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Practicing interdisciplinarity

Abstract:

Practice-led research is inherently interdisciplinary, with practitioners engaging with a range of knowledges and methods through processes of selection, integration and synthesis. Claims are made for the unique qualities of both the creative arts artefacts produced through this practice, and for the research approaches used by creative researchers. However, a substantial amount of ‘genre blurring’ (Geertz 1980) is occurring within the humanities and social sciences, with researchers outside of the creative arts utilizing creative practices and incorporating creative products in their research. Further, the history of interdisciplinary research reaches back to as early as the 1920s (Klein 1996) and is not subsequent to the rise of practice-led research in academe. Seen in this context, what can practice-led research claim as its own, and is there a benefit to conceptualising it as part of the ‘interdisciplinary turn’ (Geertz 1980)?

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Interdisciplinarity, coming to a department near you

It almost doesn't need to be said that art is inherently interdisciplinary. Art practice (verbal, visual, written, performed) draws on combinations of different methods, approaches and subjects, and invariably involves 'a number of different perspectives that the artist/researcher has to combine' (Sullivan 2005: 86). The production of art requires the creator to integrate disparate skills, experiences and interests (Carter 2004: 9). It is 'subjective, emergent' and 'ultimately interdisciplinary' (Barrett 2010: 2, 7). Yet while the interdisciplinary character of creative research is remarked upon (e.g. Barrett 2010: 7; Woods 2006: 127; Carter 2004: 9), researchers in the field do not routinely or explicitly employ the concept of interdisciplinarity, nor draw upon discourse from the field of Interdisciplinary Studies.

Practice-led researchers¹ are striving toward depictions of their work that identify its specificity as relevant institutional research, its philosophy and its 'practice sophistication'. Such a depiction is also essential in order to establish that practice-led research is appropriately different to professional, normal practice (Mottram 2009: 246). Concern that practice-led research struggles to find recognition because it lacks an articulated conceptual paradigm suitable to its tasks is well established. Creative arts researchers are familiar with the need to argue for their practice-led research alongside other disciplinary research approaches. Recognition remains a sore point:

How will it be possible for the person who is both a researcher and creative practitioner to take his or her place at the research table in a way that ensures the primacy of practice and the embedded epistemologies of practice are respected and valued, and at the same time produce research which is recognized and respected for its rigour by the other researchers within and beyond the field of creative arts? (Haseman 2010: 147)

This concern with staking a claim leads to the solipsistic position that practice-led research alone is transformative, performative, or even singularly 'creative' (Carter 2004: 7-9; 2010: 15, 16; Haseman 2010: 148; 2006: 102; Sullivan 2010: xii). Yet, with methods, approaches, conceptual paradigms and literature sources today shared across disciplines, and some of that creative practice research being done outside of the creative arts field, is it plausible to argue that practice-led research is unique to the creative arts; or as Haseman has argued, that it offers a third, 'performative' research paradigm (Haseman 2010; 2006)?

The authoritative *Qualitative research methods* (Berg 2004) includes words, images and descriptions in its definition of activities that constitute qualitative research. Along with the expected methods of observation, sociometry and textual analysis, Berg includes sociodrama and other ethno-methodological experimentation, photographic, film and digital recording techniques, and ethnographic research. Brad Haseman himself describes qualitative researchers 'relishing' the performative turn in qualitative research (2006: 7). Most tellingly, Clifford Geertz's seminal paper 'Blurred genres: The reconfiguration of social thought' discusses the 'enormous' amount of genre blurring taking place in the social sciences:

The 'lines grouping scholars together into intellectual communities, or (what is the same thing) sorting them out into different ones, are these days running at some highly eccentric angles'. (Geertz 1998 [1980]: 165, 169)

Geertz's examples include the baroque fantasies presented as 'deadpan empirical observations' by Jorge Luis Borges and Donald Barthelme.

Critical to the argument that practice-led research is unique is the argument that the creative work embodies knowledge *as research*, as argued by Gray and Mallins (2000), Carter (2004), Green and Haseman (2006), Barrett and Bolt (2010) and Sullivan (2010). Framing this is the question as to whether or not practice-led research and its particular fields, such as Creative Writing, comprise a discipline.

The twentieth century saw the ‘surface structure of academic institutions’ dominated by disciplinarity, but with interdisciplinarity nevertheless challenging the prevailing disciplines. Klein and others have analysed the development of institutional interdisciplinary studies and research in North America and Europe (Fish 1989; Klein 1996; Geertz 1998; Newell 1998; Repko 2012). In the latter half of the twentieth century, the decades during which practice-led research burgeoned in higher education in Australia, Britain and the US, heterogeneity, hybridity, complexity and interdisciplinarity became ‘characterising traits of knowledge’ (Klein 2006: 4). While long present in universities, the coalescence of practice into what we know as practice-led research, arose as part of broader movements of education reform, critique and disciplinary upheavals (Harper & Kerridge 2004; Mottram 2009; Smith & Dean 2009; Brien & Webb 2010; Cowan 2011).

Klein dates the use of the term ‘interdisciplinary’ back to the Manhattan Project and the need for new ways of organizing knowledge (Klein 1996: 107-8). Roberta Frank cites its first use by the Social Science Research Council, New York, as far back as the 1920s (Frank 1988: 91, 94-95, cited in Klein 1996: 8-9). What followed was a proliferation of kinds and sites of interdisciplinary research, the ‘de-disciplining’ of knowledge (Klein 1996), new curricula, and new disciplinary formations that were (are) a response to complex problems and issues exceeding disciplinary boundaries. Writing in 1980, Geertz wrote that it was an issue ‘not so much of what knowledge is, but of what it is we want to know’ (1998 [1980]: 178). An expanding range of ‘enunciative and generic modes’ has now proliferated in this ‘renovation’ of research (Brewster 2009: 127). Increasingly fluid boundaries have grown between the two axioms of research – qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Disciplines that are centred around quantitative methods are also increasingly characterised by changing boundaries between basic and applied research (Klein 1996: 189-93; Weingart & Stehr 2000; Szostak 2007). A great deal of repurposing of established methodologies is also taking place in the creative arts field; we are part of a sometimes discordant, energized, (and in the sciences) purposeful interdisciplinarity. Klein’s discussion of interdisciplinarity as boundary crossing emphasises the domain (‘boundary’) aspect of interdisciplinary research:

People work directly and through institutions to create, maintain, break down, and reformulate boundaries between knowledge units [...] All knowledge is located, whether, to echo Michel de Certeau, the space of inquiry is a routine, practised place or a negotiated, contested space. (Klein 1996: 1, 3)

Consistently, practice-based researchers have been concerned to establish disciplinarity in two principle strands of thinking and manoeuvre, the lines and connections between which have sometimes blurred (because of the inherent *interdisciplinarity*): disciplinarity in relation to the kind of knowledges we apply through our creative practice and methodologies as researchers; and disciplinarity which aims for institutional equivalence with other disciplines and recognized interdisciplines (e.g. Cultural Studies), that argues its place with the

administrative powers and the allocators of university-level committee memberships, research grants, HDR scholarships, department and school names, and promotion and selection committees and so on.

Such disciplinary manoeuvres involve the articulation of borders and boundaries to frame the discipline. 'Discipline' is itself a complex metaphor that expresses an ontological/pedagogical sense of an agreed body of knowledge, and a unity of methodologies and practices formed over time, with established boundaries and conceptual 'borders'. Discipline signifies a studies area has reached a level of historical 'maturity', and attained institutional and cultural value. It is also a metaphor for the disciplinarian's willingness (student or practitioner) to think within that frame, to stay within bounds. Finally, it is a metaphor for subjugation to the power of the administrative bodies and peers associated with the discipline.

Disciplinarity has strategic relevance, because it indicates equivalence with other disciplines (Biggs & Büchler 2008: 6) and a privilege: other disciplines don't do or know what this discipline knows or does. Which returns us to the question, is practice-led research unique? If not, has it failed its charter, or was the charter wrong in the first place? Measured against other forms of critical enquiry, is it alone 'inventive' and able to 'put back together what the cultural scholars have 'shattered' (Carter 2010: 15, 16)? It is not uncommon for the field and its participants to be described as different and outside usual research practice, as Carter argues. For instance, the title of a recent article published in *TEXT* locates creative writing researchers as misfits at the fringes of the research community: 'Ferals, nomads, drifters, gypsies, vagrants, blow-ins, thieves, troublemakers, tricksters and terrorists: Creative writing, from creative industries to creative ecologies' (Perry 2009). Artistic research is a 'new species' of research (Barrett in Barrett & Bolt 2010: 1), and the practice is 'unique' (Sullivan: 2009: 51; Bolt in Barrett & Bolt 2010: 33). Yet Barrett's defining question for creative arts research is one shared with any research that aims to have a rigorous foundation: 'What new knowledge/understandings did the studio enquiry and methodology generate that may not have been revealed through other research approaches' (Barrett 2010: 1). If we remove the word 'studio' from the quotation, the sentence is a meaningful statement about any research. Even in its original form, the statement does not differentiate practice-based research from other forms.

This returns us to the issue of the essentially interdisciplinary character of practice-led research, and the suggestion that it shares much with the established concepts of academic research (Biggs & Büchler 2007: 64; 2008: 5). We are also returned to the contrary claim by Haseman and others, that practice-led research produces special forms of knowledge through the application of unique, creative methods.

Identifying congruities

For practice-led researchers, situating what we do as part of the interdisciplinary turn would support moving beyond the dependency and limitations of the use of the terms 'practice' and 'discipline', and the polysemy of meanings with which 'practice' is now associated. Judith Mottram does just this in proposing that there be recognition of 'the congruence of generic models of research with models that accommodate advanced use of creative practice as an element of research inquiry' (2009: 247). A position of mutual accommodation could point

to practice-led research recognizing itself as being part of the seismic cultural shift from explanations about the world ‘based on physical processes’ to others which engage with ‘symbolic forms’ (Klein 1996: 9).

The risk in valourizing the felt and embodied knowledges associated with practice-led research artefacts – another form of border-building – is that creative practice is decontextualized from the disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking that has informed it, and is thus depoliticised, becoming neither public nor discursive. Haseman and others argue that the difference to other kinds of research (and by inference to other kinds of interdisciplinarity) lies in the ‘expression of findings’, i.e. in the creative work produced by the research (Haseman 2006: 99). Relying on creative practice’s performative outcomes without either a meta-commentary or an awareness of one’s participation in the much broader interdisciplinary turn can lead to a hermetic talking-to-oneself, to a practice where practitioners are focussed on presenting what we do, to each other; or simply amounts to a professional practice that is not ‘research’ (Mottram 2009; Biggs & Büchler 2008: 9).

Mottram’s emphasis on the distinction between ‘research’ and ‘practice’ demonstrates that without the articulation that we understand to be research, practice-led research is in fact *professional practice*. Professional artists and writers working in commercial, fringe or community-based economies are rarely called upon to explain their work through research-based analysis, or to demonstrate a knowledge of a set of related fields broadly and discursively:

If there is no hypothesis, question or objectives, the practice is ‘normal’ practice, not research-led practice’ [...] The disinclination to engage with writing cannot be the basis for developing a new approach to advanced academic work. (Mottram 2009: 246)

Alison Richards identifies an ‘insider/insighter status’, wherein the peer has already been inducted into ‘the specific matrix of precepts and concepts’ of the researcher’s culture (Richards 2006, cited in Kroll & Webb 2012). This produces a catch-22, or the ‘Circulatory Problem’, wherein exemplar works demonstrate or define what practice-based research is, having *already* been labelled practice-based (Biggs & Büchler 2008: 7).

Interdisciplinarity is implicit in many of the solutions proposed to this situation. We see it in Mottram’s suggestion that creative arts researchers not constrain themselves to ‘only using creative practice as a means to investigate our field’, and that creative arts researchers turn toward ‘research practices, historical practices and possibly even statistical, experimental or philosophical practices as a means to understand or add knowledge to the field of creative practice’ (Mottram 2009: 230). We see it in Ignaz Cassar’s plea for ‘alternative models’ for undertaking and communicating research, which will be relevant to other, even distant fields of research (Cassar 2009: 231-32). And we see it in Smith and Dean’s iterative web cycle (below). The conscious, critical interdisciplinarity which these proposals allude to, involves juxtaposing and interweaving practice-led research with research-led practice. This is, in fact, the Interdisciplinary Studies research process – of moving between disciplines, methodologies and information pathways; the use of multiple disciplinary methods or materials. Competency in the disciplines engaged with is a necessary precondition for the research, especially because interdisciplinary work engages with ‘contested terrain’: a question or issue that is the focus of a range of disciplines (Repko 2012: 7) and which need to be drawn together (e.g. Molecular Biology, and possibly Ficto-critical writing). Other

defining elements of interdisciplinary research which creative researchers will recognise are that a disciplinary method is subsumed, altered or re-imagined to suit the research purpose of the researcher's existing practices or project. The researcher integrates, recycles, and may reinvent those 'disciplinary insights, concepts, theories and methods' that are relevant to producing the 'new knowledge' (Repko 2008: 8, 9). As with practice-led research, process is integral to interdisciplinary research. It is self-reflective, integrative and is able to 'create products, solve problems and offer explanations', which are otherwise not possible through single disciplinary means (Boix Mansilla et al 2000: 337, 21). Interdisciplinary research is identified as 'a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is *too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline* ... [it involves the] construction of a *more comprehensive perspective*' (Klein & Newell 1997: 393-94, emphasis added).

An interdisciplinary cycle

Hazel Smith and Roger T Dean put forward a model for a practice/research-led approach, which is heterogeneous and candidly interdisciplinary (although again there is no reference to Interdisciplinary Studies discourse) (2009: 20-21, 23). As a representation of the kind of research practices in which creative researchers engage within the university, I would argue that it is more closely aligned with what actually takes place than the restrictive notion of the 'creative work plus exegesis/meme/audit' that has come to dominate our discussions, not as a result of researchers' actual work practices, but as a consequence of instrumental PhD requirements. Not uncommonly, collections of essays or individual papers reference creative work by HDR students in place of work by professional peers (e.g. Søren Kjörup 2011; Green & Haseman 2006; Barrett & Bolt 2010). It is worth asking, is there another field or discipline that would draw on its students' research outputs over its practitioners' research arcs to define itself? Looking at the oeuvres of established practice-led researchers, we see many other kinds of creative research conversation and discourse than the artifact and exegesis model. These have grown out of the individual researcher's creative practice within or beyond the university, teaching, fieldwork and myriad other opportunities and constraints not modeled on the current PhD approach.²

I recently undertook a citation search that revealed very little discussion of Smith and Dean's proposal. This is unfortunate, for their analysis and model reflects the multifarious kinds of interdisciplinary research that practice-led researchers actually do today, and also encourages alliances between research methods, disciplines and interdisciplines, through individual or collaborative projects. They adapt Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the *rhizome* (1987) as their metaphor for a transferable, replicable model of research. Deleuze and Guattari use the terms rhizome and rhizomatic to describe alliances that are uncentred and multiple, which reject binarism and hierarchy: 'Principles of connection and heterogeneity' should predominate: 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 6).

Possibly reflecting Dean's science background, Smith and Dean name their model the 'iterative cyclic web', a somewhat clumsy term that seems to be drawn from the sciences, notwithstanding the popularity of all things web-like (and let's be frank, the name is unmarketable in the creative arts field). The prefix 'iterative' refers to the fundamental

repetitions with variation that take place during research. ‘Web’ refers in particular to the rhizomic pattern of moving between ideas or methods. Starting points for creative research are identified, and these may be research, academic or practice-based in their focus. Ideas arise from the combinations of these starting points, generating outputs that may be theories and techniques, artworks, methods or critical accounts. The research may be process-driven or goal-oriented (Smith & Dean 2009: 23). Either way,

the model’s rhizomatic structure implies that interactions can take place between individuals from quite different communities and across cultures [...] outcomes can range from artworks to research papers, and might variously take the form of sound, text, image, video, artwork, numerical analysis of empirical data, argument, analysis or description. (Smith & Dean 2009: 24)

The model aims to conceptualise how intersections between disciplinary perspectives, knowledges and practices already take place and could be extended. Smith and Dean emphasise the potential for working across and between the creative arts and sciences.

This approach is synergistic with critiques from within Interdisciplinary Studies that promote critical and reflexive forms as opposed to strategic or opportunistic forms of interdisciplinarity (Klein 2005: 57). Jeffrey Peck’s remapping of German Studies, for instance, serves to model interdisciplinary study as a discursive formation that amounts to a

site or strategic location where the discipline reflects on itself and its practices [...] As the in-between-space where the clash of multiple subjectivities can foreground difference, it stimulates reflection on how such a new object [German studies] is constituted. (Peck 1998: 489)

He identifies the same argument being advanced in feminism, cultural studies and poststructuralist practices. On the other hand, Arthur Kroker (writing about Canadian Studies) warns against ‘vacant interdisciplinarity’ that is merely pragmatic and strategic:

What makes the thematic of interdisciplinarity substantial in its purposes and critical in its intentions is precisely the degree to which it engenders a method, a style of scholarship which is simultaneously *public*, *discursive* and *archaeological*. (Kroker 1980, quoted in Klein 1996: 17)

Drawing upon Susanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a new key*, Geertz offers a wry depiction of our love for certain new ideas, which produce the vacancy that Kroker warns against. As they ‘burst upon us’, these new ideas seem to resolve so many fundamental problems that they seem also to promise that they will resolve all fundamental problems. The new idea crowds out other ideas, its popularity due ‘to the fact that all sensitive and active minds turn at once to exploiting it. We try it in every connection, for every purpose, experiment with all possible stretches of its strict meaning, with generalizations and derivatives’ (Langer 1957: 23, cited in Geertz 1973: 3). The new concept is thoroughly relished, but then as familiarity is established, ‘our expectations are brought more into balance with its actual uses’. The days of excessive popularity are then over, and ‘our expectations do not outrun its uses quite so far’. The less driven and zealous thinkers settle down to questioning the bright idea’s applications and extensions (Langer *ibid*).

Biggs and Büchler, amongst others who are ‘less zealous and driven’, question whether practice-based research (‘PbR’) needs or can justify the special conditions or criteria applied

to it that some claim for it. Their question: does PbR share fundamental criteria with other academic research? Academic research rigour has to do with the process of the making, not the output and, they propose, PbR methods are no different in this. Our peers judge the merit of a particular method ‘not as a creative contribution, but as an answer to a question’ (Biggs & Büchler 2007: 68). In PbR, the practice ‘is the method’, and a particular method has been or will be selected as necessary, as opposed to another method. Rigour in PbR is based upon making evident the necessity of a particular method, and ‘that is what legitimizes the whole process’ (2007: 69). Their conclusion is that practice-led research is not a separate paradigm but is a ‘subcategory of research that can and should attend to and observe conventional research criteria’ (2007: 64; see also 2008: 12-13).

Whether or not we agree with Biggs and Büchler’s conclusion, the fact is that methodologies used by practice-led researchers for evaluation of practice-led research utilise many of the elements found in rubrics devised within Interdisciplinary Studies. Evaluation recognises that the practitioner works across disciplines and methodologies, which include a creative practice and related research. Veronica Boix Mansilla et al propose that assessment of interdisciplinary research includes evaluating *integration*. How has the researcher selected perspectives, in what ways have the connections across disciplines or methods been framed, have they been integrated into a coherent whole, and what ‘advantage’ has been achieved through the articulation? Other criteria include *disciplinary grounding* – the robustness of disciplinary understandings; and *purposefulness in relation to the work’s aims and audience*, critical awareness and reflexivity (Boix Mansilla et al 2009: 341-46). With researchers who also work as professional artists, performers and writers intermurally alongside their university, *purposefulness* could incorporate assessments in relation to these sites of commercial, freelance or institutional production and publication. Repko (2012: 418-25) outlines four approaches to assessment including that by Boix Mansilla et al: there is much else to draw upon from the field of Interdisciplinary Studies that is relevant to practice-led research and our understanding of its broader institutional history, epistemological standing, processes and social significance.

Conclusion

This brief overview of the broadly agreed defining elements of interdisciplinary research – of integration, process and reflection – has brought the interdisciplinary character of practice-led research into focus. Practice-led research draws on a diverse range of methods, techniques and technologies; it does and should engage with qualitative and even quantitative forms of research and practice; it requires competency across the inter/disciplines it engages with; and it requires meta-commentary if it is to be research and not professional practice.

More than forty years ago the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote an essay on ‘thick description’, expanding on the concept coined by philosopher Gilbert Ryle. In that essay and in his writing that followed, Geertz created something that really sparkled, and which has become integral to the lexicons of the social sciences. What will practice-led research’s contribution be? Perhaps it will arise if we illuminate the creativity inherent in interdisciplinarity, and engage in research that is ‘public, discursive and archaeological’. The most pertinent question for now is, how does practice-led research contribute solutions or

illuminate complex problems in ways that are *not possible* through other interdisciplinary methods?

Endnotes

1. In this paper ‘practice-led research’ incorporates the related concepts of ‘practice through research’ and ‘research-based practice’. It does not intend to privilege practice-led over research-led work.
2. To give two indicative examples: Marcelle Freiman’s poetry collections make no outward comment on her research publications on creativity and teaching, while some of her publications do discuss the interaction between writing, reading and research (e.g. Freiman 2005). Stephen Muecke’s memoir, philosophy and writings from the field do not self-critique unless it is to examine ‘writing’ or ‘language’ itself. Both writers’ teaching includes study units that are reflective of their expertise in postcolonial studies (Freiman) and indigenous studies (Muecke), as well as creative writing practice.

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