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Mindful motion: engagement with the messy vitality of research

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Abstract

A key role of supervisors and teachers is their engagement with the shaping of knowledge. In guiding students towards what is possible to know, and how it is possible to 'write' of such knowledge, there is a heightened sense of responsibility and a significant duty of care. It takes time, organisation and deep discipline to create elegantly designed frameworks through which to view experience, research ideas and comprehend ambiguity. The arguments addressed in this paper, offer a reminder of ways we might practice research as a mindful endeavor and in the process, seek understanding and cohesion. Sparked by my annual reconsideration of what is important to share with students and researchers, I visit ideas that underpin ways in which we might realise nimble thinking and so hone significant change. In this way, the work of the paper offers, a gentle disturbance to the streamlining and consolidation of practice-as-research in the academy. The discussion champions practice that prizes the revealing of ideas, without rushing to answers. In order to recognise the opportunities afforded by what is a place of not knowing, there is need to recognise that our search is to provisionally affirm, rather than finally confirm, order. In continuing to grapple, with ways to guide researchers, I argue that understanding the consequences of 'how' you engage with the potential of knowledge is the significant aspect of practice-as-research that we must protect.

Keywords: practice-as-research, idea-logics, complexity, ambiguity, knowledge

Introduction

Two recurring observations have sparked the discussion shared here and are offered as opening gambits in a call for more voices to be heard in terms of the experience of performance based research and the subsequent generation of new knowledge. The first is an awareness of the proliferation of texts published to fill a perceived gap in resources for the growing legions of practice-led academics and students. The second and more personal is an annual self-questioning wherein I ask myself, what is significant to explore with students in the ever decreasing time we spend together, in order to generate their facility for nimble thinking and their aspirations for significant self-knowledge?

My aim is to begin to tease out the journey through which these questions take me as an academic, a practitioner, a teacher and person. In so doing, I remain alert to the turbulence that exists where 'connoisseurship' mingles with the sometimes-fractious space between the tacit apprehension of knowledge; the need to generate 'commodity' in terms of research outputs and to work diligently to facilitate experience for students. I can hear Gertrude Stein remarking in 1926 on the seemingly fickle acceptance of change in art and literature, ideas that have pertinence here. In her remarks she advises how, 'For a very long time everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts. In the history of

the refused in the arts and literature the rapidity of the change is always startling' (Stein quoted in Dydo, 1993, p. 495).

So, I ask; what has been achieved through the acceptance of so called change by the introduction of practice-as-research into the academy? If the primary outcome is effectively entanglement in a set of ruling models that many of us wished to redefine and re-vision, then has there been any credible advance in terms of the manner of knowledge generation? With the welcome proliferation of examples of practice-led (PL-R) and practice-as-research (PaR); a new tribe now casts an eye towards notions of impact and value, towards a desire for disciplinary identity and for institutional recognition. In this process, I wonder if we may effectively have endorsed a future of constraint, restrained by a ruling apparatus that ultimately cages what was a nascent call for transformation?

In order to begin this exploration, I draw on the idea of relational knowledge as something complex that is gradually illuminated through what can be a messy and sometimes irrational search for ideas. In order to do this, the discussion frames aesthetic sensibility as an identifying feature of such experience, found in the process of research and corresponding with the complex realm of our individual engagement with ideas. Part of the journey includes the voices of like-minded colleagues who themselves seem to retain an un-ease about research practice and the manner of supervision that increasingly seek to prioritise formulaic approaches and outcomes. Taken together, they offer a glimpse of important and alternate ways of coming to knowledge.

Cycles of reflection

Embarking on another round of preparation for an academic session, I wonder about the students who will join me in the lecture hall and the studio and where we might find ourselves journeying as we go along. Part of my personal journey takes place in the library accompanied by the sheer weight of books published to plug the perceived gap in practice-led research methods that lie heavily on the shelves. It is always a case of getting to grips with what has changed, what has returned to favor, what appears 'new' or what brings the earlier published gems for example from, Dewey (1934), Perkins (1981), Eisner (1982), Greene (1988), Richardson (1994), to a new generation of readers.

However, over time and with experience this refining preparation also fuels recognition of a burgeoning set of mis-guides to critical engagement and, indeed, to the value to be found in learning how to think. What has in some ways become evident is that the academy can ossify rather than nurture the speculative endeavors that take place in its environs. This is particularly the case when set against a background of perceived strategic ventures in terms of research funding. These thoughts frame the slide towards product orientation in terms of both learning and research outcomes; consequences of the increasing 'employability' agenda that whilst having some benefit, often appears to operate as a diversion from the process of learning to think and learning how to recognise, what is important to think about.

Having worked in academia for over twenty years you might think I would recognise the change and have arrived with answers, but alas, the lack of answers makes what

has become an ongoing niggle into an irritation and it keeps me restless. So the discussion really revolves around an appreciation for what I identify as, 'relational knowing'; something that evolves as part of close engagement with experience, something continuous and emergent that is illuminated through the 'research' of ideas as they evolve. I continue to grapple, in terms of guiding researchers, with the need to draw attention to decision-making processes that concern the method/s to use because ultimately it is the methods that we use that direct the manner of engagement, influence the experience and dictate the outcomes of any learning. I say this to groups of students in different module settings and working at different levels of study. In the process, I have come to realise that understanding the consequences of 'how' you engage with the potential of knowledge is probably the most significant aspect of the work and the fascination I attempt to share in my teaching.

My appreciation for engaging with and thinking through experience evolved as I learned to recognise values inherent in dance education, where I was tasked to experiment with meaning and social relations in terms of choreography, improvisation and collaboration. These are activities where significant change, organisation and a sense of personal discipline can come to be recognised, dependent of course on the people you are fortunate to learn from and with. Working through these practices led me to recognise that active dialogue is constituted through aesthetic and ethical experiences. With this said, I argue that an integrating aesthetic-ethic acuity, is arguably the basis of recognising the 'mindful motion' that can be accessed through studies in dance. The reference to mindfulness is made through association with Spinoza's writings in *Ethics* (1677). Here, he explores intensities of a unified minded-body where affect and cognition coexist, as we strive to compose and reveal new knowledge. In such circumstances, expertise and connoisseurship can be seen to intermingle in the sometimes-fractious and uncertain space between ongoing development and the management of varied outcomes. If these attributes were acknowledged at the heart of the current employability agenda, I might be less restless. However, there does appear to be some clouding of the arena of learning, well-being and education in order to meet short-term market-led goals. The key, to what I term, 'mindful motion', is to realise knowledge and understanding as an intertwining of our affective and cognitive selves. This alludes to something attuned to working through combinatorial processes, where we learn to appreciate how to deal with complexity by engaging with notions of objectivity and subjectivity; knowing and not-knowing and in the process become familiar with the ways ideas move and adjust. This is where capacities such as adaptability, rationality and threshold transformations, offer more than a repackaging and representation of already tamed information, a discussion that I shall return to later in the paper.

Whilst presenting a lecture to a group of undergraduate students, who, happily dosing were oblivious to my ardent intention to disseminate the finer points of practice and nomenclature between 'practice-as-research', 'practice-based-research', and 'practice-led-research', I wondered about the institutionalised identity of learning to think. What was the value in telling them about what feasibly on one level was a tussle over territory, but more importantly, raised questions of how they might individually spark their interest in researching ideas?

For many researchers there is a sense of contentment once they identify published methods through which they might engage with their research. Recent fashion seems to have focused on discussion of methodology in terms of 'paradigm shifts' rather than the material handling of method. Yet, it is the very manipulation of material, in terms of 'being-with' ideas as personal practice that is vital. This simple idea appears to remain curiously under-appreciated at undergraduate level and from what I have witnessed not sufficiently contested at postgraduate level. I deliberately choose to characterise research work as a creative practice that is sometimes chaotic and ambiguous but that ultimately through diligent engagement with the data can exhibit coherence and validity. This is because in learning how to handle the detail of the materials we learn to recognise the complex intertwining of potential speculative outcomes. Something we might recognise as the difference between being able to generate many ideas and being able to learn how to manipulate ideas in the creation of something new.

For all of the conversation, debate and lobbying for emergent methods and the consequent acceptance of practice-led research, (at least in the UK), there seems to be something inordinately manicured about an increasing range of practice-based, led or informed outcomes. I wonder how this level of control has emerged and where the messy, irregular vitality of being with emerging research ideas has gone. From my own time as a doctoral researcher, I have retained the conviction that research informed by critical artistic processes and aligned with the non-linearity of creativity, exists on a continuum between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. By delving into a particular field of research, we enact an individual practice that will offer a particular range of possibilities that we need to learn how to handle. Part of this process is to move towards the emergence of relevant methods; a situation that highlights a shift away from ideas of universality and towards what Stockrocki (1991, p. 48) calls 'respect for the unique'. Maybe it is this 'particularity' that deserves more attention and it is this dynamic personal practice that we are in danger of losing in settling for processes promoted by the new generation of gatekeepers of the Academy/Higher Education. It is worth acknowledging at the outset that many of these new gatekeepers are the very individuals who once fought for 'practice' to be recognised as a place for open experimentation in order to gain a position in the academy.

With my own aspiration to retain what I consider to be behaviors of practice, I look for ways that I might 'possibilise' the generation of ideas. A provocation from Deleuze that theory or practice cannot totally explain or embrace one another, whilst contentious for some, does remind us that they are both practices where the supposed division between them is of our making. One is required to employ different modes of attention in order to stimulate and reveal something within the other. What exists is a relationship of reciprocity, where concepts work together and consequently share the potential to be changed in the process of being handled. Freeman (2009) argues that it is the very fusing of the creative and the cognitive that identifies the core operational value of practice-based research. This fusion, he says, is reinforced by the valuable contribution of reflective practice as a distinctly different avenue of engagement from what has become a dominating presumption of objective reporting.

Denzin and Lincoln certainly questioned the usefulness and relevance of much of the developmental changes that took place in the fields of social sciences and qualitative research from the 1960s on. I have similar questions in terms of changes taking place in the current practice-driven research, that seems to have moved some considered distance from the arguments for a 'performance paradigm' informed as it was by the work undertaken by Peter Reason amongst others who argued,

that we needed to recognize knowledge as situated emerging in cycles of practice that involve ideas, reflection and experience that in turn are '... systematically honed and refined' (Reason, 1995, p. 6).

The idea resonates with Heidegger's comment that, 'we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to know it through handling,' (Bolt, 2011, 91) an argument taken forward by Bolt when she considers the ways in which 'handlability' is significant in terms of disseminating praxical knowledge. Like Freeman, she appreciates how such an approach affords the benefit of offering both methods of investigation and the means of dissemination: in the process it allows the researcher to 'meander across previous definitions and boundary markers' (Freeman, 2009, p. 59). In terms of what constitutes 'sound' research it is worth remembering that 'a successful piece of research doesn't conclusively settle an issue' (Cohen, 1990, p. 1311). Research can be seen to be rigorous, expansive and detailed, demonstrably methodical and no less provocative for that. Indeed it can be that in the revelation of practicing theory/theorying practice that the complex nature of what goes on in learning to think through performance becomes evident.

Writing in 2005, Denzin and Lincoln considered what they saw as the state of change arguing that,

As we edge our way into the 21st century, looking back and borrowing Max Weber's metaphor, we see more clearly how we were trapped by the 20th century and its iron cage of reason and rationality. Like a bird in a cage, for too long we were unable to see the pattern in which we were caught. Co-participants in a secular science of the social world, we became part of the problem. Entangled in the ruling apparatuses that we wished to undo, we perpetuated systems of knowledge and power that we found, underneath, to be all too oppressive. It is not too late to get out of the cage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1087).

To be free of the cage, alternative ways to 'rehearse knowing' would be to foster reflection on methodical engagement as something particular, suited to the distinct features of the person, or project, and drawing on abilities to forge relations through knowledge. Such instances would be something emergent and illuminated through the messy and sometimes irrational search for ideas. Whilst this kind of argument is familiar and often used as a way to frame the opening of performance research methods modules, later it can be passed over in a perceived need to the expedient generation of efficient outcomes. If we were to foster work that explored ways of knowing, we might evolve frameworks where research facilitated understandings that interrelate in association with the elasticity of thought following Whitehead's thoughts on the elasticity of time where there is a continuous becoming of the present, a folding of past experience with the present, and the future (1938). This complex

realm of individual engagement with ideas, might lead to increased accessibility of intensified thought as, 'idea-logics', to borrow a phrase used by William Forsythe via the worlds of design and business management. To make sense through the experience of reciprocal relationships would mean recognising how concepts can work together and with experience to see the open potential that each can be changed in the process.

'be careful what you wish for'

In his introduction to *Practice-as-research in performance and screen* Baz Kershaw suggests that during the first decade of the 21st century the evident wealth of development in PaR has shown the potential to initiate 'fundamental and radical challenges to well established paradigms of knowledge making inside the academy and beyond' (2009, p. 2). He goes on to scope what he refers to as the struggle of legitimising research in this context.

Simon Jones (2009, p. 25) makes what is perhaps a more interesting argument when observing that the 'very here-nowness [of practice] resists the ubiquity of the commodity and offers a glimpse of another way of knowing.' His notion of knowledge as being something 'profoundly wayward rather than utilitarian' (p. 25) speaks of work stretching between 'the dizzying heights of theorizing, [to] the nitty-gritty self-reflexive explicat[ion] of particular practice (p. 14). These ideas echo something of the philosophy and literary theory of Maurice Blanchot (1993), whose ideas inform the later stages of this paper.

It was interesting, if a little late in the debate, to see Robin Nelson (2013) note that it is time to talk of arts research, which just happens to be based in practice. Is this, then, a shift in the need for domain ownership, a trajectory that PL-R has seemed to think vital in current debate, or a twist/shift in the weight of publication? Arguably what we have from Kershaw, Jones, Nelson, Haseman and others, is an array of ideas that serve to satisfy the control of knowledge and disciplines in higher education, securing arguments for the identification of 'tokens' (examples) of 'types' of work. The 'type/token' theory became familiar in work by Margolis (1981) through deconstructive models that categorised features and signatures of art works in order to establish lineage and a sense of career for works, practices and signatures.

Whilst practice as research may have, and continues to gain, legitimacy in the academy, is it at the expense of losing its place as a catalyst for cultural change? Perhaps pushing towards institutional recognition and becoming what Repko (2005) might call a 'new tribe' had validity, whilst either reluctantly or blindly, installing a ruling apparatus that cages what were previously transformative desires. More recent writings from Nelson reinforce this slide in direction still further when he praises the benefits of PaR in terms of applied practice and the utility of the cultural industries. Through this, an undercurrent concerning instrumental and intrinsic value rises to the surface, reminding us of the cultural issues we have in appreciating the civilising and self-identifying value of education. Effectively, moving the outcomes of PaR towards instrumental utility, rather than a search for intrinsic wisdoms, has dangers in terms of those who would use the debate to disenfranchise the cultural contribution of arts based practice. However, it evidently fulfills a survival tactic for disciplines in the current political climate that grows increasingly adept at promoting

employability skills as the major concern for education rather than the evident graduate attributes that embrace a far richer stream of adaptable life skills than 'industry' appears to appreciate. This is a thorny thought-provoking challenge for another discussion.

It could be the case that, in being so intent on fighting for the right to acknowledge the professional careers and the standing of PaR, perhaps the inherent value of being involved in the work has itself been lost in plain sight. The clarity of our intention could instead have been to identify the collective importance of singularities in terms of practice, which when brought together contribute to a significant ground swell of radical difference in the sector.

In terms of the trans-disciplinary nature of dance, we have experience of moving between, and in, proximity with varied forms of knowledge. So a call for identification and recognition might be for an embodied trans-disciplinarity, following the lead of Gill Clarke (dance practitioner, educator, mentor), who imagined an institutional *Department of embodiment* with dance at the core working with a host of other disciplines (Burt, 2011). Whilst these might include cultural studies, psychology, biology, economics, medicine, history and many others, it would help us to embrace the potential dynamism of dance as an inter-discipline and in the process acknowledge the idea that 'movement operates in the middle of things' (Cvejic, 2004), something perhaps already familiar for many of us.

What do we prize in thinking in dance?

Experiences gained through methodical practice rather than methodological authority can provide ways to recognise knowledge and share theoretical reflections, through varied forms of dissemination. The idea draws on an ecology of mindful motion that does not recognise disciplinary boundaries or at least is not prohibited by them. William Forsythe speaks in a similar tone, in reference to his own working preference of keeping things indefinite, learning to cherish the possibilities inherent in a stammer rather than a closed, inflexible text (2012). In his emerging practice and through multiple modes of dissemination that he uses, it is interesting to hear him talk of learning to allow himself to 'not know', to practice being frightened and, in this process, be in the middle of things.

Returning to Maurice Blanchot

Finding ways to talk about what can be illogical processes of investigation may run counter to many of our episodes of education but if driven by a waywardness of 'fascination', as Blanchot proposes, we might recognise 'a non- methodological method of progressing [that can] speak from the experience of the artist and an aesthetic that is [foremost] unengaged with the will-to-knowledge' (Blanchot in Peters, 1993, npn). It is the qualitative features of the progress with the journey that is paramount.

His identification of the endeavor of research as an aesthetic, rather than an academic exercise, facilitates intention to explore the behavior of research as something vital for the exploration of ideas. For Peters, who references Blanchot in relation to his own work in music improvisation, the importance of such a proposal is

for a mode of engagement with research that is 'insistent in its sustained articulation of the neutrality of the work' (Peters, 2003, npn) as he moves to identify, what Blanchot considers as, 'non-systematic coherence' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 140).

In this way, the work of the work is to reveal ideas without rushing to answers, which comes to be identified with fragmentary modes of learning, moving through and along theoretical perspectives in search of order to be provisionally affirmed rather than to be confirmed. Something resonates here with work I recently found by a Canadian academic, Antionette Oberg (Oberg and Cranmer, 2008), who talks of 'inquiry without-method', churning dialogue through questions about a 'not yet imagined' interest, or the *Generique* performance improvisations that come into existence as a collective post performance review of a 'not yet presented' performance.

For Margaret Sommerville (2008) experiences of making new knowledge following similar trajectories should be prized as exploring spaces that are irrational, for it is in the complex patterning of learning how to deal with or to inhabit these areas of our thinking that we come to know differently. She speaks of an 'embodied process of becoming-other-to-one's-self in research' (p. 209). Eisner similarly equates such attitudes with fostering an enhanced capacity to perceive the qualities that comprise an experience. He talks of moving towards 'connoisseurship', a state that exhibits the development of the ability to experience the subtleties of form (Eisner, 1985). Eisner's position is not dissimilar to that of anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) who suggests that we should neither rush to answers nor seek to confirm truth, but to vibrantly wait.

Securing mindful motions of research

To secure what I refer to as, 'mindful motion' or the movement and refinement of thought, the aim is to seek the advantages to be gained by working in continuously evolving situations, open to development and in response to the directions that a study might take. This calls for a more open appreciation of the chaos and complexity that we may encounter in the place of not knowing. This is where we need to evolve tactics that prepare us for the unexpected, that help us to navigate the unknown and, in the process, amplify our experience and understandings. To do this, I draw on phenomenological, interpretivist, feminist, qualitative, naturalistic, practice-based, auto-ethnographic, practice-led, reflexive, grounded, artistic, creative, dialogic, improvisatory, choreographic, collaborative methods of inquiry, to name a few.

What is perhaps most vibrant to me is the sense of emergence; that through a process of 'waiting', we linger and learn to ask questions differently. Questions here can be about answering more than what is known or making attempts to prove or disprove existent hypotheses or indeed challenging the comfort of being lulled by a research protocol where submitting three pieces of practice-based evidence, accompanied by 20,000 word written document, has become the norm.

Waiting in the chaotic place of unknowing is useful because,

- it is speculative;

- it is not about justifying predesigned questions made at the start of the journey or for the formal transfer from masters to PhD;
- it generates episodes where we might learn to recognise interesting questions and the ways that they interconnect.

I often return and re-read Somerville's work to remind myself how,

the closing down of knowledge-making through our approach to supervision and thesis examination is a global issue (Somerville 2008, p. 212).

As supervisors and teachers, we are the busy shapers of the knowledge that can be produced; we guide what is possible to write, and how it is possible to 'write'. In such responsibilities, there is a significant duty of care. In creating elegantly designed frameworks through which to view experience, comprehend ambiguity, profundity and essential interconnectedness, we can forge ways to practice research as a mindful means of understanding and cohesion that 'extends thought, stretches the mind, and leads us into new and uncharted territory' (Diffey, 1986, p. 11). We recognise most usefully 'meanings-in-progress'. I will close this speculative paper on a note from Ivan Illich where he argues that in our attempts to improve learning and to de-school society we need to be mindful that

personal growth is not a measurable entity. It is growth in disciplined dissidence which cannot be measured against a rod, or any curriculum, nor compared to someone else's achievement. In such learning one can emulate others only in imaginative endeavour and follow in their footsteps rather than mimic their gait. The learning I prize is immeasurable re-creation (Illich, 1971, p. 40).

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This article has not been published, submitted, or accepted for publication elsewhere.

Biography

Fiona Bannon (PhD) is *Chair of DanceHE*, the representative body for Dance in Higher Education in the UK. Beginning her career in community dance in the UK and Australia (NSW) she later joined the University of Hull as a lecturer in dance becoming the Head of the *School of Arts* and developing *The School of Arts and New Media*. Now at the University of Leeds she works with students exploring collaborative practice, choreography, improvisation and works with doctoral candidates in arts practice as research. Current research includes the preparation of a manuscript, *Approaching Collaborative Practices: Ethical considerations in Performance and Dance*. Fiona is part of the team currently exploring the re-launch of World Dance Alliance-Europe.