

DESIGN AS RESEARCH, RESEARCH AS DESIGN: EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES OF RESEARCH THROUGH CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Practice-based research is a distinctive form of intellectual inquiry in which creative works – images, musical compositions, video programs, interactive installations and so on – form the major components and submissions of the research project. Whilst the written thesis plays a significant role in the research, it is viewed as secondary to the creative works themselves. The approach is now widely accepted in many parts of the world and plays an increasingly significant role in academic and cultural spheres. However, due to its unconventional nature it has proved difficult to justify this mode of inquiry within South East Asia. Here I outline and discuss a model of practice-based research that, at one and the same time, respects the disciplinary traditions of the creative fields *and* is amenable to institutional requirements for research and academic quality. The paper references academic and curriculum development at School of Architecture and Design (SOAD) King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), Thailand.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that the creative industries, broadly understood as art, architecture, design and the media, play increasingly important roles in contemporary life. Research from various regions of the world paints a picture of a dynamic and rapidly growing sector that makes significant impacts in the economic, social and cultural spheres. The need for creative and effective art and design practitioners has therefore never been greater. The rapid growth of academic programs in the creative industries is an expression of this need.

Yet to some extent, the creative disciplines sit uneasily within the academy. Many of the approaches,

philosophies and traditions that are fundamental to education in creative subjects sit uneasily within conventional and increasingly bureaucratic academic structures and norms. This is particularly evident in the area of research. The growing significance of research in the university sector has placed art and design in a troubling situation. As Le Grice and Evans (2000) put it, "If art and design [...] are to be within the university system and to have an equal opportunity for research funding both for staff research projects and research degrees, the definition of the research process and output appropriate to the subject is crucial."

Internationally, this definition has been provided by *practice-based research*. That is, research through process-led creation of "an original artefact in addition to or perhaps instead of a written thesis" (Biggs, 2003). Unlike the sciences, inquiry proceeds primarily through the creation of cultural works such as designs, films, installations, software products, artworks, performances and spaces, and so on. Whilst this approach is now internationally accepted and has its own philosophical frameworks and fora for academic scrutiny, it has yet to gain a foothold in South East Asia where, by and large, epistemological positivism is hegemonic. As a result, the economic and cultural potential of the creative disciplines in the academy are fettered at the very time that governments are promoting the *creative economy*.

At the heart of this issue lies a misunderstanding of the distinctive nature of inquiry in art and design and a belief in a unitary model of research with a predictable and invariant structure, sequence and outcomes. My purpose in this paper is to challenge this viewpoint by promoting a version of practice-based research that is both sympathetic to the texture and dynamics of creative practice *and* the institutional needs of the academy. In so doing I articulate a distinctive model of practice-based research that might be useful for institutions in the region faced with similar dilemmas about how to develop and

capitalize on research in art, design and media.

2. PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

In this section I propose to outline a small set of issues that define the differences between conventional and practice-based research. To some extent this relies on caricature of conventional research similar to the caricature of creative practice commonly held by opponents of practice-based research. Nevertheless, it is a useful rhetorical device in that it emphasizes clearly the distinctive nature of our subject so as to clarify our approach to addressing these seemingly incommensurate domains of knowledge and action.

2.1 Problems and issues

Conventional research projects begin with a problem to be solved or question to be answered. According to Scrivener (2000), for practice-based research there is *no problem* but rather an issue, theme or interest that serves as a starting point for practical exploration. Moreover, this issue often arises from a personal interest already partially expressed and explored in the ongoing creative practice of the researcher. At the outset, then, the task is not to define a problem or map the field but find a way to begin working. In this sense, the practitioner proceeds like a phenomenologist, bracketing assumptions and responding reflexively to her discoveries as they arise. The Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang often says, “I want my work to give me problems” and in this sense the creative process might be counter intuitively understood as a *problem creating* rather than problem solving activity.

2.2 Shape, structure, dynamic

According to Rosenberg (2000), “Conventional research starts with a question and develops a research stratagem in advance of the process. It organizes strategically. The research channel is clear, focused and pre-determined. Context is constrained [...] in a limiting channel.” Moreover, “[...] results are to a large extent predictable and held within the limits set at the outset.” Practice-based projects, on the other hand, can be considered as “a dynamic process in which the imaginative course of practice can be developed as research. It starts not in the simple but in the complex, drawing out from a number of sources simultaneously.” In this way it is possible to draw a distinction between the idealised model of conventional research (linear, serial, narrow) and that of practice-based research (non-linear, parallel and broad).

Similarly, Scrivener (2000) argues that an important characteristic of the practice-based project is its organic and unpredictable nature. At my own university, a change of topic or title during the process of research is regarded with suspicion, an indicator that something is amiss. Yet as Scrivener (2000) notes, in practice-based research “[...] the topic of interest and goal may change as the work progresses [...] the student is exploring manifold

interests and goals and the priorities given to them may change as the work progresses [...] new issues and goals may emerge as it progresses.”

2.3 Materiality: process and outcomes

In conventional design research the making of things plays an important but delimited role: it does so at specific moments, for clearly defined purposes and uses conventional presentational formats. The visual/ formal/ material play subordinate roles to the results of conventional research.

In practice-based research, the experimental and speculative making of things is the driving force of the research. The inquiry unfolds through nested cycles of making and reflective critique. Visual/ material experiments – sketches, photographs, models, video clips, sound objects and so on – serve to develop, problematise, clarify or extend ideas. Making does not begin at a particular moment in the process; it is the process. In this way, we view visual thinking as a distinctive form of inquiry with its own objects of knowledge and epistemological processes.

A similar asymmetry is evident in how material outcomes are understood and valued. Whereas in conventional research, “[...] the knowledge embodied in the artefact can be described separately from it [...] and is more important than the artefact itself” (Scrivener, 2000), in practice-based research the opposite holds true, “Artefacts arising from the research cannot simply be conceived as byproducts or exemplifications of “know how”. Instead they are objects of value in their own right.”

3. AN APPROACH TO ALIGNMENT

Given these differences, is an alignment between conventional and practice-based research – as it is set out here – possible? Can speculative, process-led and experimental cultural production exist in non-sympathetic arenas such as technical and technological universities? I believe so. However, for this to happen requires movement on both sides. At SOAD we have been developing such an approach through our MfA in Communication Design. The basis of our approach is to consider essential aspects of the creative process detailed above in the light of accepted – though not always mainstream – research traditions from beyond the field.

It is important to note that this does not mean that we simply adopt epistemological and ontological assumptions, or radically redraw the terrain of creative inquiry, as much mainstream design research has chosen to do. Rather, we critically engage ideas and approaches from beyond our field, applying, testing and reworking them in the light of the peculiar demands of creative production. This is significant in that promotes change. This conversation across disciplinary boundaries forces both faculty and students to (re)consider their own working process and to sharpen their understanding of the

nature of art and design practice both as a particular mode of inquiry and as part of a research continuum. This challenge we welcome.

3.1 Action research

Action Research (AR) is an approach to inquiry that seeks to “produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives.” (Reason and Bradbury, 2000) Action Researchers, set out to achieve this by adopting methodologically open and flexible forms of inquiry aimed at producing new ideas that suggest and guide action. According to Mermoz (2006), AR provides a useful way of thinking about creative practice and aligning it with conventional inquiry. “Adopting the concept of ‘Action Research’ we redefine our practice as the dynamic integration of art, design and research and our aims as the production and communication of knowledge.” This leads to a significant change in the way that practice is conceived, but one that – argues Mermoz (2006) – is sympathetic to the peculiar rhythm and texture of practice, “Our enquiry and design work crystallizes concerns and ideas in the form of explicit and less explicit propositions, and seek to preserve the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure associated with experimental art.” In our view, the emphasis on the articulation of issues and concerns leads to the production of more explicit and robust intellectual frameworks for practice than is usually the case in either non-research driven creative practice or conventional design research.

3.2 Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) is an approach to qualitative inquiry that inverts a number of methodological protocols of conventional research. GT approaches its subject by bracketing assumptions and preconceptions. Moreover, it avoids premature problem identification by rejecting the idea of a preliminary literature review. Rather, the GT researcher proceeds iteratively, building up a rich and thick picture of her subject through research, comparing and contrasting ideas as they emerge, and rethinking the research approach in response to this. In an emergent approach such as this, the theory is generated and literature identified in response to the situation and its dynamics as these are disclosed to the researcher (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010).

For us there are clear parallels between this approach and creative practice. The idea of open-ended and reflexive inquiry in conditions of uncertainty parallels the creative process described above. Consequently, we challenge our students to consider their work as a form of grounded theory and to ask themselves what the implications of this is for their process and methodology. On a more pragmatic level, we require students to adopt a much more systematic and self-conscious approach to the documentation of their process. Traditionally, artists and designers use sketchbooks or journals as intuitive, highly personal, material and cognitive playgrounds. By introducing and exploring the various uses of notes in GT – field notes, coding notes, theory notes – students are

encouraged to adopt more systematic reflection and to use this productively as drivers during the development of creative projects.

3.3 Autoethnography

Frayling (1993) mischievously sets out a caricature of the scientific researcher as follows, “The research scientist is orderly, he has conjectures and hypotheses and he sets about proving them or disproving them according to a set of orderly procedures. His subject exists outside himself, so he must submerge his subjectivity and personality in order to study it.” We might contrast this with the position of the practice-based researcher. Here no attempt is made to ignore the subjective relationships between researcher and researched. Indeed disclosing these is seen as an essential aspect of the mode of inquiry. Yet how is this to be achieved in ways acceptable to the university?

An explicit focus on various forms of writing is central to our strategy. In particular we are beginning to use autoethnography as a way of enabling students to construct complex and reflexive dialogues between themselves and their work. Autoethnography is best understood as a form of phenomenological writing (Chong, 2008). That is, it creates a space in which various aspects of the researchers experience can be brought together and considered, notably their ongoing creative practice and its various contexts. For us, this explicit connection of subjective and objective factors creates the possibility for more profound and attentive considerations of the creative process. Used carefully, this and other forms of writing become both *sites of* and *vehicles for* reflection; they are crucibles in which theory, research and personal practice cross-fertilise.

3.4 Reflexivity, subjectivity & positionality

In our view, one issue more than any other lies at the root of epistemological positivism’s mistrust of practice-based research; the importance given to the subjectivity of the researcher. Yet reflexivity – the acknowledgment that the researcher’s ‘self’ is a significant factor in the research – is an important philosophical and methodological component of all the traditions discussed above. Indeed all have means and methods for ensuring that subjective experience meets intersubjective criteria of resonance and relevance. Moreover, according to Gadamer (2004) this is fundamental – though perhaps invisible – to all forms of inquiry, “Understanding is not a matter of trained, methodical, unprejudiced technique, but an encounter [...] a confrontation with something radically different from ourselves.”

This is not simply a question of data reliability or the removal of bias. Rather it is a fundamental move in the philosophy of research. As the ethnographer Sarah Pink (2007) describes, “A reflexive approach recognises the centrality of the subjectivity of the researcher to the production and representation of (ethnographic) knowledge [...] researchers should maintain an

awareness of how different elements of their identities become significant during research (gender, age, ethnicity, class, race and so on and so forth).”

SUMMARY

In this brief paper I made three moves. Firstly I introduced the field of creative production and sketched an asymmetry between its growing socio-economic significance and its weak position vis a vis research in the university sector. Secondly, I introduced the notion of practice-based research, described its fundamental characteristics and contrasted these with the hegemonic model of research drawn from epistemological positivism. Thirdly, I outlined a series of potential points of contact between creative production and other research traditions that we are investigating at SOAD. I suggested that these might provide methodological precedents and quality indicators that, taken alongside the tradition's own criteria of significance, relevance and rigour, could form a robust intellectual framework within which to consider practice-based research as equivalent to conventional modes and methods of inquiry.

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