

Why praxis? A case for grounding creative practice in cultural theory

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Abstract

In this paper, it is argued that if culture stems from peoples' ideas about the world it makes sense to foster forms that stem from them also. An interpretation of practitioners conducting arts practice as cultural products making cultural products supports this case for grounding creative activity in cultural theory. The discussion is intended primarily to encourage a research culture at undergraduate level for, in a student-centred learning community, cultural discourses promote learner autonomy and, therefore, motivate arts practitioners to play a vital role in the construction and communication of new knowledge.

Culture is constructed by humans in order to communicate and create community...Culture begins with an imagining of the world about us; these imaginings are represented in some way...formed in discourse, language, symbols, signs, and texts – all concepts applied to meaning systems. (Lewis, 2002, p. 13)

Introduction

Far from alluding to a model whereby the individual is seen as a socially disempowered and unthinking subordinate, Lewis' claim that culture is our own ongoing creation implicates the individual in social action and formation. Following on from Lewis' framing of the construction of culture as an extension of our thinking, we may argue that theories of who we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it, are theories about different aspects of our own creativity. With these frameworks in mind, this paper will address how cultural theory founds the 'practicing' of culture.

Lewis' claim supports the fostering of a mode of activity whereby practice is "informed by theory and also, though less emphatically, theory informed by practice" (Williams, in Johnson et al., 2004, p. 90). The term used for this mode is 'praxis', used by the ancient Greeks to refer to an activity engaged in by free individuals (Smith, 1996, par. 8), but which can also be taken to mean "the practice of a technical subject or art ... arising out of the theory of it" (Brown, 1993, p. 2321). Praxis is further described by Williams as "a whole mode of activity in which, by analysis but only by analysis, theoretical and practical elements can be distinguished, but which is always a whole activity, to be judged as such" (in Johnson et al., 2004, p. 90). Therefore, praxis entails a way of thinking about theory that is pertinent to the development of arts practices.

In this paper I make the claim that the grounding of art in theory ensures the cultural relevance of creative activity – a claim that leads an overall conception of praxis as a trait of ‘best practice’ in cultural production. This topic has a direct bearing upon research in visual art in that it encourages a research culture at undergraduate level. In a student-centred learning community, cultural discourses promote learner autonomy and, therefore, motivate arts practitioners to play a vital role in the construction and communication of new knowledge.

A Case for Cultural Theory in Creative Practice

Cultural theory is not a term confined to dusty libraries or to the dimly lit offices of university academics. Rather, it is a term used to describe a broad range of critical and self-conscious examinations into “the ways in which cultural forces, together with social factors, influence, shape and structure our everyday activities” (Inglis, 2005, p. 11). We can think of culture in a number of different ways. For example, it is meaningful, it is learned, it is arbitrary, as well as that its ideas, values and beliefs are embodied in symbols and artefacts such as tools or art objects (Inglis, 2005, p. 8-10). But, just as importantly, the signs of culture reference a process of ongoing social construction in which we are all participants. In this sense, and without dictating how life or art should be viewed, theory offers a variety of cultural reference points which we can use to help navigate and interpret our everyday activities as well as the activities of others. Whether theory leads us to new experiences or simply to thinking about familiar experiences in a novel and innovative way, it can inform us about the past and present, as well as pave the way for innovative thinking in the future.

Implicating the art-form as a sign of cultural construction, Inglis’ (2005, p. 90) makes the point that “‘art’, far from floating free in some ethereal realm ‘above’ everyday concerns, is always part of society and connected to what people do on an everyday basis”. In as much as we continue to build culture, it makes sense that our ideas about art also “remain assemblages that can be dismantled through time, space, and human action” (Lewis, p. 13). By drawing on these interpretations, we are able to think about art-forms as texts that can be culturally read - as doorways to the questions and ideas of the broader cultural contexts that frame them. Where cultural theory helps the practitioner ascertain the socio-historical context of their work, praxis lends itself to Plucker, Beghetto and Dow’s (2004, p. 90) definition of creativity as an interaction of the skills by “which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context”. In addition, the broader cultural sensibility that praxis supports, in turn, enables the practitioner in drawing from cultural theory for the interpretation of the past, present, and possible futures of arts practice.

Because a focus on praxis means a focus on the individuals’ approach to cultural creativity, thinking about the constructedness of culture and art leads us to thinking about the constructedness of the individual. At this point it is useful to acknowledge Giddens’ claim that “individuals must now ‘be’ their own structures” (cited in McRobbie, 2003, par. 6). Giddens

(1991, p. 52) says that the “identity of the self is not something that is just given ... but something that has to be routinely created and sustained” and this ties in with the approach to culture that has been presented. In this sense, when we think about whom we have become so far, we find ourselves reflecting on the culmination of an extended process of self-construction with the understanding that, as with art-forms, it is continually framed and informed by the progress of a particular cultural context.

Touching upon the idea of the constructedness of culture, art, and the individual is useful when arguing a case for the grounding of arts practice in cultural theory. This is because it enables us to interpret art objects being made by practitioners as an activity whereby cultural products are being made by cultural products. It also drives the point that if creative activity stems from ideas about culture, arts practice is suitably grounded in cultural thinking. This is one way in which theory can be conceived of as a continuing and integral part of investing in creativity.

From the shadow of the idea that arts practice is founded in theory, emerges the question of how we may interpret arts practice where a theoretical foundation is either not acknowledged or is even discouraged. It is arguable that a reluctance to encourage theory in the arts’ constitutes a degree of cynicism with regard to the cultural vitality of arts practice and also, by direct association, a degree of cynicism toward the role of thinking in creative activity. Maybe a questioning of the role of theory can be traced back to assumptions, that I have encountered on a number of occasions, that theory is a rigid and dogmatic practice that obstructs creative freedom, a distraction from the joy or the spontaneity of art making, and that true innovation is stifled by the study of pre-established theoretical frameworks. These assumptions echo the romantic notion of the artist as a “genius who has creative powers and outstanding originality of uncommonly endowed and exalted individuals” (Wittkower, 2003, par. 1). However, even this idea occupies a particular socio-historical context, having emerged in the course of 18th century cultural thinking.

The point that I would like to make here is in reference to how cultural theory actually fosters innovation in arts practice. Giddens (1991, p. 41) says that “[c]reativity ... means the capacity to act or think innovatively in relation to pre-established modes of activity, [and that this] is closely tied in with basic trust”. He adds that “[t]rust itself, by its very nature, is in a certain sense creative, because it entails a commitment that is a ‘leap into the unknown’”.

In presenting a clear correlation between the idea of creative innovation and the idea of cultural knowledge, Giddens highlights the importance of fostering practitioner mindfulness into pre-established modes of activity (i.e. an understanding of cultural history) - not least of all because it is with this grasp that the practitioner may distinguish what might or might not constitute innovation in the first place. The notion of leaping into the ‘unknown’, framed as a

requirement of creative thinking, means that praxis always involves a certain degree of risk though I would argue that the benefits may far outweigh the disadvantages. For, if we borrow Wegscheider-Cruse's (cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 78) point that going into the unknown is a part of "the risks of self growth", we can reaffirm that the critical and theoretical grounding of creative activity (i.e. praxis) reinforces the development of cultural selves and, therefore, culture itself.

I have been placing particular emphasis on a social constructionist approach to the question of theory in art. However, we can reinforce this position by flagging the role that theory has had throughout the history of art. In fact, the second half of the twentieth century saw much art being "classified as displaying some element of psychological or conceptual concerns" (de la Croix, Tansey, & Kirkpatrick, 1991, p. 1050). Whether we refer to the fact that Surrealism drew inspiration from "close readings of Freud's texts" (Lloyd, Gott, & Chapman, 1993, p. 170) or to the European salon cultures of the 20th, and also the 19th, centuries where artists congregated to 'think' about 'doing', it goes almost without saying that theory and art are mutually beneficial.

Conclusion

Within this paper I have interpreted practitioners conducting arts practice as cultural products making cultural products to support the notion of praxis, arguing that if culture stems from peoples' ideas about the world it makes sense to foster forms that stem from them also. While the views that I have put forward lend themselves to arts institutions in particular, it is important to note that they are also applicable to a much wider body of emerging and established creative practitioners. We are all influenced by cultural institutions. We are all self-creating products of culture.

But with arts education in mind, the teaching of cultural theory as a foundation for creative activity means access to skills that are applicable to the negotiation of meaning systems. The sharing of cultural knowledge equips students with a range of tools that are useful in navigating the breadth and depth of a world of ideas that exists beyond a world of appearances. Grounded in theory, arts education can continue to foster student capacities for innovative thinking and autonomous cultural action in relation to the myriad of discourses, symbols, signs, and texts with which they come into contact and to which they inevitably contribute.

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Biography

Dr. David Prescott-Steed tutors in Cultural History and Theory at Edith Cowan University and, as a practicing visual artist, has been exhibiting since 1993. His PhD thesis, 'The Import of the Sensation of the Abyss', was completed in 2006 and is an exploration of the concept of the abyss as a means to understanding ideas such as self, reflexivity, indeterminacy, ideology, and radical doubt. He is currently writing articles on teaching material culture, representations of the abyss in mass media contexts, and knowledge consumption, and has a forthcoming publication from The Caribbean Chapter of the College English Association, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. Recognising the value of multi-disciplinary approaches to cultural creativity, David is working with the Rockingham Kwinana Division of General Practitioners to explore collaborative approaches for helping 'at risk' youth in poor socio-economic communities.