

The ‘Soft Search’ – Learning to Discourse upon Personal Creative Practices

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Abstract

This text is based upon a university course which has been designed to help graduate art / design students formulate the theoretical component of the practice based work that they have generated over the course of their studies; given that this output is expected to be accompanied by a written thesis expounding upon the ideational aspects of their studio productions.

To facilitate a transition from studio practice to academic writing a friendly, adaptable strategy has been devised. A description of this approach, situated within a broader framework of concepts such as Critical Reflection, Associative Thinking and Bisociation, constitutes the main thrust of this document.

Keywords

Theory, Creative Practice, Practice led research, Learning, Associative thinking, Bisociation.

Background / Context

The graduate course VA505, taught at Sabanci University, Istanbul, aims to enable artists and designers to theorize and to write effectively on their own creative output, as well as give them the ability to conduct research and develop writing skills in wider related fields such as art theory, art education, curatorial studies and the like. A further, and by no means lesser, query however is to establish and to exemplify as to what extent conducting research in a given subject informs and indeed alters creative output.

Personal Creative Practices – why do we need to discourse upon them?

Before going into some specifics on discoursing upon personal creative output it will be in order to ask ourselves this question – why are we compelled to do so today, when only 50 years ago this was not something that was expected of creative practitioners? Are the criteria that were applied to the evaluation of art and design works no longer sufficient due to a drastic change in the nature of the work itself? Has the essence of artistic/design output – which appears to me to be the translation of abstract conceptions and ideas (that, in many cases, have initially been formulated through verbal expression) into visual/auditory artifacts that hold emotional/expressive capabilities which go considerably beyond the initial verbal format – changed to such an extent that we need to also theorize upon it rather than just experience its emotional impact?

It is true that during the last decades the application areas for creative output have expanded exponentially, particularly through the advent of computational technologies and appended new media. Where a graphic designer would only have dealt with media that was almost exclusively paper based only 30 years ago, today this same professional has to take on board a plethora of new means of distribution. And it is not only the added electronic media outlets (websites and smart-apps in addition to posters and billboards) that bring about the change; it is also the manner in which the work is produced and conceived of that is affected: What used to be a static, linear process is now in a state of perpetual flux, subject to constant change during all phases of the lifetime of a project – from its conception to its production to its usage.

Another major change that the computational medium has brought about through the internet is the bombardment of external data that artists and designers are constantly confronted by. This increase in data may well call for a ‘scientifically’ enhanced approach on behalf of artists who nowadays routinely choose, analyse and integrate large volumes of data into their own creative tasks – may this be as inspirational material, or as larger conceptual frameworks for their projects, or as items that will be directly incorporated into their work.

All of these major changes notwithstanding, it still seem to be that the query as to whether the artifacts that we create (as well as our way of operating as artists and designers) has changed significantly enough to merit what is after all a completely new method of appraisal – i.e., an appraisal not through the work produced alone but through the academic discourse that its creator engages in.

Based upon an observation of my own creative practice of over 40 years, and even more importantly, of almost 25 years of observation of my own students, my personal sense is that – no, the changes of the past decades, vast and significant as they may be, are not enough to answer the question as to why we nowadays need to not only produce work but also be able to expound upon it. To give just one example: Are the design strategies employed by a ‘smartapp’ designer of today so very different from those of his Bauhaus colleague of 100 years ago? Do the same key concepts of ergonomics, of functionality, of aesthetics as part of function, not apply equally despite the vast changes that affect not only the outcome but also the work flow of 2016?

Possibly as a consequence of this continuity of operational tenets, it also has to be noted that the vast majority of designers working in the industry do not write academically any more today than they did 100 years ago. Yes, they will write creative briefs and reports for which a certain amount of research and referencing is called for, but this is still not on a par with what we have come to call the ‘theory of artistic practice’ in academia, defining an emergent field that seems to demand as much scientific rigor as its many other counterparts in the Humanities.

It is here that we come to a circumstance that particularly affects artists, who unlike designers do not have the ready option of attaining a livelihood in various industries that make usage of their skills. Alternatives for employment are few for artists and the best known and most of highly sought after of these is working in academia. Added should also be that in the creative

fields not only artists seek employment in academia – many designers who wish to do more exploratory work than the demands of industry would allow them, also wish to work in an academic environment.

And it is in academia that creative practitioners are faced with the challenge of writing academically as part of their work obligations, due to a major institutional change that Arthur Efland notes upon: Starting from the last quarter of the 20th century art and design education at the Higher Education level has increasingly been brought under the jurisdiction of universities in which research is a criterion that is applied to the output of art instructors alongside creative activity. (Efland 1990: 248-260) The inevitable result is that while only a few decades ago artists and designers working as instructors in art schools were entrusted solely with the tutelage of an upcoming generation in art and design, today they are no longer considered to be only instructors but are also expected to perform as researchers who can write eloquently on their research output, which in many cases is also their own creative work.

While many academician artists seem to have made this transition with remarkable results by bringing in fresh perspectives to rapidly evolving transdisciplinary theory; sadly, many more seem to have ended up in an in-between state in which the expected outcome seldom ends up going beyond an uneasy hybrid between creative output and research; oftentimes emerging as neither quite one or the other.

In this context Julian Stallabras quotes Howard Singerman who describes some of the effects of this transition, saying that “*universities work to separate professional artists from Sunday painters, and do not expect of art students that they be manually skilled, take recreational pleasure in their work, or wrench it from their tortured souls.*” (Stallabras 2006: 81) Rather, they must produce a distinct and certifiable knowledge, in a theoretical language, guaranteeing the exclusivity and status of the art profession:

The first effect is that for there to be an art department there must be a unified and bounded thing, called ‘art.’ The second is that it can be researched, and that much of what artists do can be described as research. The third, that the field requires description in a specialized language, the acquisition of which defines art professionals... (2006: 81)

A further definition of studio practice led research comes from Pentti Routio who says that research which is planned and carried out in the purpose of assisting the creation of art has sometimes been called scientific art, artistic research, and practice-based research. “*Research and artistic creation are often combined into one project and carried out by one person. Note that in these projects the final aim is to create art, and research assists it.*” (Routio 2007)

However, it is not only in academia that artists and designers are put to the task of writing on their creative output: Grant and funding applications as well as submissions made to curated exhibitions and biennials all call for writing skills that demonstrate some competency in the specialized language that Singerman comments on. And even at a far more individuated, non-institutional level, artists and designers are routinely asked to accompany their output with artist’s statements that are also expected to show proficiency in this specialized language.

Consequently, it appears that writing in a theoretical, discursive language on one's own creative output has become a requirement for practitioners if they want to succeed, especially so in academia. The next question to probably be asked however is whether in general artist/academicians rise to this task wholeheartedly, with excitement and zeal. I have heard countless times that for most of my colleagues and students this is seen to be an onerous duty that they will put up with for the sake of job advancement, but other than that they would so much prefer to spend their time engaged in studio activity rather than discoursing upon studio activity.

It is to colleagues who balk at the effort that I wish to say the following: There is also a second (and in my estimation far more enticing) reason to acquire the skill of researching one's own work. Here I wish to briefly delve into personal experience to illustrate the point: I am a graphic designer, and I have been a practitioner for all of my adult life – both in the professional sector and as a studio instructor. I did not start to write theoretically until a very late age. When finally obliged to do so (largely due to the institutional pressures that Stallabrass describes above), I was at first rather dubious regarding the benefits that I might derive from the exercise at a personal level. If anything, I had the grave concern, common to many practitioners, that analysing and dissecting my work with what I deemed to be the surgical knife of theory would instigate a creative block; that I would lose the all important essentials – the spontaneity and the intuition needed for operating as a practitioner. Once I started to write however, what transpired instead was that my practice actually became better! I became far more experimental, far more daring in how I combined aspects of perception. I did not lose spontaneity and intuition – what became added to the mix was a much enhanced ability to come up with complex, multi-layered, multi-faceted ideas, which when combined with spontaneity and intuition led to unforeseen projects and builds.

While equal rigor to what is displayed in other fields of the Humanities is indeed expected from creative practitioners writing about their own practices, there are nevertheless certain predicaments that the field faces, especially so in view of the fact that this is a very young field for which few, if any precedents can be established. Beyond this newness, a further complexity revolves around the quirks and idiosyncrasies oftentimes embedded into the subject matter discussed. Thus, artists and designers have to forge ahead on their own, not only explicating on their output, but oftentimes by setting up their own methodologies and unique languages whilst doing so.

The Peculiarities of Practice Based Research in the Creative Fields

One of the main challenges of the field under discussion is that, unlike traditional quantitative research which values ample amounts of data samples in order to reduce the variability brought forth by extremes, theory of creative practice privileges the outlier, what Richard Siegesmund defines as the 'N of 1,' a formula in which 'N' signifies the number of data in a study and '1' signifies what falls outside the norm. (Siegesmund 2014) While traditional research eliminates what is unique and stands outside the norm, when it comes to creative practice based research the unique, the work that stands outside the norm, is what is actually under discussion. In quantitative research numerous data samples create cluster patterns that

reduce the variability created by extremes and thereby suggest pathways for future expectations. Outliers from this line are anomalies. In fact, it is acceptable practice in quantitative research to discard outliers that may muddy the focus. In contrast to this, arts-based research, according to Siegesmund, inherently favors the outlier since what is unique, what lies outside any concept of norm is what is under investigation. Validity in arts-based research begins with considering the overlooked case.

In order to further clarify his approach Siegesmund has used Graeme Sullivan's well known triangular diagram (Sullivan 2010: 102) to which he has added the following precepts:

1. The N of 1 as imaginative forming: The outlier is a challenge to our imagination; it forces our imagination to grow. This might be seen as the challenge to try to bring what is currently beyond our mental visualization and comprehension into a conceptual field, in order for something new, something bigger, something more cohesive to emerge. In short, ideas gain form.
2. The N of 1 as research of becoming: Here Siegesmund refers to John Dewey who has suggested that a criterion for a work of art is its ability to reorganize space and time through a shattering of recognition and in its place a rebuilding of perception that remains as a formative work in progress in which the ultimate aim is not a summative end product. Works in process veer, back-step, and change course – they have flexible purposing in which there is no rest or reassurance. The disrupting of the narrative of our past throws us out of balance, and we adapt. If we are in balance, then this artificial state lacks validity. We go back and disrupt ourselves again.
3. The N of 1 as perpetual provoking: What if the outlier cannot to be placed into a norm but remains as an unresolved challenge; a formulation of Rancière's notion that aesthetics is the ability to think contradiction. (2009) Here the outlier does not force a broader understanding, but creates a dissonance that does not assimilate and refuses to go away. In this case, a radical outlier actually erases the norm.

Here the task of arts-based research is not to make the vision of understanding more robust, more inclusive, or more complex, but instead to subvert this system of understanding for no-other reason than to provoke, to prevent conclusion, or to unsettle any capacity to act. It may even be a willful occlusion. By shutting out, there is a possibility that a new form of conceptualization will fill the subsequent void. (Siegesmund 2010)

Siegesmund's formula of the 'N of 1' appears to aptly summarize the complexities of the field when it comes to setting up methodologies for research: Creative practitioners can rely only to a very limited extent on traditional research methodologies since in all likelihood their subject matter will defy the classifications, the taxonomies, and the exact precedents that lead to the prognostic pathways which form the basis of the 'N' traditional research. Given the idiosyncrasies and quirks of uniqueness that can be seen to be a natural outcome of the three precepts listed above, artists explicating upon their own work will have to invent and re-invent their unique methodological approaches.

Finding a Language

There is however, a further challenge related to methodology and that is the finding of an appropriate language for a discussion of personal material. Such a language should take into account the uniqueness of the subject matter that is being discussed while yet remaining within the norms of theoretical writing. And beyond this overall concern for appropriate language we also find that it is not only language itself but also the nature of what should be discussed with that language, what the focus of research should be, that is of interest.

If, as stated earlier by Pentti Routio, the final aim is to create art, and if research only comes into play in so far as it assists this endeavor, this circumstance points at a conundrum that revolves around defining the exact nature of what creative practice led research should entail, how it should be developed, articulated and presented, and also by what criteria the final output – both artwork and appended research – should be assessed and evaluated.

Particularly problematic in this regard are those aspects of the creative process that are ill-defined, less tangible, and often intuitive. Sharon Bell outlines these as the *“oh so important dimensions of the creative process that don’t lend themselves to analysis – and the concomitant fear that analysis might somehow simplify rather than elucidate complexity and detract from rather than enhance understanding of creative work.”* (Bell 2009: 260) Bell’s outcry also finds voice in Paul Carter who argues that *“yet that dimension of our practice that resists conclusion that opens possibilities and new implications rather than answers and is ultimately at the core of our enterprise and, in the end, is what makes us and the products of our research different.”* (Carter 2004: 9) Noted should be that in her article Bell also quotes Sir David Watson who places the value and significance of open-endedness in research within a much wider context when he notes that the challenge for the contemporary university is about ‘charting uncertainty.’ (Watson 2003)

From all of the above it becomes evident that the circumstance that creative practitioners are increasingly called to write upon their work has started a lively debate related to the language in which this discourse should be conducted. In their 2010 article, in which they discuss the impact of creative practice based PhDs on graduate education in the Arts and Humanities, Tara Brabazon and Zeynep Dagli (2010: 23-43) point out that although doctorates awarded for ‘non-textual’ submission are becoming increasingly more common, researchers in the creative fields still seem to lack a properly developed language to describe what they are doing.

According to Brabazon and Dagli, practice-led PhDs may end up being flooded with assumptions and personal opinions on topics such as art, culture, and self; and all too often there is also a tendency to confuse/conflate artistic merit with technical skill and expertise. What the authors also point at is a wide-spread fascination with novelty that becomes apparent when reviewing the literature celebrating practice-led research – evidenced by a rampant focus on terms such as ‘newness,’ ‘innovation,’ ‘excitement’ and ‘creativity.’

A further concern that Brabazon and Dagli voice is the emphasis upon method, rather than on content that one often encounters in research in the creative fields: Studies that focus on method (as appears to be the case in quite a number of practice led theses and texts) appear to

be a more basic form of scholarship than output that is theoretically rich. 'The how' and not 'the why' lies at the core of the probe: In many research projects that are practice-based, artists / authors tend to spend much of the analysis on unraveling the process, on how they created the artifact. In short, method substitutes analysis and practice-based research faces the danger of becoming ghettoized, disconnected from a wider research environment. (Brabazon and Dagli 2010: 23-43)

The importance of method in qualitative research (under the jurisdiction of which creative practice led research falls) is also addressed by Ronald Chenail who says that it takes two studies to adequately present a project in qualitative research. *"One study is the 'official' research project and the other study is the study about that study."* In a well-done qualitative research study, in addition to seeing the results of the labor, what choices were made by the researcher in the construction of the study, the steps in the process of forming the research questions, selecting a site, generating and collecting the data, processing and analyzing the data should also be addressed and discussed. (Chenail and Maione 1997: 1-3) What is also noteworthy is that Chenail and Maione emphasize that there should be two studies, only one of which relates to 'the how' of the project, while the other one should focus on 'the why' – thus substantiating Brabazon and Dagli's claim that the forsaking of 'the why' in favor of 'the how' does indeed create a problem – not only in practice based research but in qualitative inquiries as a whole.

How the gap between an enthusiastic rhetoric that is mostly based upon concepts such as newness, innovation (or indeed a mere discussion of technique or methodology) and solid research can be bridged comes from Graeme Sullivan who brings into play the term of 'critical reflection' when talking about studio practice led research. Sullivan states that *"a useful way to think about how knowledge is created is to accept that in many instances it is productive to explore creative possibilities that are informed by, but not captive to, existing frameworks of knowledge."* (Sullivan 2009: 44) According to Sullivan, creative options and new associations occur in situations where there is intense concentration, but within an open landscape of free-range possibility rather than a closed geography of well-trodden pathways. *"Therefore practice-led research that is supported by critical reflection and reflexive action can be seen to invert the research process because it encourages working from the 'unknown to the known' and it is purposeful yet open-ended, clear-sighted yet exploratory,"* (2009: 44) leading to the notion that when studio inquiry is undertaken within a research context the imaginative outcomes generated may also serve as a means to critique existing knowledge.

Thus, according to Sullivan, when art practice is theorized as research it can be argued that human understanding arises from a process of inquiry that involves both creative action and critical reflection. There is an inherently transformative quality to the way we engage in this process: The artist intuitively adopts the dual roles of the researcher and the researched, and the process changes both perspectives because creative and critical inquiry is a reflexive process. (2009: 44)

Critical Reflection

Sullivan's emphasis on critical reflection as an apt framework for practice led research is very well founded indeed, given that the methodology is based in challenging assumptions and veering away from simplistic modes of thinking into taking a far more analytical/diagnostic position regarding external events as well as one's own actions.

Critical Reflection occurs when we analyze and challenge the validity of our presuppositions and assess the appropriateness of our knowledge, understanding and beliefs given our present contexts; and was theorized upon extensively by Jack Mezirow who used the technique as part of his learning strategy which he called Transformative Learning. (Mezirow 1991: 167-168)

Transformative Learning, which specifically addresses life-long learning, is a process of getting beyond gaining factual knowledge alone to instead become changed by what one learns in some meaningful way. It involves questioning assumptions, beliefs and values, and considering multiple points of view. In theorizing about such shifts, Mezirow proposes that there are several phases that one must go through in order for perspective transformation to occur, suggesting that this happens through a series of phases that begin with a disorienting dilemma. Other phases include self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition that others have shared similar transformations, an exploration of new roles or actions, the development of competence and self-confidence in these new roles, and a reintegration into life on the basis of new perspectives, 'concluding with a changed self-concept.' (1991: 167-168)

Coming to the nuts and bolts of the strategy, Stephen Brookfield explains that critical reflection involves three phases:

1. Identifying the assumptions (those taken for granted ideas, commonsense beliefs, and self evident rules of thumb) that underlie our thoughts and actions.
2. Assessing and scrutinizing the validity of these assumptions in terms of how they relate to our 'real life' experiences and our present context(s).
3. Transforming these assumptions to become more inclusive and integrative, and using this newly formed knowledge to more appropriately inform our future actions and practices. (Brookfield 1990: 177-193)

When it comes to how critical reflection can be applied whilst conducting practice led research we come back to Sullivan who brings the questioning of prevailing attitudes, assumptions and assurances into one of his main questions which asks how new knowledge is created in practice-led research by stating that there seems to be an unequivocal creative impulse that is a critical starting point in looking beyond what is known, and that "*facing the unknown and disrupting the known is precisely what artist-researchers achieve as they delve into theoretical, conceptual, dialectical and contextual practices through art-making.*" (Sullivan 2009: 62)

Unique and yet Rigorous...

Looking back on this literature review some salient points that are repeated in different terms by different theorists do seem to emerge: The field holds an inherent contradiction in that the subject matter under discussion falls outside norms, as discussed through the concept of the 'N of 1' and it would therefore be rather difficult to research it pertinently by employing traditional methodologies.

Throughout this review we have encountered terms such as 'contradiction,' 'disruption,' 'dissonance,' 'charting uncertainty,' 'complexity,' – all of which appear to point at the inherent problematics on writing theoretically on what can be said to be an elementally unstable field, in perpetual flux due to the very nature of the material that is being examined. What also emerges repeatedly in the above review is an emphasis on 'growth,' on 'work in process,' on 'change,' on a scrutiny of 'why rather than how' – and following from all of these on terms such as 'self-examination' and 'critical reflection.' All of which points at self-scrutiny as one of the key ways of making sense of and discoursing intelligently on what can be defined as an erratic terrain for any type of theoretical inquiry.

How then do we combine processes of self-examination and critical reflection with the sine-qua-non of theoretical inquiry – the setting up of theoretical frameworks and backgrounds against which personal work can be examined and contextualized? How do we combine the rigor of traditional literature reviews with explorations of uniqueness? And as importantly, how do we stop self-examination and critical reflection from deteriorating into unreferenced, unsubstantiated self-indulgence? The following section will attempt to describe an approach, as a work in progress, that aims to provide responses to some of these questions.

Learning to Discourse upon Personal Creative Practices

The development of the graduate course VA505, Addressing Studio Creative Practice, currently taught at Sabanci University, arose out of a need which rested upon the circumstance that although, at the end of their studies, the students enrolled in the program are expected to hand in a written thesis alongside their studio projects in order to obtain the Master of Arts degree, very few of them are actually equipped with the skills to put together such a written document, since most of them come from purely studio practice backgrounds. Consequently, the class is listed as a mandatory course that all first semester graduate students of the program are required to take.

The syllabus takes the student through all stages of putting together a referenced, academic text that is expected to manifest as a 4000 to 5000 word article at the end of the semester; and that either discusses a personal creative project of the student's or can deliberate upon a topic related to the student's professional interests. The course aims to teach all phases of the process, from learning how to conduct research for a literature review, to becoming familiar with referencing styles and terminology, to structuring and formatting an academic paper, to the final phase of actually writing the text – including learning how to collaborate, correct and comment upon a working paper by using the review tools of the standard word processing software.

The 'soft' search

Two great challenges of the course were identified almost from the outset, and it was indeed facing these and providing solutions for them that have shaped the bulk of most subsequent teaching activity. Thus, many of the learning strategies of the course were developed on the fly, mostly during the first year of teaching, although it cannot be said that this is a finished undertaking, that all problems have been resolved. The development of the course's teaching methodologies therefore will remain a work in progress. Returning to what transpired in the first year however: Although I had developed and pre-planned a learning strategy that I thought would cover the needs of the learners, what emerged in practice was that there were urgent issues that I had to address before all else, and these drastically altered all of my well laid plans.

The first problem that I faced was a general reluctance on behalf of the students to see the merits of learning to write eloquently upon their creative practices. From their point of view, they were practicing artists and designers, and expounding upon what they did had never entered the equation, was not perceived to be an essential skill. While some faced the undertaking with boredom and indifference, others were vehemently outspoken in their objections, which were that the validation of an artwork should not have to rely upon the artist discoursing on it, but that such validation should be sought in the artwork itself. Faced with such discontent, I sensed that what was needed to convince them to broach the course with a more open mindset were not careerist objectives that expounded upon the advantages of research/writing skills for artists, both in or out of academia, but instead these objectives should be personal ones that would advocate the enhancement of creative activity in its own right. In other words, what was needed were positive approaches to research that would convince them that acquiring these skills would help make them become more proficient as studio practitioners.

The second problem that I encountered was of an equally urgent nature: In the very first class meeting, when I asked the students to situate their work within the wider canon of contemporary art and design by articulating the personal influences, ideas and concepts that actualized their unique dispositions as artists and designers, many of them were only able to do so in a very generalized manner. What most of them did do quite eloquently however was to describe the techniques and technologies that they worked with. Their focus seemed to be on medium rather than content, on 'how' rather than the 'why' – in short, my students' mindsets seemed to closely reflect the findings of Brabazon and Dagi which were delved into earlier in this text whilst reviewing the research conducted on finding a language for practice led research.

That this mindset was likely to constitute a major obstacle for attaining the learning objectives of the course became especially evident through responses that emerged during discussions of appropriate procedures for conducting literature reviews: Although most of my students seemed to have some knowledge, or generalized ideas about their fields of interest and their creative activity, when asked to embark upon in-depth searches, it emerged that very few were well-informed and/or focused to the extent where they could venture forth equipped with search terms that were sophisticated enough, or specialized enough, to lead

them to satisfactory online search results upon which they could build a deeper discussion of their output. Given that precise identifications are deemed to be indispensable when it comes to discoursing upon a subject in a referenced, academic manner, it quickly became obvious to me that before we got to the stage of conducting specialized research, some preparatory work that would help them identify their interests, their influences, the aims of their creative output and where they thought it was situated would have to be instigated.

Yet another reason for devising an interim phase of investigation that would be situated between actual hardcore research and their current definitions of what it was that they were engaged in, in their studio practices goes back to Siegesmund's formula of the 'N of 1.' Admittedly, I had not heard of the 'N of 1' as a formula for defining theory of artistic practice back then; but, both from my personal practice as well as from having taught studio courses for close to 20 years at that point, I did have a very strong innate sense of what this formula points at:

I had observed that creative work will oftentimes fall outside of the boundaries of the norm in that it is unique output. Indeed the more unique it is, the more it will do so – and at the end of the day, uniqueness is what creative practitioners do tend to aspire. In this sense individual art and design works can be considered to be anomalies (or one-of-a-kinds) that may not easily be subjected to classifications when considered as stand-alone, unique occurrences. Granted, there are schools, trends, and art/design movements under which even the most eccentric outlier can be placed - however that appears to me to be a task for art history scholars. When it comes to individual artists/designers who wish to examine their own output under scholarly premises however, a far more personal approach may be called for due to the very uniqueness of the entire venture, given that this uniqueness not only relates to the artifact itself but also, and maybe even more importantly, it also relates to the creative process that has brought it into being. I was therefore highly aware that what would initially be discussed during this course would be almost always be personal, would oftentimes be intimate – in short would probably be difficult to pinpoint, to define.

That which is already very well known to the practitioner – the intimate, the everyday, indeed at times the mundane – may therefore be a valid jumping board to initiate a progressively expanding, progressively layered and sophisticated explication. The aim is a quest that takes its trajectory from what is near and moves from there into a broad horizon out of which a literature review (one that is anchored in what is closely relevant and yet manages to enlarge into a solid framework) can be forged. In other words, not to start from lofty ideas, treatises and principles, not to become bogged down in texts the meanings of which one may or not be able to associate with one's own intimate creative concerns; but rather start out modestly, from what really touches you, what makes your work tick – and see where these small, intimate ideas and notions will eventually lead you.

The solution that I devised (or rather intuited) was a 'soft' approach which would be pliable enough to be adapted to individual needs, and which would also turn research into a playful activity during its preliminary phase. To this end, instead of forcing my students to plunge in at the deep end, straight into the university's research databases and Google scholar, I decided to divide the research process into two phases: The first of these was based upon a 'soft'

search that was to be conducted not in databases and academic search portals, but the entirety of the internet – including Wikipedia and video channels such as YouTube and vimeo, where students were asked to watch videos and listen to talks related to their subjects; creative-sharing domains such as Flickr, Instagram and Pinterest, where they could search for images and inspiration; as well as Facebook pages, community portals such as Scribd and Scoop.it; and personal blogs and websites from which they were also likely to get content that would enlarge their insights.

A further outcome that I hoped for was to raise their enthusiasm by finding out for themselves that it could potentially enrich them as creative practitioners to conduct research, to read, see and hear novel viewpoints, including ones that were contradictory to what they had hitherto assumed to be cast-in-stone truths. That hearing different voices might help engender novel ideas that would beget creative output; or bring forth novel versions, iterations and variations on already embarked upon projects. Therefore, I urged them to approach the process with an open mind and in a creative spirit; to look upon the internet not only as an informational device but instead (paraphrasing Roy Ascott) to see it as an *“imagination/intelligence amplifier.”* (Ascott 2003: 129-130)

I made it known that, in all likelihood, none or very little of what they encountered in their travels during this first ‘soft’ research phase would be rigorous enough to find its way into their final texts. Instead, the expectation would be that what they saw, heard and read would prepare them for the second phase of research which would involve looking for in-depth material that could only be found through the informed search phrases that this preliminary phase was hoped to provide them with.

To make a case for the benefits of the exercise, a tangible disclosure of the hoped-for mental transformation was important. To this end, the students were asked to make multiple blog posts that revolved around a term that they felt to be intrinsically related to their work. Some of the terms that were chosen were ‘home,’ ‘animals and mysticism,’ ‘mimesis,’ ‘storytelling,’ ‘comics,’ ‘shapeshifter’ and ‘instinct.’

The first entries, which appeared to mostly consist of personal opinions and assumptions, were made before any search in the subject was conducted. The students were then asked to go online and search for the term, in as diverse a manner as possible, with no holds barred. After taking in the proliferation encountered, they were asked to wait for at least one day in order for the gathered information to sink in and to become somewhat internalized. Once this period was up, they made the second entry – which in most cases was already far more evolved than what their initial notions had been.

A week later the process was repeated with new search terms that now had already become notably enriched through what had been encountered during the first round in the previous week. Again, the found material was absorbed, given some time to become internalized, and the third entry was then made – at which point it was seen that most of the participants in the experiment had in fact progressed to a point where they were in a position to formulate search terms that were of sufficient maturity to proceed into an in-depth academic search which would lead to a solid literature review upon which they could build their final texts.

I could see evidence that showed me that my students had started and had already made some considerable headway in giving the content of their work the serious thought that it deserved. Whereas previously there had been vague generalizations when it came to defining creative content and emphasis had mostly been put upon medium and technique, there now was a marked shift in focus from ‘the how’ onto ‘the why’ of creative activity.

What appeared to also have happened however was that some of the students acknowledged that what they had seen, heard and read had modified (and in some cases even changed) their initial standpoints, and that they were now going to approach the work (both the class work, as well as the appended creative output) in a manner that would incorporate the novel insights, influences and inspirations that they had gathered along the way. In other words, although they still intended to pursue the same subject, what they now planned to write about had changed from what it had been at the onset of the course.

This finding leads me to the conclusion that Mezirow's tenet of ‘critical reflection,’ which was delved into above, may also be applied to describe the blogging exercise described here. Granted that while in Mezirow's life-long learning theories the technique is utilized within a much broader context, nevertheless the effects of change and transformation seem to be equally valid in a narrowly focused learning endeavor such as the one discussed in this text. Here too, the process works through a step-by-step approach in which initial assumptions related to a particular topic are first shaken, then assessed and scrutinized and finally are transformed to be used as newly formed knowledge that will inform and influence our future actions and practices – both in terms of creative activity as well as the related research.

Conclusion

Sullivan proclaims that “*facing the unknown and disrupting the known is precisely what artist-researchers achieve as they delve into theoretical, conceptual, dialectical and contextual practices through art-making,*” (Sullivan 2009: 62) adding that the impact this quest for new knowledge has on the self, others and communities should be considered. This, according to Sullivan, requires a new responsibility on the part of artist-researchers to take up the challenge of theorizing their practice.

Most importantly, Sullivan also says that to meet these demands it is no longer viable for advocates of practice-led research to merely borrow methods from other fields of inquiry since this denies the intellectual maturity of arts practice as a plausible basis for raising significant theoretical questions and as a viable site for undertaking important artistic, cultural and educational inquiries. (2009: 62) This brings us back to the question of finding an indigenous language for practice led research in the creative fields; particularly in consideration of the ‘N of 1,’ the formula which sets artwork and its productive phases as outliers that stand outside the norm of any aggregated data set. A natural outcome to this would be that the discussion of artwork by the individual who is embroiled in its creation may have to revolve around research methodologies that also stand outside the norm.

My own work with students who come from a studio practice into a research environment, where they are expected to write academically upon their creative practices, leads me to raise

the proposition as to whether it may not be appropriate to take this search for a dedicated language to a point that occurs before the actual writing phase, indeed starts out with formulating research methodologies that are pliable enough to help ease young creative practitioners who have no previous experience, or sufficiently developed skills to be able to jump straight into such a process.

What is also worth noting is that there should be convincing reasons that go beyond a listing of the career oriented advantages which the acquisition of such a skill would bring. These may well be grounded in arguments that the creative act itself carries a potentiality for becoming enriched through research; which to me appears to be a good enough reason for making young creative practitioners wish to learn to speak the language of practice led research.

In order to build an original language for practice led research it seems to me that what we need to consider is that specialized aids and strategies that may foster indigenous means of academic communication may also be called for: The 'soft' search is an implement which I have devised to this end. Doubtless, many other such tools that bring the identification of a creative practice in terms of academic discourse can be contrived. The field of creative practice led research is a young one, and thus the appended field of formulating distinct learning techniques that address the specialized needs of the field is also still under progression. Much of what is developed in terms of strategies and method is likely to be investigated on the fly – as has also been the case here. It would therefore be of no great surprise to find out that many individuals, both in and out of academia, are currently developing their own unique procedures through which they are putting together their research and writing, as well as teaching their students how to do so. In due course it is to be expected that a universal consensus and standard will emerge, and that this will, in all likelihood, be a distillation based upon the agglomeration of the collective efforts under way today.

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