A model for interdisciplinary research: practice-based research

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A model for interdisciplinary research: practice-based research

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Abstract

This paper considers practice-based research in retrospect of a large-scale interdisciplinary project. It presents a brief survey of practice-based research and offers a workable model for such projects, including reference to the phases of a project, written research outputs in practice-based research, reflective practice and the importance of collaboration.

1 Introduction and contextualisation

Once upon a time a little boy named Joshua did not want to go to sleep at night, so instead he said: Daddy, let me tell you a creature. These creatures were wild and wonderful: foot of the toad, horn of the rhino, wing of the bat. His dad drew them, Joshua corrected them, and finally nine creatures came to life.

Like the first act of creation, this one was interdisciplinary: the word commanded the image into being.
The nine creatures that served as stimulus for Tracking creative creatures by Joshua and Ian Marley
Joshua’s dad, Ian Marley, teaches Graphic Design at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University in South Africa. Ian took the drawings to a colleague in Creative Writing, spoke to the Director of Research at the Faculty of Arts, and a project was born: Tracking creative creatures. It involved that drawings of the creatures were given to artists, poets and other creatives as a creative stimulus and that all the work generated in this way formed part of the project in some or other way. The project was driven by a desire to explore how academics in the creative fields can be accommodated in the sphere of research – through producing creative work, by crossing discipline boundaries, and through tracking the creative process.

The normal route of research as publication typically does not allow for creative work as research and thus a new paradigm for conceptualising creative outputs as research contributions was sought. Interestingly, Creative creatures did not begin intentionally as a practice-based research project but acquired this dimension over time when the project leaders found a fairly large body of literature dealing with exactly this issue. Nonetheless, the project yielded a large flagship exhibition, several community and schools workshops, the involvement of a crafts group (which is an upliftment initiative), a cabaret performance, scholarly publications on the project as well as an interactive DVD catalogue which is a creative output in its own right. More than 400 people participated in Tracking creative creatures, and many of the final products were interdisciplinary in nature (and the flagship exhibition was a fully interdisciplinary event). Eight scholarly articles flowed from the project – some collaborative and interdisciplinary, and others single-author publications – and these appear in a special edition of the accredited journal Literator during 2009.

After reflection on the successes and shortcomings of the project, a new project was initiated and more rigorously framed as practice-based research. This project, Transgressions and boundaries of the page, was launched by the same project leaders and involves around 50 creatives (poets, fine artists, writers, academics, architects, illustrators and the like). The participants were asked to produce an artist’s book either independently or in collaboration across disciplines. The project was formally launched with invited speakers who addressed relevant
issues: theoretical framing of the notion of the artist’s book; background on the history of the book; practice-based research and its aims; reflection on the previous project and legal aspects such as attribution, contribution and copyright.

As was the case with the previous project, the participants were eager to participate and institutional goodwill had increased significantly in light of the success of the Tracking creative creatures project. Funding applications are under way and the plan is to showcase the creative work at the Word Festival in Stellenbosch during March 2010.

2 What is practice-based research?

Practice-based research\(^1\) refers to research in creative disciplines (fine art, design, architecture, performing arts, literature) characterised by its reliance on artistic activity and creative output. Practice-based research, by implication, suggests that this artistic activity and creative output be regarded as a type of research. It tends, furthermore, to disregard conventional boundaries between disciplines and allows for a free flow of creative energy between participants both in creative and academic fields.

Practice-based research has to answer to the normal requirements of research, namely that it should:

1. be firmly located within a research context – this means that the research should be framed as research, and should be backed by a theoretical context lodged in current concerns as emanating from literature in the field of inquiry.

2. be subject to interrogation and critical review – as scholarly publications are peer-reviewed, practice-based research needs peer review, albeit in the form of critique by experts in the creative fields and academics who can provide scholarly insights into aspects of the work. The work should also be publicly accessible in the form of exhibitions or performances.
3. Impact on or influence the work of peers, policy and practice – this means that the field of practice should be expanded in the same way that scholarly publications contribute to knowledge of a field. Knowledge gained should also be transferable beyond the specific project.

4. Be framed in a methodology, as all research should – and here practice-based research draws strongly on action research methods as well as its own methodological paradigm – which will be, by nature, eclectic, pluralist and negotiated as the project progresses (compare Bowen, 2005; Mafe & Brown, 2006; Douglas et al., 2000).

In terms of the paradigms of research, it is worth looking at Haseman’s (2006) suggestions regarding the different types of research:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative research</th>
<th>Qualitative research</th>
<th>Performative research</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Something is expressed as quantities by means of graphs or formulas, for example.</td>
<td>Based on social enquiry and expressed in non-numerical data, i.e. words.</td>
<td>Findings are expressed not in numeric data or words, but in symbolic form (such as visual or other creative outputs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific method</td>
<td>Multi-method</td>
<td>Multi-method led by practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brief reference to the role of the written aspect of research is necessary at this point. Haseman (2006) regards the creative product as embodied research, so that the artefact or performance constitutes the research. On a continuum where this notion represents the one end, and conventional scholarly research is positioned on the far end from this, a number of possible positions exist which need to be clarified over time. On the one hand, artists’ documentation of the creative process is indeed a type of research – of great importance here is the reflective journal where the creative process is documented before, during and
after the creative act. Obviously, reflective essays by, for example, art historians also constitute research. We are in the process of exploring a variety of possible avenues and output possibilities where the written component – plus the prestige of having published – is not only the domain of the academic who engages in scholarly publications, but where alternatives to journal articles – such as published reflective journals and the like – may begin to claim their status as research. Academics and creatives, and creatives who are academics from different disciplines are encouraged to collaborate on various types of written outputs in order to empower and enrich both the scholarly and the creative endeavour. Our position is that while the scholarly research publication is not the sole means to research output, some form of written accompaniment to creative work adds depth and ensures proper reflection.

3 A model for interdisciplinary practice-based research

We propose a model for a practice-based research project with an interdisciplinary slant as consisting of three steps, namely pre-production, production and post-production. These steps encapsulate all the actions necessary to run a project from beginning to end.³

3.1 Pre-production

During this stage the project is conceptualised and brainstormed; its first stirrings may be intuitive, playful, seemingly insignificant and even random. The seed of the project grows out of discussions between practitioners (often from more than one discipline) and may also involve theorists (such as art historians). Those involved at this stage are likely to become the project leaders. As soon as a more workable idea crystallises, it is formulated into a possible project with a working title. From here, the idea is situated in the relevant contexts to link it to pertinent current issues and appropriate theoretical frameworks. A literature survey will embolden the application for funding, which is likely to be necessary. Here the art historian or similar theoretically inclined participant may play a significant role.
The second stage of pre-production entails a plan of action, which is clear but tentative enough to allow for flexibility. Here the participants decide on whom to involve and anticipated outcomes or results are noted: creative outputs (visual, auditory, creative writing or others); theoretical or written research publications emanating from the project; possible involvement of postgraduate students; and also, very importantly, reflective artistic documentation (such as reflective journals, interviews and even creative blogs that can be run for the duration of the project). The results of the project will not focus only on the final product (which may take the form of an exhibition or performance), but also on the theoretical contexts in which the work is situated and the processes that inform the creative practitioners during their involvement in the project. With regard to quality aspects that will likely affect the stature of the project, reviewers must be appointed and decisions regarding whether work by participants will be selected (or whether all contributions will be shown) for the final exhibition or performance can tentatively be made.

During the third stage of pre-production participation of practitioners and theoretical participants is confirmed. Training now takes place (most likely in the form of workshops) on the nature of the project; its contexts and tangential theoretical themes; the envisioned outcomes and the nature of practice-based research, so that all roles in the project are clarified. The workshops should cover both the theoretical underpinnings as well as methods that practitioners can use, with emphasis on reflective journals, documentation of the creative and thinking processes, and other possible avenues of setting down creative development. It is, nonetheless, important that participants do not feel restricted and are encouraged to apply their intuitive and possibly unplanned insights; unexpected turns will most likely enrich the entire project.

Some practical issues are pertinent here: contribution and attribution of need to be clarified, and roles and tasks must be set out. Possible venues and dates for the exhibition or performance will have to be identified and coordination with events such as arts festivals can be considered. The project leaders need to decide on a publication strategy, together with an advertising campaign suitable to the project to
raise public awareness (invitations and other modes of advertising – streetpole posters, press releases to appropriate media and the like). It may not be possible to finalise all these, but a plan and timeframe must be drawn up so that the promotional material can be produced relatively quickly under the pressure of the upcoming public event. Practical arrangements regarding deadlines for submission of work and modes of collection need to be clarified. There should be a clear administrative function that documents each aspect of the process, and communicates the necessary information to relevant parties.

Funding applications should be formalised and submitted to the relevant funding bodies or institutional offices, preferably with the cooperation of the research directorate of the faculty or section.

3.2 Production

This step is the most intense, as the actual creative production takes place here together with research-in-practice in the form of reflective journals and the like. The project leaders will, apart from their own creative work, also have to manage the project. Weekly discussions between project leaders and liaising with participating creatives (often collaborating across disciplines) are crucial at this stage to retain the project’s momentum and to determine whether it is necessary to reflect on emergent possibilities, and augment aspects of the initial plan. Participants who collaborate in their creative process are likely to develop usable new insights, especially if they come from different disciplines. These should be recorded in the reflective journals, and should ideally take place in collaboration with theoretically inclined colleagues to enhance scholarly depth.

The project leaders may have to report to the institution or funding body on the progress of the project, and dedicated funding must in place for the exhibition or performance. Referees should be confirmed to validate the quality of creative work and scholars in the field should be tentatively identified for refereeing the written research outputs (those that take place after the creative process has run its course).
The production step culminates in the presentation of the final research outcomes which may be in the form of an exhibition. Curating decisions, coordinating the work delivered by participants and other practical aspects such as venue management dominate here. Pertinent is also the production of a catalogue to comply with certain textual requirements of research: printed catalogues can be substituted or supplemented by DVDs, websites or other forms of documentation. It is very important that the exhibition (or performance) is properly documented, as this will inform an entire range of post-production activities. During this stage the project’s exposure is key and the public as well as peers in the field should have ample access to the work – for this reason, either setting up the project as part of an arts festival or planning for the project to tour at least parts of the country is advisable. Arranged visits by school groups and other forms of guided tours will broaden the exposure and impact of the project.

3.3 Post-production

The first logical action during post-production is a post-project meeting, attended by project leaders and those creative participants who will be involved in this stage, as well as the more theoretically inclined participants whose role is likely to expand at this point. The project should be discussed in as much detail as possible, noting successes and failures and identifying new and emerging issues.

Three types of activities, each with its own set of decisions, characterise post-production. In the first instance, the catalogue, DVD or other form of documentation may have to be revised and gaps filled in so that it is as comprehensive and representative of the project as possible. Secondly, decisions should be made as to whether, and how, to make artists’ reflections on their work and process public, and how to transform these into possible research outputs that fall within the accepted research norms of the institution or funding body – this may entail that the creative practitioner works with a colleague to prepare the work for dissemination, either to be reproduced as artist’s journal or to extract from the journal a number of aspects that can form a guide to creative
development, or whatever other possibilities emerge from reflecting on the content of the journal.

The third type of research here is the formal route, where the scholarly results anticipated are written and submitted for publication. It is a good idea to workshop topics as those anticipated at the outset of the project may have lost their relevance or may have been enriched by new insights. Interdisciplinary post-project work begins to take shape here, where creatives and academics consider possible collaboration on formal research outputs. Workshops or informal colloquia during the article writing phase will assist newcomers to research in that findings are shared and common concerns as well as individual problems can be addressed. Writers of scholarly research articles who participate at this point should be encouraged to work with the creative practitioners in the writing of articles; collaboration is therefore encouraged throughout the project for a number of reasons. Firstly, all participants benefit by expanding their knowledge base, reassessing their methodological preferences, gaining insight into the modes of operation in different disciplines, and by encouraging one other. Secondly, scholarly articles may be based on comparative discussions informed by work produced, the reflective journals and their relationship with the creative outputs, or any other emergent issues. Many in the creative disciplines argue for practical work as “embedded knowledge”, and it seems as if some institutions in South Africa, but not government funding bodies, are ready to accept practical output alone as research. At this point those who produce written research are encouraged to involve the practitioners as far as possible to enrich the research outputs and also to provide for a type of research mentoring.

This model aims to provide a workable framework for the conceptualisation, planning and execution of a practice-based research project, with provision for different textual and more conventional scholarly outputs. In terms of the tone of the model, it can be said that the beginning stages are characterised by playfulness, tentativeness and a measure of intuitive guesswork, after which more structure is needed while still accommodating alterations and new insights. Towards the end of the project, the more formal outputs are increasingly characterised by scholarly rigour. This approach will allow for the
organic development of research insights to be acknowledged throughout; creatives often find that the process of making is indeed what guides them and this feature of practice-based research needs ample provision in the course of such a project.

To summarise, the model addresses, among others, the importance of documentation, the interplay of organic growth and intellectual rigour, the role and nature of written research outputs in practice-based research, reflective practice as integral to practice-based research, the phases of project management and the importance of collaboration.

4 Interdisciplinarity in a practice-based research project

Interdisciplinarity is either a strategy of analysis and interpretation, or, as in the case of practice-based research, a strategy of creative production. In the case of practice-based research projects, it may either entail that creative products from various disciplines are integrated into one exhibition, say, where a cabaret performance, poetry, artworks and the like are displayed in one *Gesamtkunswerk* or it may entail that creatives from different disciplines collaborate, as was the case with poets whose work was presented as illustrated layouts put together by graphic designers. Taking one’s creative cue from a visual artwork (the creatures) that grew from the word (“Daddy, let me *tell* you a creature) and crafting a poem from this stimulus is also an interdisciplinary venture, and each creative act adds another dimension to the previous ones. Issues of temporality versus spatiality (as in, for example, poetry and painting), or the dominance of one artform in the imagined hierarchy of art forms dissolve in the creative forging of different disciplines. These issues are perhaps not so easily overcome in the interdisciplinary interpretative act, where language arguably dominates and interpretations of both visual and literary texts are written down. Having said that, few would argue that interdisciplinary as an interpretative strategy is a very worthwhile endeavour – compare Wallace Stevens’ dictum that it would be possible to study poetry by studying art, and Horace’s statement of *Ut pictora poesis*.

5 Conclusion
This paper presented a model for practice-based research and emphasised how this type of research is project-based, tends to be interdisciplinary, and how it yields divergent research results (in terms of creative work, reflective documentation and scholarly outputs). Future research will focus on research equivalence so that institutional acknowledgement extends to both creative and scholarly outputs in equal terms. In order to arrive at this type of context, sufficient work needs to be done in terms of how the written element of any creative work is conceptualised and how, with reference to higher qualifications, practical and scholarly research will be perceived in terms of, for example, a Ph.D. in a creative field.  

We have established that sustained effort, a measure of institutional goodwill and a simple workable model are the ingredients for a successful practice-based research project. Added to this, we have experienced that creatives from all fields benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration and that, surprisingly, working with creatives is not nearly as complicated as one may expect. Clearly the fact that everyone benefits and that these benefits expand into unforeseen possibilities will continue to inject these projects with energy and imaginative outcomes.

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1. While terminology differs slightly (practice-based, practice-led and performative research are used by different authors) we prefer the term practice-based research as it most clearly describes research based on practical work.
3. The model grew from experience but the formulation thereof was also guided by models proposed by Douglas et al. (2000), Scrivener (2004) and Gray and Malins (2004).
The University of Pretoria is offering a newly developed practice-based Ph.D. in Fine Art but few institutions in South Africa seem ready to follow suit. The same is true for a number of institutions elsewhere in the world: the Ph.D. as a body of practical work does not seem to have received wide acceptance yet.

This paper draws on research conducted for an article published in *Literator* by L. Combrink and I.R. Marley (2009) entitled **Practice-based research: Tracking Creative Creatures in a research context** (unpublished, in press).
Reference


