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# Creative Writing as Practice-Led Research

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# Creative writing as practice-led research

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper accepts that new knowledge in the Arts is created through practice-led research and that creative writing is one expression of a practice leading to practice-led research outcomes. However, in trying to explain this methodological approach to 'outsiders', the practice-led researcher may be accused of circularity and/or self-delusion. The alleged circularity tends to be represented back to the researcher as 'So what you're saying is that 'practice-led research leads to knowledge that results from engaging in practice' Is that right?'*

Haseman (2006) has argued that there is a research paradigm separate from quantitative and qualitative research, viz 'performative research', and that this is the nature of the research undertaken via practice-led methodologies. This paper explores and critiques the kinds of knowledge produced and disseminated through the practice-led research methodology of creative writing. The aims, process, and outcomes of the writing endeavour will be analysed in the context of 'Performance as research in practice' debates.

While it is generally accepted that creative writing is an art form, it has been less easy to establish consensus on its status as a higher education research output. This tentativeness of recognition of 'creative writing as research' is also extended to other aspects of the creative

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and performing arts such as fine arts, painting, sculpture, electronic arts, dance, drama, film making, photomedia, scriptwriting, and music performance. Even though these disciplines have increasingly been studied via higher degrees by research (HDR) over the past two decades, it has proved very difficult to gain recognition for any products of research not taking the conventional form of refereed papers, books, chapters, or journal articles.

This is not to say that the matter has not been diligently pursued by a select group of motivated academics employed in Australian universities to head up, or contribute to, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and research in the creative and performing arts. Their first—and most enduring—success was the acceptance of HDRs in the fields of creative and performing arts. The proceedings of a landmark mini-conference on *Defining the Creative Arts Doctorate* (AARE 2003), convened by the Australian Association for Research in Education, remain accessible via the web. In a sense, the acceptance of HDR in the creative and performing arts means de facto that creative outputs are recognised as part of the research quantum created each year by the Australian higher education system—research degree ‘completions’ feed into complicated formulae that influence the amount of government funding flowing through to tertiary institutions under the Institutional Grant Scheme (to support research carried out by universities) and the Research Training Scheme (to support the training of future researchers via HDRs).

This acceptance of HDRs as evidence of research output is not highly contentious since the examination process in and of itself might be seen to be equivalent to the reviewing protocols that determine the validity of refereed academic papers. Further, the creative work rarely—maybe never—stands alone. (Although in some submissions this may be less clear than in others, e.g., Williams, 2003). In the vast majority of Australian creative and performing arts HDRs, a creative work is accompanied by a written exegesis that interrogates the research purpose of the artistic thesis and exemplifies the academic nature of the entire endeavour. Typically, such exegesises are about one-third-to-half the length of a normal thesis submitted in fulfilment of the relevant higher degree.

The justification for practice-led research is that certain kinds of knowledge can be created only through practice. Research into those kinds of artistic and applied knowledge is necessarily conducted as a part of the practice. The practice-led research methodology is the doing

of the work of creativity: the making of the art as part of a response to a research question. Applying the notion of practice-led research to creative writing, the supposition is that it is through the practice of creative writing that new knowledge about the art of creative writing is developed, and knowledge about the contribution of creative writing to contemporary society. Effectively, practice-led methodologies depend upon 'performativity' (Haseman, 2006) in relation to the writer's craft: the research is embodied in the written work.

This performance of creative writing results in very different outcomes from the analysis of creative writing: the performance may create new knowledge for the writer (and the reader), whereas analysis has the potential to create new knowledge about the writer's approach, and the text. Where new knowledge is created for and by the writer, however, it remains important that the newness of this knowledge is communicable to others who are knowledgeable about the field of research in/through creative writing. This is the minimum requirement for the outcomes to be appropriately recognised as legitimate research.

Nonetheless, there are potential pitfalls: in particular, the need to protect the research from the charge of circularity. The exegesis may use reflexive, introspective, analytical, and journal techniques to explore and critique the kinds of knowledge produced and disseminated through practice-led research. In the creative and performing arts, including creative writing (Brien, 2006), the proliferation of HDRs demonstrates acceptance of the generation of new knowledge through practice-led methods. The high-level academic examination of arts-based research outputs such as a musical performance, or a dance; a sculpture, a painting, an exhibition, or a novel; suggests that tertiary institutions and appropriately qualified examiners agree that research through practice develops new knowledge. The making of an original contribution to the discipline is an important requirement of the award of the higher degree by research, and this criterion is explicitly addressed by examiners. The award of a PhD or Master's by research degree is taken as a guarantee of the capacity of a graduate to contribute new knowledge to a field, and is indeed evidence of the contribution of such knowledge.

However, when researchers from other disciplines are first introduced to practice-led research, they tend to construct it as a tautology, whereby practice-led research is used to research the outcomes of practice. Whereas detractors have hitherto lacked the motivation to denigrate

and undermine practice-led research methods in a concerted manner (because only small amounts of research money were involved), it can be anticipated that a funding environment that treats non-traditional research outputs with the respect generally accorded to books, refereed conference papers, and journal articles will raise questions of rigour and legitimacy. Although it will be difficult—as will be explained shortly—it behoves academics in disciplines that champion practice-led research to ally themselves with each other in strong defence of the methodology.

For some commentators, it is the existence of the exegesis in the creative and performing arts research degree that makes acceptable the notion of practice-led research. The exegesis creates a significant difference between creative writing as art, and creative writing as practice-led research. Few published fiction writers not engaged in academic endeavours conceptualise themselves as carrying out practice-led research; they are more likely to see themselves as writers—as artists. Indeed, it is possibly a pre-requisite of practice-led research that researchers see themselves as engaged in a research process. From examples as diverse as Physics (the observer effect: Heisenberg's uncertainty principle) and Management (the Hawthorne Effect [Mayo, 1933; Landsberger, 1955]), it has been argued that the act of observation impacts upon the entity observed. Is it in explicitly carrying out creative work in the context of practice-led research that the research occurs? If so, how does the act of creative writing as practice-led research differ from that of creative writing as artistic practice?

Firstly, the exegesis requires a reflexive analysis of the processes of the production of the creative component of the HDR that situates it within a body of work and, ideally, a body of research within a disciplinary framework. In this way, the combination of the 'creative work' and 'the exegesis' requires the candidate to reflect upon their specific contribution—the new knowledge created via the exploration of the thesis—and schools them in academic culture. The latter is important since, historically, a major motivation for undertaking a higher degree by research has been to equip a student with the required skills to supervise others in a tertiary environment. The exegesis means that the central pillar of the academic nature of the work remains intact. It also offers a mechanism through which the practice-led research element of the HDR plays a lesser role than if it were required to carry the entire weight of the academic output.

Secondly, the exegesis prevents the embarrassing situation where an internationally recognised creative artist might claim that their body of work by itself qualifies them for a doctorate (say)—particularly in comparison with successful doctoral candidates in creative and performing arts who might struggle for artistic recognition among their peers. The critical difference here, the academic institution would claim, is that the art executed as part of an HDR is not 'art for art's sake' but art carried out as part of the exploration of a research question or questions. Indeed, it is more than possible (some might say likely) that a creative or performing arts research output can be good research but poor art (and, vice versa, that a good artistic product might constitute poor research). Thus, while significant success as an artist is desirable, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to prove skills in practice-led research.

Thirdly, the exegesis complementing the practice-led artistic output is a starting point for training in the documentation processes required to authenticate creative work as research. Although the practice of documenting practice-led research among Australian academics is all but lacking, the issue has attained significant salience in the UK as part of their Research Assessment Exercise. In the 'Drama, Dance and Performing Arts' panel ('Unit of Assessment, 66'), for example, practice-led research documentation was referred to by the RAE assessors using categories such as 'excellent' and 'not strong'. For example, 'while some submissions offered excellent documentation/supporting evidence for practice as research, overall the level of presentation was not strong, making for some difficulties in assessment' (RAE 2001, p. 3). There is an urgent need for collaboration across the creative and performing arts disciplines—and Creative Writing is in a position to lead this—to determine an appropriate documentation model that complements (rather than detracts from) the artistic work itself.

Interestingly, and challengingly, analysis of examiners' reports on practice-led higher degrees by research in the creative and performing arts concludes that most observations and criticisms relate to the exegesis, rather than to the arts practice (Holbrook et al, 2006). Researchers who studied the examiners' comments noted that a sample of 42 fine art degree reports 'resonated with the "newness" of examination in the field, the assessment language showed marked difference between the exegesis and the exhibition, and the relative emphasis in assessment centred on the exegesis' (p. 86). A practice-led research sceptic might argue that even professional creative and performing arts researchers who accept the validity of the methodology

find it hard (when acting as HDR examiners) to recognise and describe the characteristics of good research outputs, or identify relevant shortcomings. Holbrook et al's (2006) findings and observations suggest that critical assessment of the creative and performing arts research outputs of practice-led methodologies is still developing a discourse that is acceptable across the field.

One of the problems behind this lack of agreement on a discourse, and on appropriate documentation, is the diversity among creative and performing arts that rely upon the methodology of practice-led techniques to claim robustness for the outcomes of their research. Discussions continue in a piecemeal, discipline-based, way—possibly so that discussants can gain a sense of solidarity in their own area prior to engaging academics from beyond the boundaries of their individual artistic practice. For example, the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education recently funded a \$150,000 project, *Dancing between diversity and consistency: Improving assessment in postgraduate studies in dance* (Phillips, 2006), proposed by three university dance departments led by the WA Academy of Performing Arts in conjunction with Ausdance and the Tertiary Dance Council of Australia. This is an important advance for postgraduate dance research, but it would need a concerted effort to apply any findings to other practice-led research areas: creative writing, for example.

Similarly, a benchmarking project commissioned by ACUADS (the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools) in 2002 showed as much division within the field as it did agreement. Petelin (2006, p. 32) observed that there was a patchy acceptance of the notion of fine art practice as practice-led research. While he identified 'a shared institutional ambition for the discipline to develop a framework for practice-led research which includes terms such as rigour, methodology and validity', he also cautioned that 'discussions and focus group work with students enrolled in these higher degree by research programs indicate that, at best, progress towards this ideal is partial'. Summing up, Petelin argues that (2006, pp. 32–3) 'practice-led researchers in the visual arts are in the process of creating a research discourse which will provide a discipline-specific methodological framework for practice as research in visual art'. By implication, links between practice-led research in the visual arts, and other practice-led research, remain a further step away.

Leading academics in creative writing degrees are asking the same practice-led research questions of their constituency as do ACUADS

and the Tertiary Dance Council of Australia. The 2006 conference organisers of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, held at the Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Campus, chose the theme of *Perilous Adventures: Creative Writing Practice and Research in the Higher Degree and Beyond*, noting that:

*To continue to flourish under ... the ever-increasing pressure to be successful in securing large grants, and a renewed emphasis on quality teaching, Creative Writing needs to also look towards ways of establishing and developing research agendas that operate beyond Research Higher Degrees; to consider ongoing, collaborative, multivalent research and practice strategies that can contribute to extending and growing both our individual and national research agendas. (Text, 2006)*

Arguing that 'it seems that Creative Writing has, in Australia, dominated the field in terms of articulating and responding to the demands [...of] postgraduate practice-based research', the discipline has an opportunity to lead the development of the practice-led debate. In particular, writers are likely to have fewer concerns about committing words to print, and more faith that their skills can be harnessed to serve a range of publication possibilities (Green, 2005), including documentation of practice-led research. The 'domination of the field' by Creative Writing has yet to result in leadership of a pan-artistic alliance concerning practice-led research.

Discussions in dance, fine arts, and creative writing are further challenged by the idea that practice-led research is 'performative' (Haseman, 2006). In using this term Haseman—whose field is performance—argues that a third category of research is emerging alongside quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The critical difference for performative research is 'in the way it chooses to express its findings ... when research findings are made as presentational forms, they deploy symbolic data in the material forms of practice; forms of still and moving images; forms of music and sound; forms of live action and digital code' (2006, p. 102). Developing the argument through the use of 'J. L. Austin's (1962) notion of performativity', Haseman suggests that some performances work both symbolically—with words—and actually, with actions. Haseman cites the wedding service as an example (2006, pp. 102-3). ' "I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)" enacts what it names ... When research findings are presented as such [performative] utterances, they too perform an action and are most appropriately named performative research. It is not qualitative research: it is itself'. Once a discourse is developed and



agreed for documenting practice-led research, it may be possible to move beyond it to a new level of performativity.

Also relevant in a debate about appropriate ways of rendering new knowledge as an outcome of creative and performing arts research is the idea of 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner, 1983). Although the most widely discussed 'alternative intelligence' to the conventional IQ is EQ, emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), Garner posits a range of different capacities including:

linguistic intelligence ('word smart')

spatial intelligence ('picture smart')

bodily-kinesthetic intelligence ('body smart')

musical intelligence ('music smart') (Armstrong n.d.)

Some of these intelligences have clear application to creative and performing arts research and it would not be surprising if, for example, the high-level fruits of these intelligences were best displayed and most evident in situations other than conventional written research outputs.

Tertiary institutions with a significant investment in teaching and research in the creative and performing arts have a clear incentive to forge an agreed discourse around practice-led methodologies. Such a development could lead to more research-related income for arts-based disciplines, and would address some of the inequities between practice-based academics and their peers. Currently, academics teaching in the creative and performing arts are expected to maintain their professional creative practice. This 'licenses' them to continue to teach in the field: a writer is expected to publish, a sculptor to exhibit, a musician to play (or compose). This engagement with the arts practice is—arguably—at least as intense and time-consuming as the imperative to publish refereed academic papers is for more traditional researcher-academics. To expect a practice-based lecturer to teach, develop their artistic reputation, and to publish in scholarly journals is clearly to expect more of them than is expected of 'theory-based' academics (whose practice is integrated within their teaching and research).

For the academics, too, a (re)classification/recognition of their artistic outputs as research would enhance their 'publication' record for the purposes of promotion, and for developing and harnessing research support, and study leave. Although practice-led research has been the subject of discussion in Australia since at least the early 1990s (Richards, 1995)—leading to the Strand Report (1998) and the short-lived

attempt to include practice-led research outputs as part of the research quantum of the University sector—acknowledgement of practice-led research methodologies has yet to achieve mainstream acceptance among qualitative and, particularly, quantitative researchers. One challenge of the assessment of practice-led research outcomes is that they require appraisal and approval, and this is labour and time intensive. Such evaluations also run the risk of appearing more subjective than is traditionally permitted in the assessment of research outcomes.

Traditional research employs a range of proxies for estimations of quality. For example, the process of publication in a refereed journal starts with a submission to that journal followed by a subjective decision on the part of an editor(ial team) as to appropriate reviewers. The article to be assessed is dispatched to the referees who then compare the paper against their expectations of a successful article and make an evaluation that is fed back to the editor. The editor may need to adjudicate between differing estimations before reaching a conclusion about the overall value of the contribution and its capacity to contribute to the journal. Any required or suggested changes are communicated to the author via the editorial response. The author then decides whether and how to respond to the feedback and the resulting revisions are accepted or rejected with the article included in, or excluded from, the journal issue in question.

The effect of this process is that 'publication in a refereed journal' becomes a proxy for quality: the implication is that to survive review, an article has to satisfy a (small) number of assessors and has to persuade an editor that the final volume will be enhanced with the inclusion of the paper. Further, an editor must believe that the information and knowledge conveyed in the article is worth the space that it takes up and the effort required to understand the article's contents and arguments.

The value of publication as a proxy for quality is then further leveraged by bibliometric data such as the 'impact factor' of the journal—a relative judgement of the impact that that title has on the discipline, compared with other equivalent refereed journals—and citation rates that attribute value in proportion to the number of times an article is cited in a range of other (usually refereed, and impact-assessed) academic outputs. The proxy of publication is thus affected by the perceived prestige of the publication (via the impact factor) and the influence of the paper once published (by the cumulative citation

data). All of these numerical factors—how many refereed papers, in journals of which impact factors, cited how many times—can then be harnessed to create a near-enough approximation of quality as an alternative to reading the publication and comparing it with equivalent publications.

The establishment of quality in the outcomes of practice-led and performative research in the creative and performing arts is somewhat different, however. Some weight may be given to the venue or context in which the work is situated. The Sydney Opera House beats Subiaco's Regal Theatre in terms of gatekeeping and implied quality of production, for example, and some assessors may judge published fiction as 'better' than fiction that remains unpublished—although this may be contentious. Critical review in a public forum, perhaps in the mainstream press, implies the gaining of attention and interest. Notwithstanding these indicators of quality, the output itself still needs to be evaluated by assessors who can contextualise their response to the research in terms of other equivalent work (Marshall, 2005). The value attributed to a piece of practice-led research in the creative and performing arts, including the endeavour of creative writing, is thus informed by context but may require a closer-level engagement with the actual research product than is the case with much research published in learned journals resulting from qualitative or quantitative methodologies.

For a brief period (in the aftermath of the Strand Report, 1998), researchers in the creative and performing arts were permitted to submit details of exhibitions, volumes of poetry, and performances (among other manifestations of practice-led research) for recognition equivalent to books, conference papers, and refereed articles. The scheme was dropped as being too expensive to assess in terms of judgements about the quality and impact of the practice-led arts outputs, and a majority AVCC view was that the inclusion of creative and performing arts outputs did not substantially affect the allocation of funds compared with what would have been the case using the conventional research outputs alone. On balance, the cost and complexity of the scheme was deemed to outweigh its benefits. However, a number of institutions—particularly those with a strong creative and performing arts commitment—have consistently sought to challenge these perceptions.

There is a range of reasons why arts academics and some of their institutions seek wider agreement about recognition of the

creative outputs of practice-led research. Nonetheless, the issue of methodological integrity has recently been catapulted into new prominence by the deliberations of the various Research Quality Framework (RQF) committees advising Australia's Minister for Education, the Hon. Julie Bishop. Seeking to follow the lead of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), and New Zealand's Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF), the Department of Education, Science and Technology has spent the past couple of years refining new ways to measure the quality and impact of research produced by the higher education sector.

The proposals now approaching finalisation (RQF 2006) include a number of innovations for the Australian research sector. Specifically, practice-led research has been firmly included in the assessment agenda. Once it was accepted that quality and impact would be assessed by discipline leaders in peer-review panel processes (a qualitative approach rather than the old quantitative basis of 'how many books/articles/papers'), the major argument against the inclusion of practice-led outcomes as part of the research quantum fell away. Assessment of academics' research outputs had never looked more like the assessment of higher degrees by research, and a specific engagement with a small number of high quality research outputs was a requirement of the quality-and-impact system.

Underlining the new possibilities, the disciplines most likely to draw upon practice-led research traditions have been combined in one area: 'Panel 13'. According to the most recent model (RQF, 2006), this will be titled 'Creative arts, design and built environment' and will comprise 'Architecture and urban environment, building, Other architecture, urban environment and building, Performing arts, Visual arts & crafts, Cinema, electronic arts & multimedia, Design studies, Other arts (exc. Art history & appreciation)'. This approach takes a firm lead from the UK's RAE, where practice-led research outputs have been significant contributors to the overall research endeavour. Further, the specific exclusion of 'Art history & appreciation' means that the research outputs assessed by Panel 13 will be the art itself, rather than analysis of the art or its history.

The RAE was introduced in the UK in 1992. By the time of the second data collection period (1996), researchers in the fields of the creative and performing arts had persuaded research evaluators to include practice-led research outputs in the creative and performing arts—for example, research using dance, fine arts, writing, music composition,

etc. The knowledge gained through submitting and evaluating these outcomes of practice-led research was further developed in the 2001 RAE round when practice-led research outcomes were again included. The most recent final report of the 'Drama dance and performing arts panel' noted that 'practice as research of various kinds submitted by circa 200 researchers amounted to approximately one-third of the total' (RAE, 2001). What is more, the panel claims to have identified 'strong signs of world-class innovations, indicating that UK researchers may be leading internationally in this area [practice led research]' (RAE, 2001). Nonetheless, this is the same panel in which assessors commented that 'overall the level of presentation was not strong, making for some difficulties in assessment' (RAE, 2001, p. 3), so the documentation imperative remains, despite a call to performativity.

Assuming that there is a (small) shift in funding in favour of Panel 13, creative and performing arts practice-led researchers are going to need a strategy to protect their improved status as research-quantum-income winners. Some HDR scholarship holders in these fields already have to defend themselves against the accusation that they are 'only' enrolled in these degrees so that they can be an artist-with-a-scholarship-income, rather than an artist-on-Newstart, and use the institution's creative and performing arts facilities. Hostility to performance-led research methods is likely to grow in direct proportion to their perceived success. The best defence is collaboration and mutual support across the practice-led research spectrum.

Collaborative engagement could include:

- i critiquing the history of and literature about practice-led research and applying it across the Panel 13 disciplines;
- ii observing, recording, and meta-analysis of the process of practice-led research to develop robust documentation templates (creative writing practitioners can lead in this);
- iii comparing the methodology of practice-led research with other qualitative methodologies and research techniques with a view to developing methods of triangulation as a defence against circularity;
- iv exploring the possibility that different kinds of intelligence (emotional, intellectual, etc. [Goleman, 1995; Gardner, 1983]) are developed through different experiences and practices, and thus are appropriately researched using practice-led techniques; and
- v reflecting upon scholarly debate surrounding the assessment of research outputs submitted to the 'Creative arts, design and built environment' RQF assessment panel (Panel 13).

These anchor points would prevent the debate about practice-led research from going around in circles and would position practitioners—including creative writers—better to defend the fruits of their success from the criticisms of conventional researchers representing the interests of the established quantitative and qualitative paradigms.

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