, Habermas never assumes that such acts of practical judgement are inherently 'correct' or 'truthful' - for validity is grounded in inter-subjectivity and mutual understanding. Building on this it would follow that if individuals are asked how they might detach themselves from their cultural circumstances in order to dispassionately assess their creative actions, then such (student) researchers into creativity should understand that acts of communication need to be critically and reflexively engaged with. As Grundy says in relation to the wider educational experience, to embark in study 'from this critical perspective is to be engaged in a form of praxis. Praxis is the form of action which is the expression of emancipatory interest' (Grundy, 1987, p 104). Thus she returns us to Habermas' proposition raised in the introduction to this paper.

For better or for worse, research into creative practice in the visual arts is seen increasingly as outside the dominant institutional discourse. As a way of maintaining a foothold in the institution and avoiding accusations of narcissism, praxis forces individual engagement with institutional values, for as Freire observes, praxis takes place in the real world (Freire, 1972, p 68).

I would argue that the creative process demands reflexive action. When the creative practitioner adopts praxis, it encourages the act of reflecting upon, and reconstructing the constructed world. Adopting praxis assumes a process of meaning making, and that meaning and its processes are contingent upon a cultural and social environment.

Because praxis is acting together with others, is about negotiation, and is not about acting upon others, it forces the practitioner to consider more than the practicalities of making. It encourages a move away from the pitfalls of introspective narcissism and towards an analytical engagement with human interaction, and emphasises the necessity to clarify the inter-subjective circumstances of the communicative act. This theoretical position is clearly linked with Giddens' stance on reflexivity, and with Habermas' views on communicative action.

In conclusion I would suggest that the ethical implications of viewing research into creativity demanded within the framework of praxis locates such research firmly within the paradigms of social research as indicated in the current debate within the nursing profession, and is a productive research approach for postgraduate visual arts students.

Notes

- (1) The ARC largely funds qualitative research whose impact can be in some way measured, the success of QUT in gaining the first ARC Centre of Excellence in the Humanities and Creative Arts area was framed in the 2005 annual report as the result of it having been “backed strongly by outside organisations, perhaps in recognition that the creative industries represent a significant and growing share of most advanced economies”. (Hoi, 2006) The report also suggests “In the long term, investment in the knowledge economy is very likely to create the cash flows that will allow society to invest broadly in areas of need, but it is not sufficient to postulate this link. If possible, we must articulate and demonstrate this better.”

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Biography

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