

Creative Imaginations: The Future of Creative Practice Research

Discussion Paper

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Creativity has no limits. Creativity has a future. It remains a place for hope, for meaning and...for economic, cultural and human growth. (Robin, 2021, p.7)

Introduction

There is now a substantial body of literature on creative practice research, produced by a range of creative disciplines. This literature is focused on defining what creative practice research is, developing methodologies, navigating the relationship between theory and practice, and defending the status of creative work as research. This discussion paper gives a summary of some of the key conversations that are happening in and across creative disciplines currently and provides a starting point for thinking about best practice for creative practice research and supervision in preparation for the upcoming *Creative Imaginations* Symposium. It also includes a list of helpful resources for researchers, supervisors and students.

Of the creative disciplines contributing to conversations on creative practice research, creative writing is the most established. Journals such as *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* and *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* have produced numerous articles and special issues on the subject. While the focus of these journals is predominantly creative writing, they have also published writing from other creative disciplines such as art, screen writing and production, and performance. Additional key texts on creative writing research include Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper's *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (2012) and Jen Webb's *Researching Creative Writing* (2015).

Art has also made a substantial contribution to the development of creative practice research. Some key texts include Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt's *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2010) and Graeme Sullivan's *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts* (2010).

The discipline of screen production has, as noted by Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan in *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* (2018), "been slower to start" in terms of building up literature about screen production as a mode of enquiry (p. 2). Batty and Kerrigan's text is a significant contribution to this area, as are conference proceedings and special issue journals from Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) (see Broderick and Leahy, 2011).

Writing with a focus on performing arts, Robin Nelson's *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (2013) is much cited, as is the work of Brad Haseman (2006; Haseman and Mafe, 2009). Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's *Practice-*

led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts (2009) contains chapters on creative practice research from a wide range of disciplines and is regularly cited by researchers.

Methods and Terminology

There are several terms used to describe creative practice as research. The most common are *practice-led research*, *research-led practice*, *practice-based research*, and *practice as research*. None of these terms have stable, agreed upon definitions, and there are debates across and within disciplines about their proper use. These terms are sometimes used as umbrella terms, synonymous with *creative practice research*, to describe research in which the production of a creative work is integral. In other cases, these terms are used to describe different research methods. For example, Batty and Kerrigan use the terms practice-based research and research-led practice to describe creative practice research in which the creative work is “*the result of the research* and therefore performs the research findings” (2018, p. 7, original emphasis). Further, Batty and Kerrigan use practice-led research and practice-as-research to describe creative practice research in which the creative work “is used as *a site for systematically gathering reflections on the process* of doing/making, in order to contribute knowledge to the practice of doing/making” (p. 7, original emphasis).

Smith and Dean also use practice-led research and research-led practice to describe different approaches. They use practice-led research to refer “*both* to the work of art as a form of research and to the creation of the work as generating research insights which might then be documented, theorised and generalised” (2009, p. 7, original emphasis). On the other hand, research-led practice “suggests more clearly than practice-led research that scholarly research can lead to creative work” (2009, p. 7). Though Smith and Dean define these terms separately, they advocate for a method of research that is less distinct and one-way than these definitions suggest. Rather, they present a model for creative research that fluctuates constantly between the two—practice-led research and research-led practice—where the practitioner oscillates between process play and more goal oriented, result driven work. Jeri Kroll’s use of the term practice-led also reflects the fluctuating, cyclic nature of creative practice research. Kroll prefers the phrase “practice-led research loop” (2018).

Haseman has been a strong advocate for the term practice-led research. Drawing from the work of Carole Gray to define this term, Haseman states that practice-led research “describes what practitioner-researchers do, captures the nuances and subtleties of research processes and accurately reflects the process to research funding bodies. Above all it asserts the primacy of practice and insists that because creative practice is both on-going and persistent, practitioner-researchers do not merely ‘think’ their way through or out of a problem, but rather they ‘practice’ to a resolution” (2010, p. 147).

Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds in “Practice-Based Research in the Creative Arts: Foundations and Futures from the Front Line” (2018) outline the need for more stable definitions of practice-led research and practice-based research across art and design. They propose that practice-led be used to define research into the nature of practice, where “the role of making an artefact is not central to the process” (2018, p. 65). Further, they suggest that the term practice-based research be used for projects in which “making an artefact is

pivotal, and the insights from making, reflecting and evaluating may be fed back directly into the artefact itself” (p. 65). R. Lyle Skains also advocates for these definitions (2018).

Candy and Edmond advise against terminology that conflates research and practice such as “research as practice” or “practice as research”, noting that such terms suggest practice and research are synonymous, and lead to misconceptions about what creative practice research is.

Conversely, Nelson advocates for the use of the term *practice as research*, which he defines as “a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (pp. 8-9). Though extending on Haseman and Mafe’s ideas in their chapter “Six conditions of practice-led research” (2009), Nelson hesitates to adopt the term *practice-led*, noting that, “‘practice-led’ may bear a residual sense that knowledge follows after, is secondary to, the practice which I know some of its users do not mean to imply” (10).

Debates surrounding the use of these terms often focus on the different emphases on the creative and critical work they imply. Above are just a small selection of the numerous texts that seek to define the terms *practice-led research*, *research-led practice*, *practice-based research*, and *practice as research*, often with the aim of dispelling confusion surrounding their various uses. As a result of the confusion surrounding these terms, Patrick West, when developing the PhD via prior publication program at Deakin University, wrote an explicit definition of practice-led research into the guidelines for students, and “implicitly into the official examiner’s advice document” (2020, p. 13). There is the potential for similar action to be taken at Curtin. However, there is also the question of whether concrete definitions may be too restrictive. Alternatively, creative disciplines at Curtin could come to a consensus on the base assumptions that accompany these terms.

The Curtin Creative Practice Thesis

Curtin’s creative production thesis follows the Research Question Model outlined by Milech and Schilo in 2004. Following this model, the two components in creative production theses at Curtin—exegesis and creative work—must both answer a single research question. Milech and Schilo advocate for this model because, they argue, it equalises the creative and critical components, ensuring that both are substantial contributions to research, each answering a research question, and working to fill in a gap in existing knowledge, using the languages of two different discourses. Doing so helps eliminate the danger of one component becoming secondary to the other, serving as a footnote, appendix, or illustration: “[t]he creative or production piece does not form an illustration of the written document; the exegesis does not form a commentary on the creative work or production piece” (Milech and Schilo, 2004, para. 18). This is reflected in the *Guidelines for Thesis Preparation and Submission* (2021) for Higher Degree by Research students at Curtin, which states that, for a thesis by creative works, “The two components of the thesis ... must address the same central research question through articulating, in differing modes or languages, ideas or meanings which address that question” (para. 2.2). The guidelines also state that, “The exegesis should not provide a direct

commentary on the creative production. The creative production should not simply illustrate the exegesis” (para. 4). However, it appears that there are different interpretations of these guidelines across different disciplines and areas.

In creative theses, the exegesis may be research question driven, place the creative work in context, or provide a commentary on the creative work. Nigel Krauth in “Evolution of the exegesis” (2011) examines the development of the creative writing doctorate in Australia and discusses how the discipline of creative writing continues to push the boundaries of the exegesis. He outlines four types of exegesis: reflective, parallel, plaited, and blended. The reflective exegesis is a critical journal reflecting on the process undertaken when producing the creative work. The exegesis as parallel text provides a “conceptual or historical framework” (2001, para. 28) for the creative work, adopting the discourses of disciplines such as literary studies and cultural studies. In a parallel exegesis, the relationship to the creative work is less direct; the exegesis is “an added or alternative outcome to the research undertaken in writing the creative product” (para. 29). In this model, the exegesis is not supplementary, but equal to, the creative work (similar to Curtin’s Research Question model). In the plaited exegesis, the creative and exegetical components are weaved together, forming alternating texts that force them into a direct dialogue with one other. The blended exegesis takes this mixing of the critical and creative a step further, blurring the two. In a more recent article, Krauth, alongside Peter Nash, pushes his blended exegesis model even further, putting forward an example of a creative writing thesis in which the creative product and exegesis are “indistinguishable” (2019).

Over a decade after Milech and Schilo’s publication (2004), Rachel Robertson, alongside then PhD candidates Daniel Juckes, Marie O’Rourke, and Renee Pettitt-Schipp, published an article in a Special Issue of *TEXT, Exegesis Now* discussing the complexities of the parallel text Research Question Model, particularly when the two genres or modes the students are required to write in—creative and critical—are similar, such as in the writing of creative non-fiction. Drawing on the work of Krauth (2011), this article outlined the need for Curtin’s guidelines to allow for a more flexible approach to the creative production theses, to accommodate work that may be better suited to a braided or blended thesis. Following this article, updates were made to Curtin’s *Guidelines for Thesis Preparation and Submission*, which allowed for some creative production theses to integrate the creative and exegetical components “into a single piece of writing, in which they still ‘speak to’ each other through their common purpose of elucidating a response to the research question” (2021, para. 4).

Does the Creative Artefact Stand Alone?

Many creative practice researchers have written about the relationship between theory and practice. Webb and Brien discuss how artist-researchers find themselves “straddling two contradictory positions” (2008, p. 2). They are expected to produce both creative and scholarly works, and “[t]he commingling of these roles”, Webb and Brien note, “has been thought likely to diminish the art produced, while not necessarily generating fine scholarly work” (2008, p. 1).

Bolt views what she calls the “double articulation between theory and practice” not as a hindrance to, but a strength of, creative practice research (2010, p. 29). In her chapter “The

Magic is in the Handling” (2010), Bolt discusses the potential of the exegesis to elucidate the tacit knowledge that emerges through practice. Ross Gibson in “The known world” (2010) similarly contends that one of these modes need not come at the detriment of the other.

Though approaches to the exegesis vary, one common underlying criterion across approaches appears to be that the exegetical component should communicate to a wider audience, and have value to a field of research, not just the individual. The problems with purely self-reflective exegetical work according to scholars such as Bolt (2010) and Candy and Edmond (2018) is that they are in danger of being valuable only to the researcher. Andrew McNamara suggests students remove the ‘I’ voice from the exegetical component. He warns that in employing the personal voice, the student is in danger of losing sight of the wider research context amidst their own subjective reflections (2012).

There are debates around whether creative work can and should be seen as research in its own right, without the need for critical accompaniment in the form of an exegesis for HDR students, and a research statement for creative practice researchers, as required by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). There are those that argue that the need for a research statement to justify creative work as research devalues the creative artefact. Paul Williams in “Who let the zoologists back in?” (2021) discusses how the exegesis, as a legitimising document, has relegated the creative component “to an endnote, or an appendix, bracketed out of the ‘real’ research” (p. 2). He seeks to “re-affirm the creative artefact as the location of primary research activity, an end in itself, not a means to another, which asserts itself in the academic arena as its discourse, does not need explaining or justifying, operates by its own rules, and is not accountable to any other discourse for its legitimacy” (p. 3-4).

Andrew Cowan, in “‘No additional information required’: Creative writing as research writing” (2020) examines the recent reforms to the UK equivalent of the ERA, the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF is an examination of research outputs from Universities across the UK, and it takes place every six years. The most recent round, REF 2021, is currently being assessed, with results expected in April 2022 (REF 2021, 2019, p. 2). Unlike previous rounds, in REF 2021, the knowledge outputs in works of creative writing are seen as “self-evident”, without the need for a research statement. The panel criteria states that novels and poetry collections should be submitted under the “Authored books” category, in which “it is anticipated that the research will normally be evident within the submitted ‘book’ and that no additional information is required” (REF 2021, 2019, p. 93). Short stories and poems fall under the category of “Chapter in book” and similarly need no additional information. However, *non-text* submissions or artefacts still need to be accompanied by a 300-word statement “making clear the research process/content/contribution” (REF 2021, 2019, p. 93). Cowan looks at the new criteria in detail and advocates for a similar “paradigm shift” in the ways creative writing research is recognised in the academy in Australia (2020).

COVID-19 and Creative Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the arts and cultural sector, which was already in a precarious position. This was acknowledged in the Australian Government’s 2021-22 Budget, which noted the severe and lasting effect the pandemic has had on this sector and allocated around \$300 million to aid its recovery. This appears to be a hopeful

development in a string of challenges faced by the arts sector. However, Jo Caust, who examines the budget in an article for *The Conversation* calls attention to those who have been overlooked by the budget, such as the National Archives, the ABC, The Australian Film and Television School, and individual artists.

Other promising developments, such as the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts' report *Sculpting a National Cultural Plan*, have been looked upon with scepticism. In a recent *Conversation* article, Julian Meyrick and Justin O'Connor examine the 205-page report, which is an inquiry into "the impact of COVID-19 on the arts; economic and non-economic benefits of creative and cultural industries and institutions; policy delivery across the layers of government; and ways to enhance innovation and the use of the digital environment in the arts" (Parliament of Australia, 2021, para. 1.28). The authors highlight gaps within the report, such as the lack of discussion around the Australia Council and the ABC. They also criticise the report's "market first" perspective, though note strengths in the way the report approaches Indigenous arts and culture (Meyrick and O'Connor, 2021, para. 22).

The pandemic has also increased the pressure on creative arts departments in Australian universities. The year 2020 saw the introduction of the Job-Ready Graduates Package, implemented by Minister Dan Tehan, with the aim of steering students away from arts degrees and into STEM degrees, under the assumption that they produce more "job-ready graduates". These changes to legislation are seen by many to undermine the importance and value of the arts.

Julian Meyrick in *The Monthly* examines the disintegration of creative arts programs in Australian universities over the past year, with a focus on drama departments. Meyrick notes that "Monash, Murdoch, La Trobe, Charles Sturt and Newcastle universities have effectively closed their standalone drama programs" and others, such as Flinders and Wollongong, are suffering reductions (2021, para. 14-19). Meyrick discusses the consequences of diminishing arts departments, which are starved of staff and resources, while class sizes swell (para. 4). He notes that when creative arts teaching suffers, so does creative arts in general. This comes to the detriment of public life, and affects our ability to contribute to broader cultural conversations internationally, as well as nationally when it comes to dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (2021).

Nigel Krauth and Julienne van Loon, in the Editorial for a recent *TEXT* issue, discuss the current state of arts education in Australia (2021). They close with a call to action, stating that in the midst of current challenges facing the arts, "it is imperative for all of us in the creative arts disciplines in higher education to double down our efforts to advocate for one another and for our students, not only to speak out for ethical workplace standards and national arts and education policies, but to share resources and tactics for doing so effectively" (2021, p. 2).

As we emerge into a post-COVID world, there is a great potential for the arts and humanities to help us understand the pandemic, and other major local, international and planetary changes, navigate uncertainty, manage loss, and imagine new possibilities for the future.

Questions for Discussion

This brief review of the literature on creative practice raises a number of issues that might usefully be discussed at the *Creative Imaginations* Symposium. We encourage all participants to come with thoughts and other questions for discussion.

1. What constitutes the “contribution to new knowledge” in a creative practice research project?
2. Should we have a single School (or Faculty) approach and definitions in supervising Higher Degree by Research creative production projects?
3. How can we increase the visibility of creative practice research?
4. How can the Creative Critical Imaginations Research Network support high quality creative practice research within the School (or perhaps Faculty)?
5. What avenues for funding creative practice research could be pursued, and how?
6. What follow up from the symposium would be useful?

Conclusion

This paper has provided a snapshot of some of the variations in terminology across and within the creative arts disciplines represented in the School of MCASI, summarised Curtin’s current guidelines for creative production theses and explored some of the key issues emerging from contemporary literature on creative practice research. The aim of this paper has been to point staff and students to helpful literature on creative practice research as well as create a starting point for discussion at the upcoming *Creative Imaginations: The Future of Creative Practice Research Symposium*.

Please forward any comment or queries to Associate Professor Rachel Robertson at r.robertson@curtin.edu.au and Dr Ashleigh Angus at ashleigh.angus@curtin.edu.au. We welcome further debate and discussion at the Symposium.

This discussion paper has been developed by the Creative Critical Imaginations Research Network (CCIRN) in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry. Through creative and practice-led research as well as critical scholarship, the CCIRN explores ways in which the creative arts and contemporary Humanities theories intersect, and aims to facilitate debate and collaboration within and across disciplines.

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